

Charge Account by David J. Weiss

North

S—96

H—Q63

D—AQ7653

C—52

South

S—AQJ32

H—K95

D—K42

C—K10

East

S—84

H—A74

D—98

C—QJ8763

N-S vulnerable, IMP scoring

South	West	North	East
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1NT	Pass	3NT	Pass
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Pass	Pass		
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West

S—K1075

H—J1082

D—J10

C—A94

Trick 1: HJ, 3, 7, K.
Trick 2: D4, J*, Q, 9**.
Trick 3: D3, 8, K, 10.
Trick 4: D2, C9, DA, C8.

Trick 5: D7, C6, S2, S7.
Trick 6: D6, C3, S3, C4.
Trick 7: D5, S4, SJ, S5.
Trick 8: C2, 7, K, A.

* Shows worse hearts than expected.

** Shows better hearts than expected.

Whether West returned a heart or a spade, he had to give declarer the ninth trick. When East won the actual heart return, he could only cash two club tricks.

Who gets the charge?

Marshall Miles: "Both defenders signalled too much. West must play East for the ace of hearts. Otherwise, declarer has nine tricks for sure. Since both defenders can count seven tricks in the red suits, each must assume that declarer lacks both black aces or a black ace-king. A signal that East's hearts were better than expected is misleading. To make such a signal, East should have A9xx or A9xxx; or conceivably, Axxx.

"West should not have shown where his high cards were. His first two discards should be the 5-7 of spades, reserving his options as long as he could. If declarer held AQ of spades and KJ of clubs, he would have to guess where his ninth trick was coming from.

"While I don't like either defender's discarding, I think it was East who was more at fault. The signal in diamonds probably convinced West that he had three more heart tricks coming—and that if declarer had the nine of hearts, it was now unguarded. After West's signal in diamonds showing worse than expected hearts, East should discard a heart and West should discard two hearts, saving all three clubs. This would require lots of partnership confidence and would not be easy, but the actual defenders did not even come close."

Steve Evans: "After 3 tricks, both defenders know that declarer has 7 tricks in the red suits and at least 9 points in the black suits. If those points yield 2 tricks, the contract will obviously be made. The major defensive error occurred at trick 4. West's discard of the club 9 meant that the defense no longer had a legitimate chance to beat the contract, assuming declarer read the position correctly. Besides that, the discard is misleading and doesn't tell East how to conduct the defense.

"The correct discard at trick 4 is the heart 8. The defense requires 3 tricks in hearts if West's black honors are their only other tricks. That would happen only if declarer had a club guess and guessed right. In that case, even A9x of hearts in East's hand would not be enough to defeat the contract; he would require 4 hearts because West wouldn't have a second quick entry. If East has 4 hearts, West has no need for 4 of his own and should discard the 8 for two reasons; to let East know what's happening in hearts and to unblock the suit in case declarer has the nine. West's discard would tell East exactly what is going on. His partner wouldn't discard the 8 from a five-card holding, so his distribution must be 4-4-2-3. If declarer has the club ace, he must have at least the KQ of spades and then the contract is cold. So East must play partner for the club ace and spade king. East should pitch the club 8 at trick 4 and the heart 4 at trick 5. This will tell West that clubs is the important suit and to forget about hearts. All West has to do is to keep all three clubs and when he gets in with the spade king, lead a heart to partner's known ace. A club through from partner will finish declarer."

The Smith echo is an extremely useful signal. Here, though, East judged his holding inaccurately and derailed the defense.

It was obligatory for East to duck the opening lead, although the defense could have taken the first seven tricks, since his partner might have had KJ10xx. But once South showed up with the heart king and won the diamond queen, East should have realized that his partner would be forced to play him for the heart ace. Otherwise, declarer would have six diamond tricks and three heart tricks off the top. The intent of East's high-low in diamonds was to show the heart ace, but with the ace already presumed, the echo should have shown a better holding, such as Axxx or A9x. East's signal induced West to defend the hand somewhat casually; West counted on three heart tricks and he knew declarer's black suit finesses would lose.

East also blew the late defense by failing to appreciate his partner's Smith echo. It is useful to play that an echo by opening leader shows a worse holding than expected (I credit this refinement to Ed Davis). Here, West's high-low in diamonds (begun before he was misinformed about the quality of East's hearts) was intended to deny the crucial heart nine. This information should have told East that the defense was in a desperate situation; declarer has seven tricks in the bag and surely can set up two in the black suits unless West has the club ace. So East should have kept four clubs to go with his heart ace and should have pitched his low heart after signalling with the club eight.

To be sure, West should have pitched the heart 8 rather than the club 4. But his picture of the deal was based on the misinformation his partner fed him. East gets the charge. Declarer gets some of the charge too, for not simply finessing a spade at trick three. Would the defenders have solved the quite different problem this more normal line would have set them?