

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?

Board 11
South Deals
None Vul

	♠ 4 3		
	♥ J 7 3		
	♦ J 6 3		
	♣ A K Q 5 3		
♠ J 8 6 5 2		♠ 10 9 7	
♥ 9 2		♥ A K 10 5	
♦ 8 7 5 4 2		♦ K Q 10	
♣ 10		♣ J 9 2	
	♠ A K Q		
	♥ Q 8 6 4		
	♦ A 9		
	♣ 8 7 6 4		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
Pass	3 NT	All pass	1 NT

South opens 1NT (15-17) and North raises to 3NT. To make nine tricks South must make five club tricks and as clubs are 3-1 he must hold on to the four which he can then overtake with the five and then cash the three for his fifth trick.

There were no problems this time; everybody was in 3NT, everybody was one down. Clearly everybody blocked the clubs by playing the four of clubs (the lowest) to the first trick.

Why were these simple hands misplayed by players who should know better; in most cases by players capable of making difficult contracts. The answer lies in the apparent simplicity of the hand which makes the player careless.

The vast majority of people playing social or duplicate bridge play simply for pleasure. They do not take the trouble to analyse every move, so when a hand looks simple they play it routinely and automatically.

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 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.