

Can you see your way to making this 4S contract, from a recent online duplicate game?

West dealer, NS vulnerable

		S K982	
		H K74	
		D 8763	
		C Q5	
S 4			S J6
H JT952			H AQ3
D 42			D KJT9
C JT764			C K932
		S AQT753	
		H 86	
		D AQ5	
		C A8	

West	North	East	South
pass	pass	1D	1S
pass	3D	pass	4S
all pass			

Before we turn our attention to the play, a comment on North's 3D bid. This is a popular treatment called a "mixed raise" where, after partner has made an overcall, the jump cuebid in opener's suit shows sound single-raise values (say, 7-9 points) but promises 4-card support for partner's suit. If you turn one of North's small spades into a small card in any other suit, North would bid 2S instead of 3D.

Here, South confidently bid game, knowing from the mixed raise that the partnership has a 10-card fit and roughly 24 combined high-card points. North's actual hand, however, was a disappointment to South: Neither the heart king nor the club queen mesh well with South's values. There are only 8 top tricks (6 spades plus 2 aces), and even if the diamond finesse works that would still leave South one trick short.

West leads the jack of hearts. What now?

The first key to the hand is that there is absolutely no reason for South to play the king of hearts at trick one. With East having opened, it is a virtual certainty that East has the ace of hearts here. Further, it is possible that East started with ace-queen doubleton of hearts, in which case preserving the king now might lead to establishing it as a winner later.

Thus, smoothly ducking the opening lead is the indicated play. East contributes a low card, so the ace-queen doubleton possibility didn't arise; still, good things can still happen from having ducked.

At the table, West decided to switch to diamonds at trick two. Why would West switch after holding trick one? Well, after seeing the dummy, it's very possible from West's perspective that East's hand is something like S J6 H AQ83 D AKT5 C 932, in which case West can still get a diamond ruff by switching now but would lose that potential ruff by continuing hearts.

On the diamond shift, East inserts the jack (a so-called "discovery play" to learn whether West has the queen), won by South's queen, and then South pulls trump in two rounds. Now what?

You may have noted that if diamonds were to split 3-3, then South could establish a long diamond in dummy and reach dummy with a trump to cash it. Unfortunately, just as it was virtually certain that East has the ace of hearts, it is now virtually certain that diamonds are not splitting 3-3. Why? Because East is known to have only 2 spades. If East had held all 3 missing spades, then it would be possible that East had opened 1D holding 3=4=3=3 shape (although many people would systemically open 1C on that shape regardless of the high card holdings in the minors, and also the diamond shift at trick two would be unattractive if West were void in spades). However, holding only 2 spades and 3 diamonds, East would have opened 1C or 1H or 1NT, but never 1D.

Even so, continuing diamonds at trick five is the right play for declarer. After South cashes the ace of diamonds and plays another diamond, East has no great options. If East cashes the ace of hearts, then that establishes dummy's king. Alternately if East switches to a low club, South can let it ride around to dummy's queen, playing opener for the club king.

East's best play is to play a high diamond, which requires South to make the second key play of the hand: Pitching a heart. That gives the defense their third trick. However, now East is well and truly endplayed, as South could now ruff the ace of hearts and then cross to dummy with a trump to cash the king for the game-going trick. East should switch to a low club, giving declarer one last chance to go wrong, but as noted above South should play opener for the king and let the low club ride.

Admittedly, if West had continued hearts at trick two then the contract would always have been set. However when this hand was played online, there were 14 tables where West switched to diamonds at trick two, and only 3 of those declarers managed to bring the contract home.