



Commentary for the CBAI Simultaneous Pairs

Friday 6th March 2026

Dear Bridge Player,

Thank you very much for playing in the CBAI Simultaneous Pairs 2026, and for your continued support for the Association.

The funds that you contribute via these Simultaneous Pairs will help the CBAI in its ongoing development work – training new teachers and new TDs, promoting the game and trying to attract new members, developing junior bridge, and so on. Many of the input costs, like costs generally these days, are increasing significantly, so your support for this event, and for the various live competitions run during the season by the CBAI, is greatly appreciated.

I hope that you enjoyed the chance to test yourself against your fellow players across Ireland (and for those still playing online, maybe overseas as well). As always, the hands (which are randomly generated by computer with no manual intervention whatsoever) provided plenty of difficult decisions. Many thanks to our expert commentators Jeannie Fitzgerald (Monday), Gay Keaveney (Tuesday), Brian Senior (Wednesday), Enda Glynn (Thursday), and our latest Grand Master Hilary D-L McDonagh (Friday) for their guidance through the fog. I hope that you have picked up some useful tips from their advice. Congratulations to anyone who ends up in the prizes; with over 1,000 pairs playing on most days, you've earned it!

Don't forget to check your standing in the national results at www.ecatsbridge.com/sims. You'll find the daily commentaries there too.

John Phelan

President, Contract Bridge Association of Ireland

Board 2	♠	K2	Dealer E	
	♥	K109	Vul: N-S	
	♦	108753		
	♣	A72		
♠	853		♠	A976
♥	QJ32		♥	86
♦	942		♦	AQ6
♣	964		♣	KQ108
	♠	QJ104		
	♥	A754		
	♦	KJ		
	♣	J53		

There is no right answer with this hand, so here are some of the possibilities and some things to consider. If playing a Weak NT and 4-card majors, East should open 1♠. Playing 4-card majors, you should always open the major not a 4-card minor, that's why you play them. With a balanced hand you plan to rebid NT so it is more important to show a 4-card major than a 4-card minor.

South has a Weak NT hand but holds a 4-card spade suit and therefore does not have a takeout double and must pass. They cannot tolerate a diamond suit bid from partner and only have a minimum opening so will not be able to bid again. If the bidding goes 1♠ – Pass – Pass, North knows that South must have values and West has less than 6 hcp, or they would have responded. There is no clear-cut action with the North hand. They might pass – partner is likely to have length in spades as they could not make a takeout double. A INT bid in this position from North, the pass-out seat, is known as a protective NT and shows 10-14 hcp and a stopper in spades. This is likely to produce a better pairs score than overcalling 2♦. South is not sure whether there are enough points for game, so the safest action (without specific conventions, see below) is to play in INT. In pairs you should always try to make sure you are getting a positive score. North might also decide to make a takeout double of 1♠ in pass-out seat, but this usually promises four hearts, and South might have to play in a 4-3 fit (see below).

If E/W are playing a Strong NT, East opens INT 15-17 hcp. South has both majors and if playing a convention to show both majors, they might overcall. They do not have a great hand, but they are non-vulnerable. North would reluctantly show a preference for hearts and might find themselves playing in a 4-3 fit. This type of fit requires special play, described below.

If it is also reasonable that the bidding might go INT (15-17) from East, passed out. If E/W go down 2 that is plus 200 and a great score for N/S. It is unlikely, given the lie of the cards, that E/W can get a positive score if they play the contract. N/S must be careful not to give E/W a positive score by getting too high if they compete.

A direct overcall of INT shows 15-17 hcp and a stopper in the opened suit. After one of a suit – Pass - Pass, a NT overcall is “protective” showing 10-14 hcp and a stopper. When responding to protective NT, South is not sure if N/S have points for game. Over a protective NT, it is best to play a convention called Crowhurst. It is like Stayman but it also asks about whether you have an opening hand for your INT bid. South would respond 2♣, and with less than 12 hcp, North would respond 2♦, now 2NT from South is to play. If North had 12 –14 hcp they would respond 2NT, and South can still ask for a major by bidding 3♣, if they are interested.

A 4-3 fit is called a Moysian Fit. Playing in a 4-3 fit requires different strategies as it is likely that one opponent also has four trumps (64% of the time) or more (16% of the time). Playing more than one round of trumps usually commits the declarer to a given line of play, hoping the opponents' trumps split relatively evenly, which is against the odds. So generally in 4-3 fits it pays to delay drawing trumps and hope to score your trumps separately if you can.

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	2	3	3	2	2
S	1	3	3	1	1
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

Board 3 ♠ A753 Dealer S
 ♥ 4 Vul: E-W
 ♦ 52
 ♣ QJ10974

♠ Q2 ♥ A986 ♦ AKQ4 ♣ K62	♠ 1094 ♥ J1073 ♦ 9876 ♣ A3
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♠ KJ86 ♥ KQ52 ♦ J103 ♣ 85	
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After South's Pass, West would open 1♥ if playing Weak NT and 4-card majors. After a 2♥ raise from East (East is just worth 2♥ with 5 hcp and 2 points for shortage in clubs – you should always add points for shortage when you have a fit), West is worth one more move and bidding a new suit is a game try. However, East will probably decide that as they have already stretched to a 2♥ bid game is a step too far.

If E/W are playing a Strong NT and 5-card majors, West opens 1♦ and East is worth a 1♥ response. Again, they are less unlikely to raise a 3♥ rebid from partner.

Because of the heart break, E/W can be prevented from taking 10 tricks in hearts – although it appears that there are only three losers (two spades and one heart). On the expected ♣Q lead from North, West should win in dummy and play a heart immediately. South should split their honours and then duck when declarer plays a second heart. Declarer now can't play a third round of trumps as South could win the ♥Q and play another heart preventing the ruff of the club loser in dummy. Declarer must revert to clubs taking the ruff in dummy and then playing diamond winners. If declarer plays a heart, South can win and play three rounds of spades forcing a ruff in hand and promoting the long trump in their own hand.

The key defensive moment is ducking the second heart so that declarer is no longer in control of the trump suit.

Makeable Contracts					
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	1	-	-	2	-
S	1	-	-	2	-
E	-	4	3	-	2
W	-	4	3	-	2

Board 4	♠ Q954	Dealer W
	♥ Q63	Vul: Both
	♦ K105	
	♣ Q103	
♠ A3		♠ 1082
♥ J84		♥ AK1095
♦ A6		♦ Q83
♣ J97654		♣ AK
	♠ KJ76	
	♥ 72	
	♦ J9742	
	♣ 82	

Playing a Weak NT, after two passes East opens 1♥ and West responds 2♣, showing 10+hcp. Now West's 2NT rebid shows a balanced hand with 15-17 hcp and is game-forcing (game-forcing because the NT rebid shows at least 15 hcp and the initial 2-level response shows at least 10 hcp).

Even though West has a 5-card heart suit, they do not need to show this now – just their overall shape and strength. If West had 4-card heart support, they should have supported hearts immediately. If West has 3-card heart support, they can check back showing 3-card heart support over 2NT by bidding 3♥, and East should raise to 4♥. East's best rebid is 2NT as indicated.

While a spade lead will hold declarer to 11 tricks, on any other lead, given the lie of the cards, declarer can make 12. Not leading a spade is perfectly understandable as you are leading into a strong balanced hand.

Playing in a suit contract, count your losers and if you have more losers than you can afford, see if you can use dummy's trumps to reduce the losers in your hand. Here East has two club losers and two diamond losers and a possible loser in hearts. Dummy has a doubleton spade and doubleton diamond, so the trumps in the short trump hand (dummy) can be used to ruff these losers.

Therefore declarer should delay drawing trumps, and play on diamonds first. After Ace and a second diamond – North must win the King, otherwise the diamond loser disappears – now the ♦Q can be used to throw the small spade from dummy (if a spade has not been led initially). And declarer can make twelve tricks by ruffing the two small spades from hand in dummy and finessing the ♥Q.

If playing a Strong NT and 5-card majors, this is a 1NT opening, and the partnership must make sure their methods allow them to find a 5-3 major fit.

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	-	-	-	-
S	-	-	-	-	-
E	5	1	5	1	3
W	5	1	5	1	3

Board 6 ♠ AQ5 Dealer E
 ♥ 8743 Vul: E-W
 ♦ K
 ♣ KJ1062

♠ 4 ♠ 9
 ♥ A1092 ♥ KQ6
 ♦ Q10874 ♦ A932
 ♣ A93 ♣ Q8754

♠ KJ1087632
 ♥ J5
 ♦ J65
 ♣

After East passes South should open 4♠. This is a pre-emptive bid with an 8-card suit, 6-9 hcp and within three tricks of the contract non-vulnerable. Here, this should buy the contract as even though West is short in spades, opposite a passed hand they have no business entering the bidding.

Some Souths may decide to treat this as a 7-card suit as the suit quality is poor and could opt to open 3♠. Now West might make a takeout double holding perfect shape and North should raise to 4♠ holding 3-card support. This is extending the pre-empt.

East should not go to the 5-level. While they have values and shortage, it is the same shortage as partner has shown. As I am repeatedly told and still trying to learn – the 5-level is for the opponents



	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	-	-	4	-
S	-	-	-	4	-
E	3	4	3	-	-
W	3	4	3	-	-

Board 7 ♠ Q973 Dealer S
 ♥ KQJ1093 Vul: Both
 ♦ 8
 ♣ 64

♠ J8654 ♥ 7 ♦ 965 ♣ AQ108	♠ A2 ♥ A8542 ♦ KQ3 ♣ K93
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♠ K10
 ♥ 6
 ♦ AJ10742
 ♣ J752

This is typically a pass from South first in hand – although some pairs might be playing a weak 2♦ opening, which would fit the bill perfectly here. Weak 2's are basically pre-empting with a 6-card suit a level lower than you would with a 7-card suit. Here, 2♦ would show 6-9 hcp and a 6-card suit.

If 2♦ is opened, North can't respond 2♥ as this is forcing for one round (you have only eight points and will not be happy to hear 3♦ from partner if they can't support your hearts). East has a 2NT overcall – showing stopper in the suit and 15-18 hcp typically.

Note that if South does not open, North has a weak two opening in hearts, and again East has a reasonable 2NT overcall. East has no reason to make a takeout double holding only a doubleton spade.

If N/S are not bidding, then after three passes East starts with 1♥ (playing Weak NT) and after a 1♠ response, rebids 1NT. Playing Strong NT, East opens 1NT and West transfers to 2♠, which will make.

Without N/S bidding, E/W are likely to stop below 2NT and have a making contract. With N/S bidding, it is likely E/W will get too high or be unable to compete.

This is why competitive players tend to play weak 2 bids, not because they show great hands but because they make life difficult for their opponents – as can be seen clearly in this hand.

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	-	2	-	-
S	-	-	2	-	-
E	2	2	-	2	1
W	2	2	-	2	1

Board 9 ♠ A10 Dealer N
 ♥ QJ542 Vul: E-W
 ♦ 1074
 ♣ AJ8

♠ Q93 ♠ J8654
 ♥ 963 ♥ A87
 ♦ 986 ♦ A32
 ♣ K762 ♣ 53

♠ K72
 ♥ K10
 ♦ KQJ5
 ♣ Q1094

North has 12-14 hcp and a balanced hand and should open 1NT (Weak). While they hold a 5-card heart suit, this is not a hand to open 1♥ and rebid 2♥ which should show a 6-card heart suit and a single-suited hand. Some players might open 1♥ playing a Weak NT and plan to rebid 2♣ on a three-card suit, but life is easiest if when you hold a Weak NT hand you just open 1NT.

South has an easy 3NT response and East leads their fourth highest spade. We have all heard “third hand high” but this hand provides a lovely example of why this is necessary. Assuming East leads its fourth highest spade, North will play low from dummy and West must decide what to play. If West plays the ♠9, North will score an easy trick with the ♠10. This gives North time to knock out both the red suit Aces before E/W’s spades are set up. Even if West plays the ♠Q, at the table, North might still do well as East does not know where the ♠10 is.

Smith Peters:

Declarer should start by playing on hearts. Even if East holds up until the third round, they must still guess to return the ♠J, pinning declarer’s ♠10, and West needs to unblock the ♠9 under it. This is the only defence to hold declarer to 9 tricks. If East returns a low spade hoping partner started with Q10x, North can let this run around to the 10 and make 11 tricks.

One way that expert players try to address this problem is by playing Smith Peters. When following suit to the first suit played by declarer, in this case hearts, both partners signal with their first card to say whether they liked the opening lead and would like it continued or whether they do not. Most players play high-low for “like” and low-high for “don’t like”.

So here East would play the ♥8 to say they liked the spade lead, while West would play the ♥2 to say they didn’t want partner to come another spade. Now East, knowing declarer holds the ♠10 (otherwise partner would have encouraged) could play the ♠J hoping to pin it.

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	4	5	5	2	3
S	4	5	5	2	3
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

Board 10 ♠ 63 Dealer E
 ♥ 104 Vul: Both
 ♦ KQ8632
 ♣ K93

♠ AK102 ♥ Q32 ♦ A74 ♣ 752	♠ Q954 ♥ J98 ♦ 95 ♣ AQ108
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♠ J87 ♥ AK765 ♦ J10 ♣ J64	
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West should open a Weak NT (12-14 hcp, balanced hand). North has a nice diamond suit but not enough hcp to overcall at the 2-level, and so should pass. East has a 4-card spade suit but can't enquire about a major fit as if Opener shows 4 hearts, East is not strong enough to bid again, and so should pass. South, with only 10 hcp should not overcall 2♥ – again consider the suit quality test.

Against NT North should lead their fourth best diamond, and it is really important that Declarer ducks the first diamond. This protects against the diamonds being 6-2. As the cards lie, if declarer takes the first diamond then South will have a diamond to return to North when it gets in and the defence can take five diamonds and two hearts. By ducking the first diamond, declarer severs communication between the defenders' hands and can't be stopped making 8 tricks. This is because the suit breaks 6-2. See note on hold up play below.

If playing Strong NT and 5-card majors, West will open 1 of a minor and then raise East's 1♠ response to 2♠. While the ♦K lead would be normal, on this hand if North leads their doubleton heart, they hit the jackpot, finding partner with Ace and King and scoring the valuable ruff required to hold declarer to 8 tricks.

Hold-Up Play:

A hold-up play occurs when declarer refuses to take a winner and allows defenders to win tricks in a suit early in the hope that if the suit breaks badly the hand with length can't gain the lead to cash its winners – effectively breaking the defenders' communications. It occurs in NT play typically when defenders start by attacking a suit in which they have the majority of the cards – that's why we lead from length against NT. The rule of seven says add the number of cards in declarer and dummy in that suit and subtract that number from seven and the answer is the number of times you should hold up.

In this hand if the diamonds are 4-4, declarer can never stop the defenders from taking three diamond tricks. If the diamonds are 5-3 then if declarer holds off winning the diamond until the third round, then the defence can only get two diamond tricks as South has both the Ace and King of hearts and the ♣K can be finessed.

The rule of seven is not a golden rule to follow but a safety play you can make. But if holding up could result in an even more damaging switch – don't do it!

Makeable Contracts					
♣	♦	♥	♠	NT	
=	=	=	=	==	
N	-	2	-	-	-
S	-	2	-	-	-
E	2	-	1	2	2
W	2	-	1	2	2

Board 11 ♠ A4 Dealer S
 ♡ Q Vul: None
 ♢ AKQ87643
 ♣ 85

♠ 1075 ♠ K986
 ♡ J975 ♡ 63
 ♢ 10 ♢ 952
 ♣ AQJ42 ♣ K1063

♠ QJ32
 ♡ AK10842
 ♢ J
 ♣ 97

South has a clear 1♥ opening. Yes, this hand has only 11 hcp but the points are in the two long suits and there is a clear rebid. South opens 1♥ and aims to either raise partner in spades if the response is 1♠ or rebid 2♥ showing a 6-card heart suit if partner responds something else.

On this hand North will respond in diamonds. What level depends on systematic agreements. In basic Acol, a jump shift response is game-forcing showing a self-sufficient suit and setting diamonds as trumps, so 3♦ would be right here. South should now rebid 3♠ – showing something in spades but denying club cover for NT, and North will rebid 4♦.

This 4♦ bid is important. It denies a club stopper for NT and it denies a club cue-bid to make a slam in diamonds. South can now look see their doubleton club and know that 5♦ is the limit of the hand.

If you are playing 2-over-1 game-forcing the bidding should proceed in a similar fashion. Over 1♥, North responds a game-forcing 2♦ and South bids their 4-card spade suit or 2♥, whichever your agreements permit. Now after 3♦ from North, South bids out their shape, by bidding which ever major not bid the first time. Now North can only bid 4♦ and South will raise to 5♦.

I have sympathies for any N/S players who settled in 4♥ – picking the major over the minor but holding only 7 trumps leads to a trump loser, which dooms the contract.

Makeable Contracts					
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	5	2	1	2
S	-	5	2	1	2
E	1	-	-	-	-
W	1	-	-	-	-

Board 12 ♠ Q8 Dealer W
 ♥ KJ86 Vul: N-S
 ♦ KQ42
 ♣ KQ3

♠ K9432 ♠ J105
 ♥ A3 ♥ Q952
 ♦ AJ106 ♦
 ♣ A8 ♣ J109642

♠ A76
 ♥ 1074
 ♦ 98753
 ♣ 75

Holding 16 hcp, 5 spades and four diamonds, every West is opening this 1♠ and every North should make a takeout double holding 16 hcp, a balanced hand and a doubleton spade. East does not have to bid and could pass, but this makes it easier for N/S to find a fit, so even though East holds only four points and three spades, I really like a 2♣ response. Obviously, this is easier if E/W are playing a 5-card major system but very disruptive even if playing 4-card majors (see below).

If your partnership plays that a 2♣ bid should be stronger, I will pass initially and then compete with 2♠, if for example a 2♦ bid from South is being passed back around to me. I will always bid 2♣ and not open with a doubleton, holding a void in diamonds.

Competitive players often play that over a double a direct raise to 2M is very weak and a bid of 2M-1 shows a normal raise to the 2-level. This only applies when it goes 1M – takeout double – your bid – and makes life difficult for your opponents.

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♥	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-		-	-	-
S	-		-	-	-
E	3	-		3	
W	3	-		3	

Board 13 ♠ AJ3 Dealer N
 ♡ K7 Vul: Both
 ♦ K862
 ♣ J743

♠ K ♠ Q987
 ♡ A10942 ♡ 863
 ♦ Q54 ♦ J109
 ♣ AKQ10 ♣ 965

♠ 106542
 ♡ QJ5
 ♦ A73
 ♣ 82

North has a 1NT opening and South, holding a 5-card spade suit and only seven hcp should make a weak takeout, either by bidding 2♠ directly, or if playing transfers, by bidding 2♥ and then passing partner's 2♠ response.

Of course, West has no intention of passing regardless of what action South takes. If we assume most readers are playing transfers, West will start by doubling 2♥s – showing hearts. And North will complete the transfer showing a fit with 2♠. If a transfer bid is doubled, showing the suit bid, the person responding to the transfer has a choice. They can complete the transfer, then can pass, or they can redouble. These are for you to discuss with partner. Typically expert players play that pass denies a fit for transferred suit, while bidding the suit shows a fit (redouble could show a fit and maximum).

East is happy to pass and West has a decision to make. The points appear to be evenly divided and the 3-level isn't safe, so I think West must reluctantly pass.

If the defence are careful, 2♠ should go down. The key decision lies with West; when they gain the lead they need to know how many clubs to cash. If North is declarer, West can see the doubleton in Dummy and can easily switch to a diamond. However, if South is declarer, West would like to know how many clubs partner has.

Lead of Ace for Attitude, lead of King for a Count Signal

With this holding AKQx, you do not need to know if partner likes the suit, you need to know how many cards they have. If West is on lead they should therefore lead the King, looking for count from partner, not the Ace, and partner would follow with the 2, playing normal count, showing an odd number of cards. (High-low would show an even number.)

While 2♥ is the last making contract, it is difficult to imagine any auction that would allow 2♥ to be the final contract, and I would expect a large variety of negative scores on this hand.

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♥	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	1	-	1	-
S	-	1	-	1	-
E	1	-	2	-	-
W	1	-	2	-	-

Board 14 ♠ AK7 Dealer E
 ♡ Q6 Vul: None
 ♢ K76
 ♣ 98432

♠ J109643 ♡ K3 ♢ AQ ♣ A105	♠ 85 ♡ AJ1054 ♢ J943 ♣ K7
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♠ Q2 ♡ 9872 ♢ 10852 ♣ QJ6	
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4♠ is a lucky make but can't be stopped as the cards lie. Some players may be able to open 2♥ to show less than an opening bid and five hearts and four of a minor. This might result in them missing their 6-2 spade fit and playing in a 7-card heart fit instead.

Otherwise, the bidding should proceed with West opening 1♠ after two passes. North does not have a takeout double of spades holding a Weak NT hand and only a doubleton heart. East could be excused for responding 2♥, having already passed. In that case, 2♥ shows 9-11 hcp and a 5-card suit. This might persuade West to rebid 3♠ and you might reach game.

In the play, there is no lead that can stop West from making 10 tricks, and this becomes easier if North doubled to show values. West plans to ruff a club loser from hand in dummy, and then play a spade. If North wins they can't attack diamonds. If South plays the ♠Q and then a diamond, West can rise the Ace (not taking the finesse is easier if North has bid) and play the King and another heart – planning to finesse. When the ♥Q appears, West can continue with the ♥J throwing the ♦Q from hand and North has to ruff with either the Ace or King.

Takeout Double

It is important that players realise that double here is not simply an opening hand, and with a minimum opening hand that can only make one bid, North would not be happy if partner responded 2♥ and therefore should not make a takeout double. A takeout double promises shape – support (4-card) or tolerance (3-card) for the other three suits ... not simply opening values.

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	-	-	-	-
S	-	-	-	-	-
E	1	3	3	4	3
W	1	3	3	4	3

Board 16 ♠ A108 Dealer W
 ♥ J653 Vul: E-W
 ♦ J2
 ♣ QJ87

♠ QJ542 ♠ 763
 ♥ 82 ♥ AKQ7
 ♦ AQ743 ♦ K8
 ♣ A ♣ 9652

♠ K9
 ♥ 1094
 ♦ 10965
 ♣ K1043

West opens 1♠. East should not respond 2♥ with this hand, even holding the ♥AKQx. A 2♥ response guarantees a 5+-card suit as a 5-3 ♥ fit might be missed. There is no risk of missing a 4-4 heart fit when partner opens 1♠ as they will rebid 2♥ if they hold a 4-card heart suit. Here East should respond 2♣ and West will rebid 2♦ (after a two-over-one response, a change of suit from opener is forcing for one round). Now West rebids 4♠, with enough points for game and a spade fit.

North's obvious lead is the ♣Q. Now West has no losing clubs, no losing hearts and two definite spade losers. They need to keep their diamond losers to one and spade losers to two or diamond losers to zero, in which case they can afford to lose three spades.

They can't afford to lose three spades AND a diamond and so need to get rid of some spades early on by playing a spade towards the ♠QJ. If when North wins they clear dummy's trumps you will score three spade tricks, three heart tricks, three diamond tricks and one club trick.

If after North wins the spade they do not continue with another spade, West can win the return and after cashing two rounds of diamonds play a small diamond. When North ruffs in they can only take one more trump trick.

Makeable Contracts					
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	1	-	-	-	-
S	1	-	-	-	-
E	-	4	2	4	2
W	-	4	2	4	2

Board 17 ♠ KQJ7 Dealer N
 ♥ AKQ75 Vul: None
 ♦ A52
 ♣ K

♠ 8 ♥ 1082 ♦ J9 ♣ AJ109752	♠ A95432 ♥ J6 ♦ 107 ♣ 863
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♠ 106
 ♥ 943
 ♦ KQ8643
 ♣ Q4

North has a monster of a hand with 22 hcp. The hand holds four spades, five hearts three diamonds and a singleton ♣K. While the hand is not classically balanced, 2NT is the most descriptive bid (showing 20-22 hcp and a balanced hand). The partnership's best spot is 3NT where the defence can't prevent declarer from taking 11 tricks; indeed, the defence must be quick to take their two Aces or they won't get it them.

For example, on the expected and normal spade lead, declarer can win the opening lead and then take five heart tricks (because the hearts break 3-2) and six diamond tricks before giving up the last trick for +690.

If partnerships have tools to ask for a 5-card major South might bid 3♣ over 2NT which West can now double. Typically, a double in this type of auction, where the opponents have the points and are bidding to a vulnerable game, shows length in the suit and suggests a potential sacrifice. North proceeds with a 3♥ bid and West has the perfect hand to bid 5♣ at their next available bid.

South should double this and not risk the 5-level, and E/W will go three down for -500. This type of bid is called a sacrifice and works at what is termed favourable vulnerability, i.e. when the sacrifice bidders are non-vulnerable and the partnership with points for game are vulnerable. When bidding a sacrifice, as the name suggests, you don't expect to make your contract, but hope to lose fewer points going down than your opponents would make for making their vulnerable game.

If N/S are tempted to bid 5♥, it should always go down. When West leads a club and North's King falls, East will switch to their singleton spade and get a spade ruff. As the cards lie, N/S can always make 5NT but it is impossible to bid with a singleton King opposite a doubleton Queen.

Makeable Contracts					
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	4	4	2	5
S	-	4	4	2	5
E	2	-	-	-	-
W	2	-	-	-	-

Board 18 ♠ AK10432 Dealer E
 ♡ J52 Vul: N-S
 ♢ Q8
 ♣ 93

♠ Q6 ♡ 973 ♢ KJ1062 ♣ AK6	♠ 975 ♡ AKQ106 ♢ A943 ♣ 2
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♠ J8
 ♡ 84
 ♢ 75
 ♣ QJ108754

East has a 1♥ opening and, playing 4-card majors, West will respond 2♦. North has a lovely spade suit but bidding 2♠ here should show a much better hand. This is because you are coming into a live auction where you already know your opponents have more than half the hcp and the opener (West) is still unlimited.

West now raises 2♦ to 3♦ – showing a diamond fit, and a fifth heart. Bidding should be the same if playing a 2-over-1 game force. With a minimum responding hand and a double fit, West raises to 4♥.

On a spade lead declarer can be held to 11 tricks. North's best continuation is a third spade, hoping that partner has a trump higher than the 9 on the table (trump promotion). Not this time. With hearts breaking 3-2, declarer must play the diamond suit for no losers, if possible, and that requires finding the Queen. Holding a 9-card fit the general rule of thumb is to play for the drop – playing for the diamonds to divide 2-2. I've mentioned this before; let's dive a bit deeper to see why.

If you simply finesse the chance of it working is 50%. There is an even chance the Queen could be in either defender's hand, assuming no further information. If you cash the Ace and King, the chance the Queen will fall is 56.22%: this caters for singleton and doubleton Queen in either defender's hand.

The very best line of play is to lead up towards one honour and if both hands follow back to the second honour. This is only because if when you led low towards an honour, if the second hand to play shows out, you can now finesse your other opponent for the Queen. This line increases your chances to 57.92%. Note cashing one honour and then finessing works 56.22% of the time.

So with a 9-card suit and plenty of entries to each hand and no information to guide you, with a 9-card fit play for the drop! Note that on a non-spade lead, declarer should take 12 tricks – five hearts, five diamonds and two clubs. The key to this hand is the play in the diamond suit.

Makeable Contracts					
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	1	-	-	-	-
S	1	-	-	-	-
E	-	5	5	1	1
W	-	5	5	1	1

Board 19 ♠ K1086 Dealer S
 ♡ 87 Vul: E-W
 ♦ AQJ92
 ♣ 95

♠ J9 ♡ Q532 ♦ 103 ♣ KJ1042	♠ 542 ♡ AK94 ♦ 654 ♣ A86
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♠ AQ73
 ♡ J106
 ♦ K87
 ♣ Q73

South has a Weak NT opening and North has only 10 hcp so not enough to typically to bid game. However with such a nice 5-card diamond suit and four spades, bidding Stayman as South could be forgiven. The aim is to rebid 2NT after a 2♦ or a 2♥ response from South, and to invite to game with 3♠ if partner has four spades – as is the case in this hand. The 5-4 distribution makes playing in spades more inviting – provided the fit is there. If partner does not have four spades, the diamond suit should be useful in NT. On this particular hand, partner will not accept your 3♠ invite but will be very glad to play 3♠ making rather than going down in NT, which has no hope. Against NT West should lead the ♣J of clubs, the top of an internal sequence, East should play the Ace (third hand high) and return the ♣8. As West cashes the fourth and fifth club, East has the responsibility of making sure that West know to switch to a heart. This comes down to partnership signalling.

On this hand East, can play their highest spade or highest diamond, but neither is a very high card, so partner must pay close attention. Perhaps the clearest signals East can make are the ♠5 followed by the ♠2. If East has a diamond trick, there is no rush to take it, so West has to decide whether to switch to a spade or a heart. Normally the first card discarded is a suit preference signal – this is the card that tells partner which suit to switch to. In suit preference signals you don't want the suit you are throwing away (on this occasion spades) and a high spade says you want the higher of the two remaining suits (in this instance hearts) and a low spade says you want the lower of the two remaining suits (in this case diamonds). Discarding spades in this way makes it clear that a heart, not a spade or a diamond, is called for. Now West should switch to a small heart after cashing their last club, and the defence takes 9 tricks.

Those playing a Strong NT and 5-card majors would have found their spade fit more easily – and hopefully had no problem stopping short of game! Getting a good score requires paying attention to signals and good hand evaluation – not just hard and fast rules.

Makeable Contracts					
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	3	-	3	-
S	-	3	-	3	-
E	3	-	3	-	-
W	3	-	3	-	-

Board 20	♠ J73	Dealer W
	♥ Q985	Vul: Both
	♦ K10	
	♣ Q943	
♠ 1064		♠ KQ95
♥ AJ3		♥ K102
♦ QJ4		♦ A9653
♣ AKJ7		♣ 2
	♠ A82	
	♥ 764	
	♦ 872	
	♣ 10865	

Playing a Weak NT West opens 1♣ and after East responds 1♦, rebids 1NT showing 15-17 hcp and a balanced hand. East would like to check for a major suit fit. Improving players play that a 2♦ rebid now from East is game-forcing, asking opener to describe their 1NT further. This way E/W could easily identify if they have a spade fit. Those playing a Strong NT will open one and after 2♣ Stayman to check for a spade fit East will raise to 3NT.

On this hand West will play in 3NT and North is in the unfortunate position that leading a club or a heart (their two 4-card suits) away from the Queen into a Strong NT will cost a trick. Indeed, on either a heart or club lead declarer has to finesse in diamonds, and when the Queen is covered and they play low back to the Jack the 10 falls doubleton in the North hand, bringing home the whole suit.

When declarer tackles the spade suit, the best play from South is to duck if declarer plays low to the King or Queen. If you win the Ace, declarer is forced to finesse North for the ♠J, whereas if you duck, declarer has to guess whether you ducked or whether the Ace is in the North hand.

Importantly, North should also play low each time – declarer can still get it right, but your job as defenders is not to make it easy!

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	-	-	-	-
S	-	-	-	-	-
E	4	6	4	6	6
W	4	6	5	6	6

Board 21 ♠ J65 Dealer N
 ♡ K1094 Vul: N-S
 ♦ 43
 ♣ Q1093

♠ 10 ♠ KQ432
 ♡ AQ8752 ♡ J6
 ♦ K10962 ♦ AJ8
 ♣ 2 ♣ A87

♠ A987
 ♡ 3
 ♦ Q75
 ♣ KJ654

East opens 1♠, playing a Weak NT, planning to rebid NT. After South's pass West is worth a 2♥ response. They have 9 hcp and exceptional playing strength holding 6-5 in the red suits. East rebids 2NT, showing 15-17 balanced and West bids 4♥. Even if partner has 17 hcp, you still do not have the combined strength to explore for slam and the most likely game is 4♥.

As the hearts lie, West has to lose two trump tricks and the Ace of spades. They need to be careful not to lose a trick to the ♦Q also. Here we have an 8-card fit and must decide which hand to finesse. (With an 8-card fit you should always finesse rather than playing for the drop, unless you have some information suggesting the contrary.)

In this case, you should play South for the ♦Q because as they showed out on the second round of hearts, so there are considerably more spaces in their hand to potentially hold the ♦Q.

If you have nothing else to go on, play the hand with shortage in one suit to have length in the one you are trying to tackle – and more length here is more chance of holding the ♦Q.

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	2	-	-	-	-
S	2	-	-	-	-
E	-	4	4	1	2
W	-	4	4	1	2

Board 22 ♠ 92 Dealer E
 ♥ AK5 Vul: E-W
 ♦ K843
 ♣ K1032

♠ K84 ♠ J73
 ♥ Q64 ♥ 872
 ♦ J976 ♦ AQ1052
 ♣ 854 ♣ Q7

♠ AQ1065
 ♥ J1093
 ♦
 ♣ AJ96

South should open 1♠ and after North responds 2♣, South should rebid 2♥, and now North will bid 3NT. With only 12 hcp, knowing partner has a minimum hand (North jumped to 3NT), South might well pass, however as a diamond lead is marked on the bidding, South may feel that 5♣ might be a better spot. On this hand, if you find the ♣Q, run the ♥J successfully, and finesse the ♠10, knocking out the ♠K, you can actually make 12 tricks in clubs, while a diamond lead will hold you to 9 tricks in NT, even with the right plays in hearts and clubs.

Note that if North held the AK of diamonds rather than the AK of hearts, 3NT might have been the winning contract.

That's why we love this game 😊

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♥	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	6	1	6	6	3
S	6	1	6	6	2
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

Board 23 ♠ A94 Dealer S
 ♡ Q2 Vul: Both
 ♦ 1054
 ♣ A9853

♠ 532 ♠ QJ10876
 ♡ 10876 ♡ AJ95
 ♦ AK72 ♦
 ♣ KJ ♣ 762

♠ K
 ♡ K43
 ♦ QJ9863
 ♣ Q104

While South holds only eleven hcp, including a singleton King, they have an easy opening bid and rebid – 1♦ followed by 2♦, showing a minimum opening hand with long diamonds. This describes the hand well.

North would typically respond 2♣, and brave Easts may bid 2♠. While you might think that East does not have enough points, realistically this shows a hand that wants to compete in spades, and suit of decent quality – which is what East holds. If East bids spades at their first opportunity South’s rebid must be a pass to show a minimum opening; rebidding 3♦ would show a much stronger hand. Now East’s bravery might be rewarded if North does not feel able to compete to 3♦.

If East passes and South rebids 2♦ and North passes this, East can easily balance in 2♠ and West can compete to 3♠. 3♠ can easily be let make if E/W can keep losers to two spades, one heart, and one club. East needs to use its entry to dummy (clubs) to play hearts – planning to double finesse. 3♠ might sneak through or might only go down one, either a better score than defending 3♦.

Two important points: (1) If you would like to compete, compete at the first opportunity, and (2) try to raise partner’s suit if you can. Here a raise from 2♦ to 3♦ by North makes it more difficult for opponents to find their fit. While East can easily balance if 2♦ is passed out, bidding for the first time over 3♦ is unlikely.

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♡	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	2	3	-	-	
S	2	3	-	-	
E	-	-	2	2	-
W	-	-	2	2	-

Board 24	♠ Q82	Dealer W
	♥ J75	Vul: None
	♦ 98532	
	♣ 108	
♠ AK654		♠ 1073
♥ AK		♥ 10643
♦ 76		♦ Q4
♣ J743		♣ AQ65
	♠ J9	
	♥ Q982	
	♦ AKJ10	
	♣ K92	

West opens 1♠ and, if playing Weak NT and 4-card majors, East responds INT. South holds 14 hcp and a doubleton spade. A double in this position is usually played as a takeout double of spades (the suit opened). If South is going to bid to show their hand this is their opportunity, and double is the best option. This does not stop West from rebidding 2♣ and East corrects to 2♠, knowing now that partner has at least five spades.

In the play, declarer can't help losing one spade trick, two diamond tricks and one club trick – making +140. Declarer should play the Ace-King of trumps and leave the Queen of trumps outstanding and then revert to playing on clubs .

When the defender's last outstanding trump is a winner don't waste your own trumps to draw it out, let the opponents take it whenever they want, hopefully by having to ruff one of your side-suit winners.

	Makeable Contracts				
	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-			-	-
S	-			-	-
E	3	-	-	3	
W	3	-	-	3	

Board 25 ♠ 104 Dealer N
 ♥ J976 Vul: E-W
 ♦ J642
 ♣ KQ9

♠ AK63 ♠ 852
 ♥ AKQ5 ♥ 42
 ♦ 73 ♦ A85
 ♣ 1075 ♣ J8642

♠ QJ97
 ♥ 1083
 ♦ KQ109
 ♣ A3

South has a Weak NT opening and West should double, typically showing a Strong NT-type hand (15-18 hcp). Now North has no reason to bid. The points look to be 20/20 and they have some values over the double. East has no problem bidding 2♣ and if let play there can make an easy 8 tricks.

N/S always have six losers, so competing to the 2-level will always go one down. But this is preferable to having the opponents make 2♣; we are non-vul. However, it is very important that N/S have clear agreements about HOW they compete over 2♣, specifically whether a double from either North or South is penalties or takeout. This is a very important conversation to have with your partner.

Playing a Strong NT it is easier for N/S to not sell out to 2♣. South would open 1♦, and West has a clear takeout double, North responds 1♥ and South rebids 1NT. If this is passed around to East, it is difficult to bid 2♣ vulnerable with only five points.

With a 5-card suit always pull 1NT doubled unless you're strong enough to be sure it has a reasonable chance of making.

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♥	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-		-	-	
S	-		-	-	
E	2	-			-
W	2	-			-

Board 26 ♠ A984 Dealer E
 ♡ Q Vul: Both
 ♦ 852
 ♣ K9863

♠ KQJ763
 ♡ K8
 ♦ K96
 ♣ 105

♠ 1052
 ♡ A7432
 ♦ A4
 ♣ QJ7

♠ J10965
 ♡ QJ1073
 ♣ A42

East has a nice 1♠ opening. South should pass; this is not a 2♥ overcall, as your heart suit is too poor. West has a problem; they have a nice hand but not opposite the expected spade values in partner's hand. Even though this hand is not balanced, the correct bid from West is 1NT. East has only one rebid, 2♠ – the worst possible news for West who will pass.

On this particular hand E/W might make 2♠ in spite of Dummy's void, as to defeat it South needs to score a ruff in diamonds – taking two spade tricks in North, a diamond trick and a diamond ruff in South, the ♥A, and a club (note that a heart ruff takes North's natural spade trick). The expected lead from South is the ♣Q.

It is often tempting when void in partner's suit to think you might have a better spot to play in but each time you bid, you force the partnership up a level. Don't think that you can dig a nicer hole on your side of the table than the one partner has dug on their side.

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♥	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	2	-	-	-	-
S	2	-	-	-	1
E	-	3	2	1	-
W	-	3	2	1	-

Board 27 ♠ J864 Dealer S
 ♥ A1043 Vul: None
 ♦ AKJ9
 ♣ 6

♠ 105 ♠ KQ7
 ♥ KJ52 ♥ Q
 ♦ 753 ♦ Q1064
 ♣ K1032 ♣ QJ854

♠ A932
 ♥ 9876
 ♦ 82
 ♣ A97

After two passes, North holds a 4-4-4-1 distribution and a minimum opening hand. Our basic bidding rules state that with a balanced hand we open NT or open a suit and rebid NT, while with an unbalanced hand we open one of a suit and rebid a different suit – typically showing an extra card in the first suit bid. This hand shape does not follow either of these rules and so whatever you bid it will be a lie – so what is the cheapest lie?

If we lie about length in a major suit, we might end up playing a 4-3 fit because partner thinks we have a 5-card suit, so the best strategy is to open a minor. On this hand you will open 1♦ and hope that partner responds 1♥ or 1♠. Now our rebid is easy; we can just raise to two of the major. Our worst-case scenario is that partner responds 2♣; now we have to rebid 2♦ as rebidding 2♥ or 2♠ would be a reverse and you have a minimum opening hand. Partner will think we have five diamonds, but that is rarely the end of the world.

Sometimes the best lie with a 4-4-4-1 hand might be to open or rebid NT. This is especially true if you hold a singleton honour and are counting it as full points. Not on this hand, however.

On this hand, even though East has 12 points and a 5-card suit, this is not a good 2♣ overcall. You only have a suit quality of 7 in clubs and will give declarer information about playing the hand. On the hand E/W can compete to 3♣ but there are 9 tricks available in either major for N/S.

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♥	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	-	1	3	3	1
S	-	1	3	3	1
E	1	-	-	-	-
W	1	-	-	-	-

Board 28 ♠ 7642 Dealer W
 ♥ KJ Vul: N-S
 ♦ 64
 ♣ AQ1042

♠ KJ109 ♠ 853
 ♥ 8763 ♥ 102
 ♦ K1082 ♦ Q9
 ♣ 7 ♣ KJ9863

♠ AQ
 ♥ AQ954
 ♦ AJ753
 ♣ 5

South breathes a sigh of relief when the bidding starts with three passes. Often when you pick you a nice distributional hand the bidding is already very high before you get a chance to bid. Here if there is no interference, South opens 1♥, and North responds 2♣. The easiest way to show 5 clubs and 4 spades and an invitational hand by North is to start with a 2♣ bid – planning to rebid 2♠ after a 2♦ or 2♥ response.

On this hand South rebids 3♦ and now North should bid 3♠. This is not natural, although on this hand North happens to have four spades. Rather it is a forcing asking bid to see if South has values in spades and can bid NT.

Played from South, 3NT can always be made. It's easy on a spade lead, into the Ace-Queen. But even without a spade lead, it can still always be made because South can keep East off lead for the whole hand and lose three diamond tricks to West, who can't attack spades without giving away the critical ninth trick. This is rather double-dummy.

If East opens a cheeky 3♣ because of the favourable vulnerability, South has a 3♥ overcall, not a double as they can only rebid 4♦ if partner responds in spades, and North should bid 3NT.

If East finds a spade lead, 3NT will go down. On any other lead, East can be kept off lead for the rest of the hand and 3NT will make – a line of play only made possible by the 3♣ opening bid which gives declarer information about the lie of the club suit.

	Makeable Contracts				NT
	♣	♦	♥	♠	
	=	=	=	=	==
N	1	3	3	1	2
S	1	3	4	2	3
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-