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Play & Learn

First things first

Cover up the East–West hands on the deal below and plan South’s play in 4♠. West leads the ♥Q with East following low.

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

West	North	East	South
1♥	Dbl	Pass	4♠
All Pass			

South’s losers are three diamonds and one heart. One loser must be eliminated, and the doubleton in dummy is a clue that South should consider ruffing the heart loser. The question is when to take that ruff — before or after drawing trumps? Declarers who ruff first will be defeated when East overruffs the third heart.

You might be thinking that the distribution was terribly unlucky, but

West did promise at least five hearts in the bidding so a 6–2 heart split isn’t completely shocking. Declarers who take no unnecessary risks and draw all the missing trumps first make 4♠ since one spade remains in dummy to ruff the heart loser. Whenever you plan to ruff losers, you also must decide whether it’s safe to draw some or all of the trumps first.

On the next deal, West leads the ♥Q and East follows with the ♥3.

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

West	North	East	South
Pass	2♦ ⁽¹⁾	Pass	1♠
Pass	4♠	All Pass	2♠

(1) North plans to reach 4♠, but makes a forcing 2♦ response because an immediate 4♠ bid would show a weaker hand with more spades.

South counts four losers — one diamond and three clubs. The plan is to ruff a club loser in dummy. Some declarers might immediately see the solution and fail to count the third club as a loser. It’s best to count any card you plan on ruffing as a loser to remind you to save enough trumps in

dummy for ruffing.

With a nine-card trump fit, it’s tempting to hope for a 2–2 split and draw trumps immediately, but be careful. Before you can ruff a club, you must give up the lead to void dummy of clubs. This gives East–West two opportunities to gain the lead. Is it safe to lead even a single round of spades before playing clubs? Not with this 3–1 trump split. If you play even one spade before losing a club, East can win the ♣K and return a spade. East again gets in with the ♣A and draws dummy’s last trump. Win the opening lead and play clubs immediately. Your spades are strong, so play it super safe and ruff the third club high. Then draw trumps.

Can you find any defense that would have allowed East–West to defeat 4♠? An opening trump lead would have done it, but it would be absurd to criticize West for not finding that lead. West has a lovely sequence lead and the auction didn’t suggest a trump lead.

Tournaments and many clubs provide hand records containing a copy of each hand played in that session and a list of all contracts that can be made by either side. The hand record for this deal would have said that North–South can take only nine tricks in spades.

I often see newer players take this list of contracts as gospel. A better judge of how well you did is to compare your results for the event to the other scores. If you got a poor result, take the time to work with your partner to see if there was a way for the two of you to do better. □