Companion Card. . . with John Koch

Playing in the finals of a regional compact knockout, I hold:

Both sides are vulnerable. West, on my left, deals and opens three hearts. Partner doubles, and East passes. My initial instinct is to try three notrump, but this bid has several drawbacks. One is that West may be ♥AJ109xxx opposite his partner's VKx, when a heart lead will result in a quick -300. Another is that partner may have an ordinary three-level takeout double, something like ♠Axxx ♥x ♦AQxx ♣Kxxx, giving us a splendid play for 6♣. However, these are extremes: West is more likely to have a concentration of good hearts (making three notrump safe), and partner may easily have two hearts (scuttling a six-level contract). Eventually, I bid three notrump. Everyone passes. The full auction:

West North East South 3♥ Dbl Pass 3NT All Pass

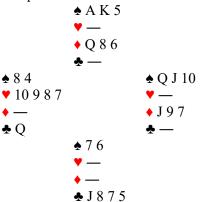
West leads the ♥K and a quick look at dummy validates our bidding:

Preliminary analysis:

Counting the ♥Q, I have eight tricks and only need a favorable

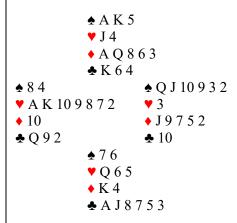
position in clubs for ten or eleven tricks. West continues the ace and a third heart. East throws two small spades and I have to find a discard from dummy. A diamond may cost a trick, so it is between a spade and a club. The third spade appears to be useless, and the club may allow easier communication with dummy. I begin to call for a spade, and then choke off my call. It is seldom right to discard down to top honors early in the play. As for clubs, I have a ready diamond entry if needed. So I call for the \$4.

On a club to the king, East follows with the 10, but then surprisingly discards the ♠9 under the A. That is a blow. My easy 11 tricks have shrunk to 8. It is time to take stock. East has 11 cards in spades and diamonds. He has thrown 3 spades. If he began with seven spades and four diamonds, four rounds of diamonds will establish the long diamond. But if East has 5 diamonds, I may need some luck. I play the •K and West follows with the 10. Good! On a diamond to dummy's ace, West shows out. This gives me a complete count of the hand:



I play ace, king and another spade. East wins the ♠Q, and plays the ♠J. I duck, and East must give me the last two tricks with the ♠Q8.

The full deal:



Points of Interest:

- In the bidding, it is too much to expect partner to produce four or five specific features. Here partner needed the ♣K, the queen or a fourth club, a singleton heart, the aces of spades and diamonds, and something extra. If North-South had been allowed to conduct a leisurely auction to place most of these features, and needed only one extra card, it would be reasonable to move toward slam. But as it was, gambling that dummy would come down with perfect cards was asking too much.
- It is always good policy to keep a companion card to your honors in a suit. In this case, the small spade represented the throwin card—hard to anticipate in the early play but invaluable in the endgame.