

The Belladonna Coup

By Rich Waugh

The Belladonna coup is the play of a low card away from an accompanying high card, giving the opponents the impossible choice between setting up a winner for declarer and abandoning an attack on another suit.

The provenance of the following spectacular hand, which illustrates the Belladonna coup, is uncertain. A similar layout, with the same key play, is discussed by Victor Mollo. Both sources attribute the coup to Giorgio Belladonna, for many years a cornerstone of the Italian Blue Team. (Belladonna later said that he could not recall having made the key play.) It is said that Belladonna played it as described in a European Community championship in Belgium during the 1980s. But it is also said that Paul Lukacs, the game's preeminent composer of single-dummy problems, composed it away from the table.

Board 16
West Deals
E-W Vul

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

All pass
1. New Minor Forcing

Against South's four spades, West leads a small trump to East's ten and South's jack. South has several ways to play for ten tricks, which include finding the heart ace onside (50% probability of success), or finding the diamonds 3-3 (36%). The best prospect is to ruff a heart in dummy, but the attack on trumps jeopardizes that plan. If South mistimes the play, the defense can manage to lead three rounds of trumps and win the king of spades, before declarer can ruff the third heart.

Instead of relying on the position of the heart ace or a favorable diamond split, South played for the nearly sure thing by taking a safety play in hearts.

South led to dummy's diamond king and played the six of hearts away from the king! This gave the E-W an impossible choice:

- If East takes the trick with either the ace or (if he has it) the queen, South eventually takes a heart trick by force of cards. East can continue trumps safely from his side, but South would no longer need to ruff a heart to reach ten tricks.
- If West takes the trick – say, by capturing the jack with the queen – then South might never take a heart trick. But West could not lead another spade without sacrificing his trump trick. South can't be stopped from either ruffing a heart in dummy, or (if West leads another trump) from taking five spades in his own hand.

Notice that South gives up the best chance of making a heart trick (leading toward the king). By giving up the chance for one trick in hearts, South virtually guarantees ten tricks (now only a very unlikely defensive minor suit ruff can defeat the contract).

Notice the presence of the avoidance play theme in this deal.