

Don't Play Idle Cards Thoughtlessly

They Are the Neutrinos of Bridge

By Jean Besse

Idle cards are those that can neither make tricks nor prevent the enemy from making tricks, nor act as guards to important cards. Indeed, they appear to have no practical use at all.

And yet idle cards can exert an influence, even though it may be hard to pin down. They are like the neutrinos of nuclear physics, which are of minute mass and seem not to affect other particles but which have mysterious powers.

There is only one way you can penetrate the mystery. Before playing an idle card, you should consider what the effect of playing it may be.

We begin with an ordinary hand, where the bidding was simple and direct: South opened 2NT and North raised to 7NT.

South Deals
None Vul

	♠ K Q J
	♥ A J 10 9 3 2
	♦ K Q 3
	♣ 2
♠ 4 3 2	
♥ Q 6 5	
♦ 10 9	
♣ 10 7 6 5 3	

West North East South

1NT

Pass 7NT All pass

You lead the ten of diamonds and dummy's king wins the trick, East and South following low. Declarer cashes the queen of diamonds and leads a diamond to the ace in his hand. What is your discard?

Clearly, a heart would be suicidal; a club, too, might be dangerous. So it seems safe to throw a spade, an idle card.

Safe? You have just killed the defense! This is the full deal:

South Deals - None Vul

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

West North East South
1NT

Pass 3NT All pass

After the first three tricks, declarer intends to run four clubs and three spades. When West shows out on the third spade he will know that he started with three cards in the suit; when East shows out on the fourth club he will know that West started with five. He already knows that West had two diamonds. So now he will know that West had exactly three hearts. South will easily pick up your unfortunate queen.

To give yourself a chance, you had to keep your spades intact, instead discarding a club on the third diamond and leaving South with a complete guess. East, too, had to take care. When the fourth round of clubs was played, he had to discard a diamond, not a spade. A discard of a spade from either defender allows declarer to find out the spade distribution, and hence the distribution of the entire hand. Those 'idle' spades had mysterious and unexpected powers.

Now take a hand from the 1994 Macallan/Sunday Times Pairs Tournament:

WEST Deals

None Vul

	♠ A K 7	
	♥ A 6 5	
	♦ K 10 9 7 5	
	♣ A 7	
♠ -		♠ Q 9 3
♥ 10 9 7 4		♥ Q J 8 3 2
♦ J		♦ Q 6 3
♣ K Q 10 9 6 4 3 2		♣ 8 5
	♠ J 10 8 6 5 4 2	
	♥ K	
	♦ A 8 4 2	
	♣ J	

West	North	East	South
5 ♣	Dbl	Pass	5 ♠
Pass	6 ♠	All pass	

Lead: ♣ K

West led the king of clubs. Robert Sheehan as South was one who found a successful line of play. He won with the ace of clubs, ruffed a club, noting East's echo, and played a spade to the king, West discarding a club.

Faced with a trump loser, Sheehan set out to partially strip the hand before putting East in. He played a heart to the king, crossed to a top trump, cashed the ace of hearts, ruffed a heart, and then exited with a trump, leaving East on lead in this position:

♠ -	
♥ -	
♦ K 10 9 7 5	
♣ -	
	♠ -
	♥ Q J
	♦ Q 6 3
	♣ -

East had no more clubs and clearly did not want to open diamonds, so he led a heart, a 'neutrino', thereby disclosing West's fourth heart!

Sheehan could now place West with 0-4-1-8, so he called for dummy's king of diamonds and continued with a finesse against the queen to complete the good work.

Again, the play of the 'idle' heart sabotaged the defense. East must return a low diamond, accepting the risk of leading into the tenace, should South hold the jack of diamonds. Had East done so, South would have had to guess. And if you look at the hand closely, you will find that he will go for the losing line more often than not.

So, my BOLS bridge tip is:

Don't play an idle card thoughtlessly. Consider what the effect of playing it may be.

If played at the wrong time, an idle card may betray your whole hand