

As declarer, don't lose sight of the wider picture



Freddie North

IN their formative years, bridge players love simple *aide-mémoires* and one of the most popular is the jingle 'eight ever, nine never.' This refers to how you deal with capturing the missing queen – usually in the trump suit – with eight and nine cards respectively. So the general rule is to finesse when holding eight cards and play for the drop with nine. This may well be sound enough advice in the ordinary way, but the words 'ever and always' and 'never and nohow' make uncomfortable bedfellows in the greater scheme of things as the best line of play is being considered. Sometimes a little fine-tuning is required – regardless of the dos and don'ts. Consider these two hands:

This is the full deal:

	♠ 8		
	♥ A 9 5 2		
	♦ 7 6 3		
	♣ K Q 6 4 3		
♠ A J 10 7 5 2		♠ K 9 4	
♥ K 6 3		♥ 8 7 4	
♦ Q 10 4		♦ A K J 9 5	
♣ A		♣ 10 9	
	♠ Q 6 3		
	♥ Q J 10		
	♦ 8 2		
	♣ J 8 7 5 2		

Game All. Dealer West. Teams.			
♠ A J 10 7 5 2		♠ K 9 4	
♥ K 6 3		♥ 8 7 4	
♦ Q 10 4		♦ A K J 9 5	
♣ A		♣ 10 9	

Perhaps the uncontested auction goes: 1♠ – 2♦ – 3♠ – 4♠, and North leads the king of clubs. What are your thoughts?

Well, of course, you may have underbid. If the trumps behave you are looking at twelve certain tricks: six spades, five diamonds and one club. On the other hand, if there is a trump loser even 4♠ could fail. Suppose South wins a trick with the spade queen and North holds the ace of hearts . . . Disaster! The point is that the king of hearts could become an endangered species, so it is imperative to keep South off lead.

So, rather than follow the 'eight ever, nine never' rule, we invoke the assistance of our fine-tuning friend. After the ace of clubs, we play a spade to dummy's king and then a second spade, inserting the ten when South plays low. If North wins with the queen he cannot attack the heart suit to advantage, and if the ten holds we draw the last trump and claim twelve tricks.

At teams or rubber bridge the recommended line is unquestionably correct as it guarantees the contract (at least eleven tricks) whatever the trump distribution. However, at pairs declarer has more of a problem. Some East-Wests will be in 6♠ and with an inevitable heart loser may decide to play for the queen of spades to drop. The game-only players may or may not do the same (the odds are very close), so if West is looking for a good board he might still follow the teams and rubber-bridge line.

Now, suppose you are East in the following situation:

Game all. Dealer South. Rubber bridge.			
♠ A K 10 9 6		♠ J 5 2	
♥ A 10 3		♥ J 6 2	
♦ K		♦ 7 6 3	
♣ J 9 7 2		♣ A K Q 6	

South, playing five-card majors, opens the bidding with 1♥ but West becomes the declarer in 4♠. North, who has passed throughout, leads the four of hearts. What are your plans?

Obviously the main problem is the trump suit. The jingle 'eight ever, nine

never' suggests that declarer should finesse for the queen, a play which on its own is mathematically correct. But is that right here, or is a little fine-tuning required? The bidding and lead point to the virtual certainty of the four of hearts being a singleton. If this is the case the danger in taking the spade finesse must surely outweigh other considerations. This is the full deal:

	♠ Q 7 4		
	♥ 4		
	♦ 10 9 8 5 4 2		
	♣ 8 5 4		
♠ A K 10 9 6		♠ J 5 2	
♥ A 10 3		♥ J 6 2	
♦ K		♦ 7 6 3	
♣ J 9 7 2		♣ A K Q 6	
	♠ 8 3		
	♥ K Q 9 8 7 5		
	♦ A Q J		
	♣ 10 3		

Suppose West, without the benefit of fine-tuning, blindly follows his favourite slogan. Now, after the ace of hearts and ace of spades, he enters dummy with a club and takes the spade finesse . . . Oh dear! North wins and puts his partner in with the ace of diamonds to cash his king of hearts; then, the final nail in the coffin, hearts are continued for North to ruff.

While slogans and jingles are all very well in their place, declarers should never lose sight of the broader picture – especially any possible dangers from the bidding and opening lead. The conclusion in this case must surely be to eschew all thought of the trump finesse. Thus declarer loses just one spade, one heart and one diamond. □