

Cherchez la Femme

By Brian Gunnell

Try looking at just the North-South hands and decide how you are going to play that spade suit. Where's the lady?

Board 6
 East Deals
 E-W Vul

♠ A 8 7 3
 ♥ Q 10 9
 ♦ 9 8 5
 ♣ K 3 2

♠ K J 10 9 2
 ♥ 3
 ♦ A K 6 4 3
 ♣ Q 4

West North East South
 Pass 3 ♠ 1 NT 2 ♠
 All pass Pass 4 ♠
 4 ♠ by South
 Lead: ♦ Q

1NT showed 15-17 HCP, after which the auction inches its way up to four spades. West leads the ♦Q, which is won by your ace. You have one loser in each of the side suits, so to make your contract you must avoid losing a trump trick.

In the play of the spades you could choose to finesse against West, or to finesse against East, or to play "for the drop" (hoping that the suit is 2-2 or the ♠Q is singleton). The general rule, when holding a nine-card fit, is to play for the drop, all things being equal that is about a 58% chance.

But why settle for 58% when you can have 100%? Yes, it's time for some counting. North-South have a combined 22 HCP, that leaves East-West with 18. West has already played the ♦Q, leaving precisely 15 or 16 HCP in the East hand. As East has already advertised 15-17 he must have all the missing high cards with the possible exception of one of the missing jacks. So at trick two you lead a spade to dummy's ace and then, when East plays low on the second round, you finesse the jack with complete confidence. That's ten tricks for those who count, but only nine for the rule-followers.

♠ A 8 7 3
 ♥ Q 10 9
 ♦ 9 8 5
 ♣ K 3 2

♠ 4
 ♥ 8 7 6 5 4 2
 ♦ Q J 10
 ♣ 10 6 5

♠ Q 6 5
 ♥ A K J
 ♦ 7 2
 ♣ A J 9 8 7

♠ K J 10 9 2
 ♥ 3
 ♦ A K 6 4 3
 ♣ Q 4