

Charge Account

by David J. Weiss

	North		N-S vulnerable, IMP scoring			
	S—KJ3					
	H—Q5					
West	D—A543	East	West	North	East	South
S—106	C—K986	S—84	Pass	1D	Pass	1S
H—A8742		H—J63	Pass	2S	Pass	4S
D—862	South	D—KQ7	Pass	Pass	Pass	
C—AQ4	S—AQ9752	C—J10752				
	H—K109					
	D—J109					
	C—3					

Trick 1: D2, 3, Q, 9

Trick 2: DK, 10, 6, A

Despite the fact that the killing suit had been led, the contract was immediately surrendered. Was this method or madness? Who gets the charge?

Steve Evans: "Since West made the only opening lead to beat the contract, it is hard to fault him on the defense. The only reason for East's defense is that he assumed the lead of the 2 promised an honor. If that was the case, then West chose the wrong card to lead. But it seems that East thought it was time for drastic action and played his partner for the diamond jack in addition to the other cards needed to defeat the contract. However, it seems unnecessary to play for that holding. A heart return should suffice to beat the contract whether partner has the diamond jack or not. So East gets full charge for the defense."

Marshall Miles: "West is at least 90% at fault. He should have led the eight of diamonds, not the deuce. Bridge is too hard a game if one must assume he has three opponents and then has to figure out whether there is a safety play against partner's not having what he says he has. West should have the jack of diamonds (or 10xxx); in which case it can't cost to return the king of diamonds.

"Nevertheless, East made a very minor error. It is unlikely that the hand can be set unless declarer has three diamonds. West would still need the ace of clubs and a major suit ace. If the major suit ace is the ace of hearts, East can return a heart at trick 2 without risk (in case West had 10xx of diamonds). A heart return would lose only when declarer had Q10xxxx, AKx, 109x, x, since declarer would win and lead a club. But this is an unlikely holding for two reasons. West is msuch more likely to hold the ace of hearts than the ace of spades (because he holds more hearts than spades), and also West's lead of a diamond is more consistent with his having the ace of hearts than nothing in hearts.

"No defense will work when declarer has AQxxxx, Axx, 109x, x. With a diamond return, dummy would win the ace, play two rounds of trumps and lead toward the club king. With a heart return, declarer could win the ace and lead a club. When declarer holds A109xx, A109xx, J9, x, the hand might be set; but a heart return is as good as the king of diamonds.

"What it all amounts to is that a heart return at trick two can only lose when West's ace is the ace of spades, which is slightly less likely than West's holding 10xx of diamonds. With that diamond holding, I would probably lead the ten, but a low diamond is a reasonable alternative."

I share Marshall's conviction that leading low from three small makes one's partner's life difficult. Indeed, I think low leads should promise jack or better, so I'm even more of an extremist than Marshall. Most experts who play 3rd and 5th best are aware of the burden a count-oriented style can place on partner, and so they go out of their way to avoid the treacherous low from three small. But here, a diamond lead was necessary and West duly found it. Did his adherence to a method I consider inferior leave his poor partner with an impossible guess?

Much as I hate to admit it, no. East blew it. The kind of diamonds is a poor, even terrible, return. It may well lose when partner has the hoped-for Jxx of diamonds. Let's analyze the hand carefully from East's perspective. The defense has, at most, one heart trick (because West would have led AK otherwise), at most one club trick, probably no spade trick, and so must hope for two diamond tricks. The king of diamonds return will be adequate if West has Jxx and both hypothetical aces, but then a heart return will be O.K., too. But there is a danger lurking in the diamond suit even if West has Jxx; East knows the suit is splitting 3-3. What if declarer has AQxxx, Ax, 109x, xx? The contract is poor but it will make unless East returns a heart. Even when declarer has only five spades the king of diamonds may be disastrous. With AQxxx, Axx, 109x, Qx, declarer can win the diamond and exit with a diamond. West will win the diamond jack, exit with a trump and then gnash his teeth when he is (Morton's) forked by a club lead toward dummy. On that construction East had to lead back either a low diamond or a heart.

So we see that a heart return is likely to be the winner whether West has the diamond jack or not. It is safe, too. West will not play back a second heart when he has the club ace, because he can see that the heart king cannot run away. He will not try for a heart ruff (giving declarer 5-5-2-1) because (a) declarer probably would not have ducked the first trick, and (b) with a singleton heart, East would have won the diamond king rather than the queen.