

Five or Three? . . .with John Koch

Playing in a team game against experienced opponents, I hold:

♠ A K 2 ♥ 5 4 ♦ A K 10 2 ♣ 10 8 4 3

Generally, I subscribe to the accepted view to open clubs with a balanced hand and two four-card minors. Here I draw the line and open **one diamond**. The opponents are silent and we reach **three notrump** in this auction:

| | | | |
|-------|------|-------|----------|
| South | West | North | East |
| 1♦ | Pass | 1♥ | Pass |
| 1NT | Pass | 3NT | All Pass |

West leads the ♦Q, and this is what I see:

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

Initial analysis:

I win the ace as East discards the club seven. The club discard gives a glimpse of the outstanding distribution. East likely started with five or six clubs and length in both majors. Even if East has length in clubs, I need a trick or two from clubs, so I begin with a low club, and I am happy to see West win the ace. West now shifts to the ♥9. I play the ten from dummy, and East wins the jack and returns the three, which goes to West's queen and dummy's ace.

East is almost surely 4=4=0=5, which means that I am never going to take more than one club and two hearts. Therefore, I need three from both spades and diamonds. What is the best way to play spades given the four-two break?

If East has all the key spades, I can't manage three tricks. But if he has only two, I can develop three spade tricks depending on how I start the

spades. Since the odds are two to one that West's doubleton is ♠10x or ♠9x, I begin by leading the ♠J from the dummy. East covers with the queen and I win the ace. On the ♠K, West obliges by dropping the ten. A small spade to dummy's ♠87 develops my third spade trick, and dummy is put back on lead with ♥K. I cash the spade and the ♣K, and lead a low diamond from the board and play the ♦2 from my hand. West plays the ♦4. *What happens?*

The outcome depends entirely on my preplanning. Did I drop the ♦5 on the opening lead and retain the ♦3? Or did I woodenly call for a "low" diamond and retain the ♦5. If I retained the ♦5, I win this diamond trick but have to lose a club and a heart to East. If I kept the ♦3, West's ♦4 wins and he is endplayed into giving me the last two diamond tricks. This was the full deal:

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

Points of Interest:

- Declarer was somewhat unlucky to find West with a singleton ace of clubs instead of a singleton queen or jack of clubs, which would have allowed him to develop two extra club tricks.

- The spade suit was a question of probabilities. Once the distribution was established, it was simply a matter of determining that West was more like to have ♠10x or ♠9x than the ♠Qx.

- As to diamonds, I have a friend who invariably plays high-low from two small cards in the dummy. When the cards are very small, this deal is a prime example why this practice can sometimes pay huge dividends.