**Seventeen Hundred at the One-Level?**

Rowen Bell, 7/5/2012

All bridge players relish the opportunity to collect the large penalties from doubled contracts that are colloquially known as “telephone numbers”. Typically, this refers to penalties of +800, +1100, or even +1400. If you search your memory banks hard enough, you may even recall a time when you collected a penalty of +1700.

However, do you ever recall seeing an opportunity to collect a penalty of +1700 by defending at the one-level?

Believe it or not, such an opportunity presented itself during the Wednesday afternoon pairs game at the July 2012 Chicago Regional, on the following layout:

West dealer, both vulnerable

North

S T4

H A762

D J75

C Q986

West East

S AKQJ3 S 96

H J H KQT84

D AKT8 D 632

C AKJ C 543

South

S 8752

H 953

D Q94

C T72

Playing standard methods, the auction is likely to start 2C by West, followed by 2H (showing a five-card suit with two of the top three honors) by East, after which East-West will likely arrive at some level of notrump contract. With there being no entry to the East hand, North-South can hold declarer to 10 tricks with best defense, but in practice it’s easy to imagine declarer ending up with 12 tricks. For instance, if North leads a club and later ducks the first round of hearts (in case declarer has jack-doubleton), then the 3-3 diamond split gives declarer a 12th trick.

Playing Precision, however, West opens with 1C rather than 2C, and that’s where our story really begins.

Many players believe that when the opponent to your right opens a Precision 1C, and you have a weakish hand, you should bend over backwards to enter the auction. Your opponents are very likely to have a game or slam, and left to their own devices they are likely to arrive at a good contract. When you interfere, however, it throws a monkey wrench into the opponents’ ability to communicate. Aggressive interference over a strong club opener theoretically exposes you to the risk of conceding a sizable penalty; however, there will be times when the opponents won’t know that they should take the money and run, and instead will let you wriggle off the hook.

At the table, North evidently subscribed to this theory, as he made a natural overcall of 1H on a 4-card suit with only 6 HCP! East passed, which by agreement showed either a very bad hand (0-4 HCP) or a desire to defend against hearts. After South’s pass, West reopened with a double, catering to the possibility that East had a trap pass. 1H doubled became the final contract, with South having no reason to believe any other contract would be better.

East led a spade, won by West, who pushed through the jack of hearts, North winning the ace. That was the only trick to which North was entitled! Say North exits with a diamond at trick three. West wins, cashes another spade, and continues spades; North ruffs, and East overruffs and draws trumps. West can discard all of the losing minor suit cards while East is drawing trumps, and then can claim the remainder after East exits in a minor. Down six, doubled, vulnerable is +1700.

In practice, however, there was a slight hiccup. The magic defense for +1700 requires West to retain the fifth spade, while discarding the club jack and diamond ten. If West thinks that North is eventually going to regain the lead in hearts, then it is more natural for West to pitch the low spade in favor of retaining tenace positions in the minors. As such, in order to the defense to be assured of collecting all its tricks, East needs to make West realize that East has total trump control, and that the defense is in a cash-out situation.

At the table, East drew trumps by banging down the king and queen, which misled West into thinking that declarer held ace-ten-fifth of hearts. So, West discarded the baby spade, and in the end needed to concede a second trick, holding the penalty to +1400. If East had played the king followed by the ten, it would have been obvious that East also had the queen (else the play would have cost a trick), giving West an important clue to the defense. Similarly, after drawing declarer’s last trump it is useful for East to make the seemingly wasteful play of cashing the thirteenth trump, as otherwise West may think declarer has it, playing North to have overcalled on a five-card suit.

The difference between +1400 and +1700 is potentially very costly at matchpoints, if East-West can make a vulnerable slam. And indeed, 6NT was bid and made at some tables in the Flight B Pairs, although as noted above it can be beaten on best defense. In the Flight A Pairs, +1400 was a top.

However, note that East-West do have an available slam… 6H, of course! 12 tricks were available on defense against 1H; and while that doesn’t necessarily mean that the same 12 are available on offense, Deep Finesse says they’re there. Arriving at 6H on these hands, however, sounds even less likely than the idea of collecting +1700 at the one-level!