

North
 S—98743
 H—Q983
 D—Q10
 C—QJ

South
 S—AKQJ10
 H—J4
 D—KJ962
 C—2

East
 S—52
 H—1076
 D—A743
 C—10643

E-W vulnerable, matchpoints

South	West	North	East
1S	Dbl.	2S	Pass
4S	Pass	Pass	Pass

Trick 1: **CA**, J, 3, 2.
 Trick 2: **CK**, Q, 4, **S10**.
 Trick 3: **SA**, 6, 3, 2.
 Trick 4: **SK**, C9, S4, 5.
 Trick 5: D2, 8, Q, **A**.
 Trick 6: D3, **K**, 5, 10.

Now three hearts were pitched from dummy, so the contract was made. Who gets the charge?

Marshall Miles: "I think the fault for this debacle is West's alone. With his actual hand it was a serious mistake not to lead the king of hearts at trick two. (Even though the defenders were leading ace from ace-king, when West can see the queen in dummy, he should lead the king to show both honors.) This would be necessary to set the hand if declarer had held AKQxx, J10x, AKxx, x, for example. In fact, even with AKx of hearts, West should cash the king of hearts, looking for East's signal before continuing with the clubs. Consequently, East had a right to assume that whatever West had, it did not include the ace-king of hearts.

"Suppose that West's hand were x, KJxx, Kx, AKxxxx (leaving declarer with AKQJ10, Ax, J9xxx, x). In that case, West would need a heart lead to establish a heart trick before his king of diamonds was knocked out—and he would have been right to duck the first diamond trick. But with this hand, West could and should have discarded a high heart on the second round of trumps. This is a more clear-cut signal than the club nine.

"The one hand with which West would be compelled to defend as he did (except possibly for discarding the nine of clubs), and where it would make a difference how East defended, is x, AJx, Jxx, AKxxxx. When he holds this hand, a diamond return would assure a set, while a heart return gives the contract. It is true that this hand is only one hand out of many and that West might have overcalled two clubs instead of doubling. But when you have to guess between an unlikely hand on the bidding or a misdefense by partner, I think you should trust partner's cards. With x, AJx, Jxx, AKxxxx, West could not defend any other way. With any hand where a heart return is correct, West should have defended differently."

Steve Evans: "This is an example of non-thought by both partners. West gets more of the blame because he had the easier play to make. I think East should start to signal length by playing the club 4 but, even so, there is no reason for West not to lead the heart king to trick two. Either East has an ace or can ruff something or else West's four tricks must live. Playing the club king doesn't cater to any possibility except the latter.

"However, after trick 5, East knows that West has one spade, six clubs, and an even number of diamonds (because of West's signal): On the bidding, then, West must be 1—4—2—6 and it can't be wrong to lead a heart. Not only would it save the day on this hand, but the defense would have been optimal if West had x, Kxxx, Kx, AKxxxx. But West gets the majority of the blame because his play was easy, whereas East had to count to find the right play."

Yes, West certainly should have played the heart king at trick two. The most irritating hand from declarer's perspective is when South has AKQJ10, J10, AJ9xx, x. West can cash his two hearts and then when South ruffs the second club, he cannot get to dummy to take the winning diamond finesse!

But there's more to this hand than West's glaring error. First, consider Steve's suggestion that East should echo in clubs. But then, might not West go wrong if he held, say, x, KJxx, J98, AKxxx (placing South with AKJxx, Ax, AK, 10xxx) by playing three rounds of clubs—the only way to beat that hypothetical hand? No, East had better not echo in clubs, unless he knows it is safe to have West continue—then he can play a higher one the next time to avoid giving the impression of a doubleton should the ace and king both survive.

These blind auctions can create murderous defensive problems. Suppose West had cashed the heart king at trick two, catching East's seven and South's ten. Would West then know what to do? Does declarer have AKQJx, 10, KJ9xx, xx or AKQJx, J10x, AKxx, x? Count simply may not be enough. On the actual deal, East's heart six would not have been ambiguous, and it would not have mattered what West did next anyway. That's a common bonus for making the right play.

Marshall's clemency toward East strikes me as unjustified. As the panelists have shown, a heart return at trick six could be both necessary and consistent with West's having defended optimally. But, he argues, there is the danger that West has AJx of hearts and has bid peculiarly. If one must choose between peculiar bidding and casual defensive errors, I would bet on defensive errors every time. I cannot conceive of an expert doubling with x, AJx, J98, AKxxxx; but carelessly cashing the second round of clubs (with a doubleton in dummy) seems quite ordinary to me. West's play was indeed terrible, but East should have saved him.