

CHAPTER 17

SAFETY PLAY? BOLSI!

I happened across an old Bridge Magazine article the other day and must say enjoyed re-reading what I had written some 20 years ago. I also wondered whether today's experts had in fact learned about the 'safety play' that I discovered so many years ago. Not that it is a safety play in the true sense of the word. There is no GUARANTEE that this hand is makeable against any distribution, so there IS no safety play in that sense. But let's read what the writer who reported the hand 20 years ago had to say. He was, at the time, an Australian International, and the player featured as South was, as I recall, a top US player. Here is the report:

"Find the Safety Play."

The hand comes from the US Vanderbilt, with East the dealer and EW vulnerable:

<p>♠ Q 8 6 ♥ K Q 5 4 3 ♦ ♣ A Q 9 8 6</p>	<p>♠ A 10 7 5 3 ♥ 2 ♦ A Q 9 7 6 5 2 ♣</p> <p>♠ K J 8 4 2 ♥ A 8 ♦ J 10 8 4 ♣ J 7</p>	<p>♠ ♥ J 10 9 7 6 ♦ K 3 ♣ K 10 5 4 3 2</p>
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This was the bidding:

E	S	W	N
NB	1S	2H	4H
5H	DBL	NB	6C
6D	DBL	6H	6S
NB	NB	DBL	

Playing in 6S doubled, Martel won the heart lead and took stock. Chances looked good but the bidding did suggest a spade void. Believing that East's bid of 6D was void showing, declarer did not play East for a spade void as well. He led a small spade to the ace and went one down when a diamond loser could not be avoided. Unlucky."

That is what the writer had to say. Now here is what I had to say at the time: "Unlucky, yes, but if East is indeed void in diamonds, then the contract is stone cold. Therefore the ONLY thing declarer has to guard against is if East is NOT void in diamonds and has either Kx or the bare king of diamonds (declarer would presumably finesse and lose to the singleton king). Therefore declarer's SAFETY play should be to play EAST for the spade void and lay down the king of spades. But, there is a better and much more elegant 'Safety' play available. Declarer should put the theory of a diamond void in EITHER opponent's hand to the test at trick TWO. Lead the jack of diamonds. If WEST has the void, West can ruff what is a loser anyway, or not ruff and let the ace make, whereupon trumps are drawn, playing WEST for all the trumps since West had the diamond void. If West follows to a diamond and East is void and ruffs, spades now fall. So the only embarrassing moment for declarer is if West follows to the diamond and East wins the singleton king. But if that is the case, the spades will almost certainly EITHER break OR be with EAST. Why? Because East MUST have a spade void to justify, after being a PASSED HAND, cue bidding diamonds in search of a slam."

I sent this problem out to our panel of "experts". Astoundingly, the first answer I received was, in a matter of minutes: "Finesse diamond at trick two". That bugger Willy Riskett must have read my article, I thought.

Maybe it's a trivial problem after all. Happily, I can report that the other answers were not quite so accurate or succinct. One DID, after waffling on about who had what, come to the FINAL conclusion, that: "But maybe the answer is to finesse the diamonds at trick two". Others worked out all the possibilities STATISTICALLY and based their play on the odds of all sorts of things, but nobody else was prepared to play a diamond.

The instinct to draw trumps was clearly ingrained. We even had a couple of our experts deciding that they could not afford to lead a diamond and lose to the king because then East would return another one for West to ruff! Our panelist No.1 did point out to his Aussie mate that we actually play with only 13 cards in each suit in NZ. I'm sorry to report that, MOST of the panel who decided to draw trumps immediately, did NOT fall into the same trap as Martel. Some did, because they believed the cue bid. But to believe the cue bid and therefore lead a spade to the ace (West will follow and you're surely not going to take a first round finesse) is, in my opinion, crazy, because that in effect means that you are trying for an OVERTRICK in your doubled slam! THIS problem you should be able to get right even without being told any bidding, and some of our panelists relied entirely on their statistical expertise. Because that involved allowing for the possibility of LOSING to the king of diamonds off side, their statistical approach meant that you should play WEST, if anyone, to have the spades. Makes sense, and it's just another way of looking at the possible loser problem. Playing this way and laying down the KING of spades, according to our statistical expert from Portugal, gives you about an 80% chance of success. Finessing the diamond FIRST merely confirms this line of play.

Has anyone else come across such an interesting safety play as to offer opponents a ruff in a side suit at trick two? I'd like to hear from them if they have.

Another hand from the same article I entitled "Brilliances? Bols!" and this reported a hand which led to one of the defenders being accorded what then was known as the "Bols Brilliancy Prize". Here is the problem, and the way it was reported at the time:

"The bidding isn't given but South landed in 3NT and West led the TWO OF HEARTS. Put yourself in the EAST seat.

Dummy (North)

♠ K Q 7 6 5 3
♥ Q
♦ A 9 6 3
♣ 6 4

You (East)

♠ J 2
♥ J 8 6 5
♦ K 8 7
♣ 10 7 5 3

The queen wins in dummy and declarer now calls for the THREE OF SPADES. How will you, as East, defend, and WHY?

Next: Chapter 18: Brilliances? Bols!