

CHARGE ACCOUNT

by David J. Weiss

	North		Neither vulnerable, IMP scoring		
	S—762				
	H—AQ5		South	West	North
West	D—K6432	East	INT*	Pass	3NT
S—A84	C—85	S—K953	Pass	Pass	Pass
H—J973		H—K8			
D—85	South	D—J9			
C—J1094	S—QJ10	C—Q7632			
	H—10642				
	D—AQ107				
	C—AK				

*15-17

Trick 1: CJ, 5, 7, K.

Trick 2: DA, 5, 2, 9.

Trick 3: DQ, 8, 3, J.

Trick 4: D10, H3, D4, C3.

Trick 5: D7, H7, D6, C2.

With the club length no longer a threat, declarer was able to force a ninth trick by leading the spade queen. Who gets the charge?

Marshall Miles: "East gets 80% of the blame, West 20%. This would not be an easy hand to defend since each defender will have to make three discards. West must assume that his partner has the king of hearts and either (a) five clubs headed by the ace or ace-queen, or (b) five clubs headed by the queen and the king or queen of spades. If East's spade honor is the queen, declarer must also misguess in spades. Of course, it is obvious that declarer could make the hand if he were to guess the heart holding. Logical discarding for West is the nine or ten of clubs, a heart, and a spade. His actual discard of two hearts would almost surely have given the contract—whatever East might do. But it is not obvious to West that his heart discards will be fatal since declarer might have started with only three.

However, East knows that he has the length in clubs, and it is inexcusable for him to throw away his potential winners. From his point of view, West can have either of two hands: his actual club holding plus the ace of spades, or AJ10x of clubs originally (in which case declarer might have to guess between taking a spade finesse or a heart finesse). A lead from AJ10x is unlikely. First, the defenders might play that the jack denies a higher honor; and even if they don't a four card suit headed by AJ10 is not a desirable lead. Since West must have the ace or queen of spades, or declarer must be persuaded to finesse hearts rather than spades, East's logical discards were his three small spades. It would take good defense to give declarer a problem, but East didn't even give his side a chance."

Steve Evans: "This is a difficult hand to defend because the defenders have to try to indicate to their partner what is going on, but at the same time want to keep declarer in the dark. Obviously, the key trick is the fourth, West pitched a heart which really had no effect except East thought that meant declarer's hearts were good, other than the king. Then the only hope for the defense was to play partner for AJx of spades. That way the defense could collect 4 spade tricks to go along with the heart king. West could certainly have afforded to pitch a spade, but often that would give declarer a better idea of the spade position. For instance, with KJx of spades he will likely guess the suit correctly because a defender is more likely to pitch a spade from Axx than from Qxx. I think that I would tend to give West more of the charge than East because, even though a spade discard can cost in some instances, in this case it was necessary and so he gets charged for not making it. East gets some of the charge only because he did not guess the position correctly. However, I would not blame either defender too harshly on this deal."

This must indeed be a difficult deal, because my view is that both panelists blew it, too. Marshall is on the wrong track completely, and Steve didn't go far enough along his. West unilaterally misdefended this hand; he had two chances to get it right and missed both of them.

First, let's clear up the debris. Defense at IMP scoring is easier than at match points because one can assume that partner has the very cards needed to defeat the contract. West's assumptions have been stated correctly by Marshall; East must have the heart king and either a spade honor with good clubs, or great clubs. In principle, East should be able to signal great clubs by how he plays his diamonds (the Smith echo, playing high-low in the suit attacked by declarer, should connote excellent clubs), but that is not crucial on this deal. East's assumption must be that his partner has the spade ace and one of the major suit jacks. If declarer has the heart jack, the club suit will come home too late; there will be five diamond tricks, two club tricks, and two heart tricks. So the only hope would be to score four tricks in the spade suit; this requires West to hold AJx, or possibly AQx. On the other hand, if West has the heart jack, then the club suit will suffice. The partnership should have the tools to let East know that declarer has both high clubs. One way is through the popular J = top convention, perhaps even better is to use Smith echo by opening leader. High-low in diamonds by West would mean a higher honor accompanies his J-10.

So an accurate picture of the actual hand should have formed in both defenders' minds. Who made the key error? When West pitched the first heart at trick 4, East was worried; but his club pitch kept the defense's options alive. There was still the hope of four spade tricks and a heart, or alternatively, two clubs, two spades, and one heart. The heart pitch suggested that West had spades worth keeping, so East could not afford to give up on that suit. And if West had misjudged with, say Ax of spades and Jxxx of hearts, the defense would still have a chance (a slim one, to be sure) if declarer would misguess the play. When West pitched the second heart at trick 5, East relaxed, knowing he had done the right thing; the spades must be coming home for the defense. Well, the relaxation was appropriate, for the hand was over. But the outcome was not as East had envisioned it. Declarer could now make the hand by playing either hearts or spades, and it didn't matter how he guessed to play hearts.

What of the nonsense that West must keep his small spades to give declarer a guess in that suit? It is certainly true that defenders are more likely to pitch from Axx than from Qxx. But here, with eight tricks visible, West could certainly afford to throw a spade from Qxx, knowing that unless his partner had the ace, his own holding was irrelevant. Declarer would know this too, and would thus be faced with a pure guess.

Guessing considerations aside, West simply must cater to deals on which declarer is always slated to go down, such as the actual one. He doesn't even have to foresee his partner's possible dilemma at trick 4. West need only follow one of bridge's ancient maxims: throw losers, keep winners. West must pitch the spade 4 at his first opportunity.