

SWEET BEGINNINGS

1. Once in a Lifetime

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

Do not adjust your glasses. This hand was actually dealt to me! It was during the 1980 Vanderbilt in Fresno, California, in the Round of 16.

The boards were dealt by us, actual human beings. According to the *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*, if you play a million deals, you can expect to hold this exact pattern three times. To put that in perspective, imagine that you play twenty-four deals a day, three days a week: that's seventy-two deals a week, 3,744 a year. Even if you played eighty years at that rate it would still be against the odds ever to hold this exact distribution.

Here I was, at the age of twenty, already using up my lifetime expectancy of holding such a hand.

The Auction

I was dealer, with both sides vulnerable. What is the correct opening bid? If you know the right answer, it will be all downhill from here. The bidding problems only get easier.



Most people opt for 4♠, 2♣ or 1♠. If I had to pick one of those, it would be 1♠. The hand is much too good for a preemptive 4♠, and you don't have enough aces and kings to open 2♣.

However, there is a better and more accurate call available: 5♠. If you don't believe me, you can again consult the *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*. Look up 'Five of a Major Opening' and you will see the following definition:

FIVE OF A MAJOR OPENING: *Shows a hand missing both top honors in the trump suit, but no outside losers. Partner is invited to raise to small slam with one of the missing key cards, to grand slam with both. Probably the rarest bid in bridge.*

I can't recall from whom, where, when or why (probably a misspent youth), but I was aware of this 'rarest bid in bridge'. So I reached into the bidding box and pulled out the 5♠ bid and placed it on the table. This drew a few amused looks from the other players. Even in the Vanderbilt, there is room for levity. Left Hand Opponent passed, and my partner, Ron Gerard, started to think.

With a slight smirk (and more amused glances from the table), he reached into his bidding box and produced a 7♠ bid!

I hoped he had interpreted 5♠ the way I had meant it. If he was raising based on the ♣A and ♥A (as opposed to the top spades), this wasn't going to work too well. Everybody passed, and I anxiously awaited the dummy. At least I knew we weren't off the ♠A (no double!).

The Play

Both Vul.

♠ A K
 ♥ K 9 8 4 3
 ♦ 5 2
 ♣ Q 9 4 3

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

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|----------|-------|
| pass | 7♠ | all pass | 5♠ |

The final contract is 7♠ by South. Perfect! He had the hoped-for ♠AK. You win the trump lead in dummy, as everybody follows. Will there be anything to the play of this hand?

What should you play to Trick 2?



It would be wrong to draw the last trump. If diamonds split 3-3, you will always make 7♠. If they split 5-1 (or 6-0), you will never make your contract. The only relevant diamond split is 4-2. It also happens to be the most statistically likely division. So you should start the diamonds, planning to ruff one in dummy. Everyone follows to two rounds.

♠ A
 ♥ K 9 8 4 3
 ♦ —
 ♣ Q 9 4 3

 ♠ Q J 10 9 8 5 4
 ♥ —
 ♦ Q 8 6
 ♣ —

What if somebody had ruffed this second round of diamonds? As already mentioned, if diamonds were 5-1 or worse, you never could make this contract so don't worry about it. What now?



Let's not screw up the good work: ruff a small diamond in dummy. Playing the ♦Q would subject you to a ruff if an opponent had started with two diamonds and two trumps. Diamonds were 3-3 all along. You ruff something high in your hand and claim your contract.

The Result

Both Vul.

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|--|-------------|---|--|---|--|---|--|---|--|-------|
| | Gerard | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♠ A K | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♥ K 9 8 4 3 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♦ 5 2 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♣ Q 9 4 3 | | | | | | | | | | |
| ♠ 6 | <table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table> | | N | | W | | E | | S | | ♠ 7 3 |
| | N | | | | | | | | | | |
| W | | E | | | | | | | | | |
| | S | | | | | | | | | | |
| ♥ Q 10 7 6 2 | | ♥ A J 5 | | | | | | | | | |
| ♦ J 10 4 | | ♦ 9 7 3 | | | | | | | | | |
| ♣ 10 7 6 2 | | ♣ A K J 8 5 | | | | | | | | | |
| | Cohen | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♠ Q J 10 9 8 5 4 2 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♥ — | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♦ A K Q 8 6 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | ♣ — | | | | | | | | | | |

Notice how disciplined East was. He had two aces (and a king), yet trusted the North-South bidding enough to restrain from doubling the grand slam. Also notice West's proper opening lead. Expecting declarer to have a solid hand outside of trumps, the only 'extra' trick could come from ruffing a small card (from declarer's side suit) in dummy.

At the other table, the South player was unaware of the possible 5♠ opening bid. He started with 2♣ and reached only 6♣, receiving a club lead. Playing IMPs, what is the correct line of play in only a small slam (try to take twelve tricks)?

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

After ruffing the first club, should you?

- a) Draw trumps
- b) Play the ♦A and ♦K
- c) Other



Needing only twelve tricks, declarer can always make his six-level contract if diamonds are 4-2 or 3-3. At IMPs, you don't worry about overtricks. In six, you can try to find a way to protect against a 5-1 diamond break. There is an easy way to do so: after cashing a top diamond, continue with a *low* diamond from hand. This is a safety play to guarantee the contract.

If the suit splits 3-3 or 4-2, you've given away a potential overtrick, but you can win any return and draw trump and claim. The advantage comes if the suit splits 5-1. Even if somebody shows out on this trick, you can win any return (even a trump won't hurt you) and ruff your other low diamond in dummy to make twelve tricks. If instead, you laid down another high diamond and an opponent ruffed, you'd be in big trouble. On a trump return, you'd have only one trump left in dummy, but two losing low diamonds in hand. Down you'd go.

Anyway, the diamonds behaved well enough for either 6♣ or 7♣ to make, and our team won 13 IMPs for bidding the grand slam. Take one last good look at the South distribution. You probably will never get to hold such a hand in your lifetime.