

Never Play Your Lowest Card First

By Israel Erdenbaum

Should one ever say 'never' or 'always' in relation to bridge? Maybe not, probably not, most certainly not. Nevertheless this is my tip. But why?

Some years ago we 'planted' the following hand in various duplicate games, in the hope of proving that the best way to illustrate a point is by way of a practical demonstration.

Board 23
South Deals
Both Vul

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

West North East South
Pass 3 NT All pass 1 NT

To make nine tricks South must play the eight and nine of diamonds first. The hands of the opponents do not justify intervention.

When we examined the score sheets we found that many pairs played the hand in diamonds, the contracts ranging between two and five. However, most played in 2NT or 3NT making six, seven or eight tricks.

In conversations with many of the players, it took some explaining why 3NT should be bid with 'only' 7 HCP. There was, however, no need to explain what happened in the play of the hand and why nine tricks were not made. The players involved were dismayed and even shocked by the way they blocked the diamond suit, when they automatically played the six of diamonds (the lowest) to the first trick.

Seven or eight months later we 'planted' the same hand again, exchanging only the diamond and club suits. As most of the players were playing this hand the second time and we remembered how shocked they were, we were eagerly waiting to see the score sheets.

Well, there certainly was a difference. The number of 3NT contracts rose dramatically, so the bidding demonstration worked. As to the play of the hand, the 'practical demonstration' and the shock it caused were apparently completely forgotten. Nobody made nine tricks; the automatic play of the lowest card blocked the suit once again.

We repeated this experiment several times, always with intervals of six to nine months, with the same results. The few times the contract was made, it was by some seasoned 'tournament' or 'championship' players as opposed to 'social' or 'duplicate' players who play for pleasure.

The Laws of Duplicate Bridge say that when declarer tells dummy to play low, dummy must play the lowest card at the first opportunity, but the simple fact is that this is exactly what he does whenever he plays without thinking, and quite often with dire consequences.

When we accept the fact that the average player will play automatically in these situations, and when we accept that the automatic play of the lowest card first is bad, then all that remains is to try to make him hang on to his lowest card.

Of course, sometimes (seldom) it is absolutely necessary to play the lowest card first, but what we want to do is change the automatic behavior. To change automatic behavior is a tough proposition and to give it

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any chance at all the proposed change must be as short and as clear cut as possible. So it is not ideal, but it is definitely a step in the right direction.