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Play & Learn

When to be a pessimist

Cover up the East–West hands on the deal below and count South’s losers in 4♥. West leads the ♠Q and East follows with the ♠2.

♠ 9 8 7 6 3 ♥ 8 6 5 ♦ — ♣ K J 6 4 2	♠ 5 4 2 ♥ 9 4 2 ♦ K J 8 6 5 ♣ A Q	♠ Q J 10 ♥ 7 ♦ A 10 7 4 2 ♣ 10 8 7 5	♠ A K ♥ A K Q J 10 3 ♦ Q 9 3 ♣ 9 3
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West	North	East	South
			1♥
Pass	2♥	Pass	4♥
All Pass			

Did you count five losers for South? If you counted fewer, you could be setting yourself up to be disappointed. Your initial loser count should be pessimistic. Count losers suit by suit, looking at high cards in dummy for help. Expect any honor that is not an ace to be captured by the next higher missing card.

South has two small clubs so we look at North–South’s two highest

clubs — the ♣K and ♣J. Assuming no luck, the ♣K will lose to the ♣A and the ♣J will lose to the ♣Q, leaving South with two club losers.

The same pessimistic outlook is true for losers that can be ruffed. While you can see that it’s possible to ruff diamond losers in dummy, your initial count includes three diamond losers. Two losers must be eliminated to make 4♥. What is your plan?

Eliminating a club loser by way of a successful finesse gives you only a 50% chance. Ruffing at least two diamond losers in dummy gives you a much better chance to make your contract. You can’t ruff diamonds if you draw trumps immediately.

Win the opening lead and ruff a diamond. Return to your hand with a spade and ruff another diamond. You’ve now eliminated enough losers to make 4♥. You could simply draw trumps and later hope to avoid a club loser for an overtrick, but your hearts are so good that you can afford to ruff a spade high and ruff the third diamond. Another high spade ruff lets you reach your hand to draw trumps and then exit with a club. As the cards lie — with both high clubs offside — you will make five.

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

West leads the ♣Q and the defenders play three rounds of clubs without making dummy’s ♣K good. You ruff the third club and then what? Cover the East–West cards to plan your play.

You can afford to lose one more trick, but you have two heart losers. I have a difficult time convincing my students to count the second heart loser because they see that they can ruff it. But not counting that heart loser can lull declarer into a false sense of security. Without too many losers, declarer will often draw trumps immediately. On this hand, drawing trumps takes three trump leads, leaving dummy without any spades and declarer with two heart losers.

You might argue that you can recover after drawing two rounds of trump and discovering the 3–1 split. Is that true? Not if you played trumps as soon as you gained the lead. Before you can ruff a heart, you have to lose the lead, allowing West to get in to play a third spade, drawing dummy’s last trump.

Be a pessimist. Lead hearts early — either as soon as you gain the lead or after playing just one round of trumps. A second round of trumps could be fatal.

Make counting losers and developing a plan to eliminate them your top priorities when you are in a suit contract. Do this before calling a card from dummy at trick one. The more you practice this process, the easier and faster it becomes. □