

Roll Over, Houdini

By Zia Mahmood

It's rare that bridge players receive compliments, but when they do come the one that strokes my ego the most is the word 'magician'.

You can keep your praises for error-free bridge or the accolades given to the so-called purity of computer-like relay bids – they don't do anything for me. No, I suppose it's something in my character that has always made me thrilled by the razzle dazzle of the spectacular and excited by the flamboyant and extraordinary.

Yet the world of bridge magic, like stage magic, is often no more than illusion, much simpler to perform than it appears to the watcher. Allow me to take you into that world...

Assume you are East, sitting over the dummy, North, after the bidding has gone 1NT by South on your left, 3NT on your right. Isolating one suit (let's say diamonds), you see:

Dummy

♦ J 2

or ♦ J 3 2

You

♦ Q 4

or ♦ Q 5 4

or ♦ Q 6 5 4

Declarer plays the jack from dummy. What would you do? Cover, you say? Correct. With Q-4 and Q-5-4 you would cover all of the time. With Q-6-5-4 you would cover somewhere between usually to always.

Good!

What if the bidding was one heart on your left, four hearts on your right, and this was the lay-out:

Dummy

♦ Q 2

or ♦ Q 3 2

You

♦ K 4

or ♦ K 5 4

or ♦ K 6 5 4

Declarer played the queen from dummy. Again, what would you do?

Again, the answer is easy.

With K-4 and K-5-4 you would cover all of the time.

With K-6-5-4 you would cover somewhere between usually and always.

In both examples, you would have defended correctly, following one of bridge's oldest rules: cover an honor with an honor. Bear with me a moment longer and change seats.

As declarer, needing as many tricks as possible (don't we always?), how would you play these suits?

Dummy ♦ J 2	Dummy ♦ Q 3 2
Declarer ♦ A K 10 9 8	Declarer ♦ A J 10 9 8

Run the jack, run the queen? That's normal; you would be following the simple, basic rule taught to every beginner about the finesse.

But, hold it a moment. Something's wrong. How can both these plays be right?

If, as in the first example, the defender over the dummy would nearly always (correctly) cover the honor played when he had it, how can it be right to finesse that honor when we know that East (RHO) almost never has it?

The queen in the first example, and the king in the second are almost surely in the West hand (*mal placé* as the French say) and sometimes unprotected.

My BOLS bridge tip, therefore (and I certainly have taken my time to get there), is as simple and easy as this:

When they don't cover, they don't have it

Declarer should place or drop the relevant card offside, even when this is hugely anti-percentage. Before the critics jump, I must add a few obvious provisos:

- (1) The length must be in the concealed hand.
- (2) The declarer should not be known to have special length or strength in the suit.
- (3) The honor in dummy should not be touching, i.e. J-10, Q-J, etc.
- (4) The pips in the suit should be solid enough to afford overtaking your honor without costing a trick when the suit breaks badly.

I know this tip is going to revolutionize the simple fundamentals of the everyday finesse, but although it comes with no guarantees, I can assure you that it is nearly always effective and deadly.

Here are two examples, both from actual play:

♠ K Q 3 2
♥ A 4 3
♦ J 2
♣ K J 6 5

♠ A 4
♥ 6 5 2
♦ A K 10 9 8 6
♣ 10 7

You declare 3NT after opening a slightly offbeat weak no-trump (if you weren't offbeat you wouldn't still be reading this). West leads a heart and you win the third with the ace and lead the jack of diamonds.

East plays low. He didn't cover! He doesn't have it! Drop the queen offside! Magic – you might have thought so before you read this article.

♠ Q 2
♥ 5 3
♦ 10 9 4
♣ A K 10 9 7 2

♠ A J 10
♥ K 2
♦ A K Q 3
♣ Q 6 5 3

Finally you reach six clubs from the right side (well bid!) and receive a trump lead. How would you play?

The scientists would carefully look at this hand and see that the percentage line would be to draw trumps and play out the top diamonds. If the diamonds were 3-3 or the jack came down they would discard a heart from dummy. Now they could play up to the king of hearts and, if that lost, finally try the finesse in spades. Not bad, you say? True, but the greatest illusionist of all time, Harry Houdini, would have rejected this line. Instead, he would have played the queen of spades at the second trick. No East living in the twentieth century would fail to cover the king if he had it (declarer might have A-J-2, for example). If East played low, Houdini would 'know' the king was in the West hand and win with the ace. He would now draw trumps and play on diamonds. If they weren't good, he would go down just like the scientists, but if they were good he would discard a spade, not a heart from dummy and take a ruffing finesse against West's king of spades, setting up the ten for a heart discard to make his contract with both finesses wrong.

If at that time the kibitzers burst into applause and the deep-throated voice of Ella Fitzgerald singing that 'Old Black Magic' could be heard in the distance, don't be surprised.

Roll over, Houdini, the bridge magicians are coming.