

Even if you can see the contract should go down, consider what problem partner can have and see if you can solve it for them. Here, it looks like partner has the queen of spades. How can we help them cash it before they play another club?

Good Habits # 3: Guessing the Shape

When Sartaj Hans was still writing his bridge blog, he wrote a post in 2009 called “Warning: This Post MAY Wreck Your Life”.

The crux of the post was that good technical players are counting **all the time**. A takeaway message was that it is often possible to accurately guess declarer’s shape very early in the hand, and after a couple of tricks a fairly high degree of accuracy is available.

Board 3			
South Deals		♠ J 10 5	
N-S Vul		♥ A 9	
		♦ 10 9 6 3	
		♣ Q 9 8 6	
	♠ Q 9 8		
	♥ 8 6 4		
	♦ K 7 4		
	♣ K 10 7 4		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 ♦ ¹
Pass	3 ♦ ²	Dbl	All pass

1. usually 5+ diamonds
2. pre-emptive

3 ♦× by South

<i>Trick</i>	<i>Lead</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>
1. W	♥ 4	<u>A</u>	Q	2
2. N	♣ 6	5	<u>A</u>	4

After a difficult auction, declarer wins your heart lead (3rd/low leads), crosses to the ace of clubs and leads a low club. What is declarer’s most likely shape, and how should you defend?

Putting It All Together

At the table, there is usually a lot going on. Staying ‘on task’ can be difficult which is why we need winning habits that will keep us on the straight and narrow.

Next time you play, try putting these habits into practice each time you defend a hand:

1. Work out partner’s likely strength during the auction, and adjust when dummy appears;
2. When the defence seems clear, take control of the hand or help make it clear for partner;
3. Guess declarer’s most likely shape during the auction, adjust when dummy appears, and adjust again each of the early tricks.

Knowing who has what strength, what the likely shape of the hand is, and keeping an eye on partner’s problems as well as your own will lead to much smoother defences.

Here’s one last deal where my play was second-best:

Board 4			
East Deals		♠ A Q 8 5	
None Vul		♥ 9 6	
		♦ J 10 8 2	
		♣ A 5 3	
	♠ 10 7 6 3		
	♥ J 10 7		
	♦ A 9 7		
	♣ Q 8 2		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		Pass	1 ♣
Pass	1 ♦	Pass	1 NT
Pass	2 ♣	Pass	2 ♥
Pass	2 NT	Pass	3 NT
			All pass

3 NT by South

<i>Trick</i>	<i>Lead</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>
1. W	♠ 3	5	2	<u>K</u>
2. S	♦ 3	<u>A</u>	2	5

At the table, I jumped up with the ace of diamonds and played a heart. Where did I go wrong?

“CHOOSING THE BEST CHANCE IN DEFENCE” - SOLUTIONS

Board 1
 South Deals
 None Vul

♠ K 9 7 6 4 ♥ 9 7 ♦ Q 6 2 ♣ K 5 2		♠ J 10 ♥ J 10 5 ♦ A 7 4 ♣ A Q 9 6 4	♠ 8 5 2 ♥ K 8 6 2 ♦ 10 9 3 ♣ J 7 3
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♠ A Q 3
 ♥ A Q 4 3
 ♦ K J 8 5
 ♣ 10 8

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 NT

All pass
 1 NT by South

Board 2
 East Deals
 E-W Vul

♠ Q 7 6 3 ♥ 10 7 4 3 ♦ K ♣ 8 7 5 3		♠ 8 5 ♥ A J 9 ♦ J 6 ♣ K Q J 9 6 2	♠ A J 9 4 2 ♥ 8 2 ♦ 10 9 7 5 3 ♣ 10
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♠ K 10
 ♥ K Q 6 5
 ♦ A Q 8 4 2
 ♣ A 4

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		1 ♣	Dbl
1 ♥	1 ♠	Dbl	2 ♦
Pass	3 ♦	Pass	3 NT

All pass
 3 NT by South

On the first board, we are in at trick five with the ace of diamonds, partner having led and continued spades.

Partner’s lead of the six of spades followed by the four looks like they have led a five-card suit to the king. In diamonds, it looks like declarer has king-jack to some number. In hearts, partner followed with the nine of hearts which likely indicates an even number of hearts.

What are declarer’s points? Ten points across the pointed suits (♠ AQ, ♦ KJ) leave five to seven more. Would declarer have played on hearts missing the top honours? Not likely. It seems more likely that declarer led a heart holding either the queen or ace or both.

This gives declarer 16 points, which leaves partner with the king of clubs. If you play a club, your side takes the rest of the tricks: down four. If you play a heart, declarer makes an overtrick – a mere five tricks difference.

Note that even if partner does turn up with the ace of hearts, declarer still has only six tricks if we play a club (two spades, one heart, two diamonds and one club).

After catching a great club lead from partner, declarer holds up one round, then wins and cashes the ace and king of spades before finessing in diamonds to partner. Partner continues with the seven of clubs.

In spades, it is virtually impossible for declarer to have the queen of spades, not only from the play but the bidding. Clearly the contract is going at least three down, but we would like partner to cash their spade trick before leading a club to us as they will not get in again.

We must leave partner on lead, but only one card caters to all distributions: the six of clubs. At the table, partner did not get the message immediately and continued with the five of clubs, but we were able to underplay with the two of clubs to again leave partner on lead.

With no clubs left, partner could now be certain that we held the ace of hearts as an entry and was able to cash their spade trick before playing over to our hand. Declarer was down four in a contract they could have made (partner’s king of diamonds was singleton).

Board 3
 South Deals
 N-S Vul

♠ J 10 5
 ♥ A 9
 ♦ 10 9 6 3
 ♣ Q 9 8 6

♠ Q 9 8
 ♥ 8 6 4
 ♦ K 7 4
 ♣ K 10 7 4

♠ K 4 3 2
 ♥ Q J 10 7 5
 ♦ A
 ♣ J 5 3

♠ A 7 6
 ♥ K 3 2
 ♦ Q J 8 5 2
 ♣ A 2

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1♦ ¹
Pass	3♦ ²	Dbl	All pass

1. usually 5+ diamonds
2. pre-emptive

3♦× by South

After a difficult auction where we had several options over partner's double, declarer arrives in a seemingly cold doubled part-score. After our heart lead, partner played the queen – a play they could probably only afford with a five-card suit. In addition, we probably need to assume that declarer holds only five diamonds and only three hearts to have a fair chance to beat this contract.

In the black suits, we can see eight clubs and six spades, so declarer's shorter suit is likely clubs – which is consistent with partner's takeout double too. Declarer's doubleton club is just about confirmed when partner plays the five of clubs (reverse count). With no heart tricks and at most one club trick, if we win we must hope to cash three spade tricks immediately. This is an unlikely layout. With nothing in spades, declarer would probably play for a different chance such as endplaying partner.

At the table, the only chance (on this layout) of a smooth duck in clubs was found. The club intermediates meant that declarer could and did play for an alternative line of ♣ Jxx or 10xx with West, first finessing the 9 then later leading the queen for a pin. Declarer lost two spades, two trumps and a club for one down. Playing the king of clubs gives declarer nine easy tricks.

Board 4
 East Deals
 None Vul

♠ A Q 8 5
 ♥ 9 6
 ♦ J 10 8 2
 ♣ A 5 3

♠ 10 7 6 3
 ♥ J 10 7
 ♦ A 9 7
 ♣ Q 8 2

♠ 4 2
 ♥ Q 5 3 2
 ♦ K 6 5
 ♣ K J 6 4

♠ K J 9
 ♥ A K 8 4
 ♦ Q 4 3
 ♣ 10 9 7

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		Pass	1♣
Pass	1♦	Pass	1NT
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♥
Pass	2NT	Pass	3NT
All pass			

3 NT by South

Our spade lead proved unsuccessful at trick one as declarer was marked with four spade tricks by partner's failure to put up their hypothetical jack. Declarer's shape looks like 2-3 spades, 4 hearts, 2-3 diamonds and 3-4 clubs. Most likely declarer has three diamonds (with four they would have opened 1♦ or raised to 2♦, while with two declarer might not be playing on diamonds).

Declarer's diamond play at trick two looks most likely to be from queen to three. With just the king of diamonds, declarer would be leading the suit from dummy, while with the king and queen declarer would have led high.

Counting the points reveals that partner has 8 or 9 points. If we defend passively, we can see seven tricks coming in the dummy and declarer should be able to find two more in their hand. With partner holding the king of diamonds, that leaves 5 or 6 outside points.

We will need most of those points all in one suit, either hearts or clubs, to have a chance. We must win the ace of diamonds to preserve partner's entry in diamonds. Which suit should we switch to? Either could be right, but partner's cards at trick 1 and 2 are relevant. Both times they followed with their lowest card, so we should trust their plays and switch to clubs. If partner wanted a heart, they would have played their higher spade and diamond.