

ACBL-wide Senior Pairs #2

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Analysis by Barry Rigal



American Contract
Bridge League



Barry Rigal is a player, author, commentator and syndicated columnist. Born in London in 1958, he has been a professional bridge player since moving to New York in 1994. Rigal has written many books, as well as magazine and newspaper columns and has contributed to the world championship books for two decades. He has also served as the Chief Vugraph commentator for the World Bridge Federation for 10 years.

He has won two North American championships as well as EC Mixed Teams and multiple UK titles. As a professional player, he claims to be the only pro ever to have been shut out by his client from declaring a single board in a session – not for want of trying! At college, Rigal reached the quarterfinal round of the University Challenge for Queen's Oxford – where he suffered the indignity of losing to Queen's Cambridge – and a team headed by the comedian Stephen Fry. He also claims that his tutors awarded him the title of "The laziest man in Oxford."

Board 1

North Deals
None Vul

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

East's opening call will significantly impact how the auction develops. If he bids 1♣, West may preempt in hearts following a 1♠ overcall and lose his side's diamond fit. In that scenario, however, North might opt to try to defend hearts rather than play in spades. With such freak distribution, any prediction may end up looking foolish, but technically N/S should make game in spades comfortably enough. They can only be held to 10 tricks by the defenders taking a heart ruff. E/W might well find a save in 5♦ profitable — although a trump lead nets the defenders 500.

Board 2

East Deals
N-S Vul

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

Will North upgrade his hand to a strong notrump (unsound because it potentially wrong-sides the contract, and if partner has five or more spades, you'd surely rather stay low on any marginal hand)? That decision will materially affect the final contract here. If North shows 12-14 and four hearts, South will doubtless settle in 2♥ without trying for game. But if North upgrades, then he will declare 4♥ after a Stayman sequence. Both black aces are onside, both red suits behave, and 11 tricks materialize as if by clockwork.

Board 3

South Deals
E-W Vul

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

West has just enough for a vulnerable overcall of 2♥ over 1♠, but some Norths will raise to 2♠, others may discreetly pass. Either way, East can bounce to 4♥; but will South then opt to defend facing a silent partner? Probably, but of course, if his partner has raised spades, South is going to bid on to 4♠, probably doubled. A trump lead against 4♠ may force South to guess clubs to escape for down one. Meanwhile, 4♥ is a poor contract, but with the ♦J doubleton onside and the ♣109 falling, declarer can come home with a not-unfortunate +620.

Board 4West Deals
Both Vul

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

At many tables N/S will bid unopposed to 3NT by North, since South can hardly stop short of game facing an opener. Some Wests will intervene as a passed hand to show the majors - or even just hearts - but that should not affect the outcome. Whatever the lead, the fate of 3NT seems to hinge on whether declarer can find the ♦Q. The percentages favor the drop over the finesse, but if West has overcalled, maybe the additional shape he has promised might persuade a thoughtful declarer to find the winning maneuver, and be suitably rewarded.

Board 5North Deals
N-S Vul

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

When North opens 1♣, South can produce either an inverted raise or a splinter jump to 3♥, showing game-going values and short hearts. Whatever he chooses, West will surely introduce his hearts and North is unlikely to do more than opt to play 5♣, as he has no real extras. Slam is no better than the diamond finesse, but it comes home today. However, that isn't the end of the story. Curiously, the cards lie remarkably well for both sides, and at this vulnerability E/W can save against the slam for less than the cost of the N/S game. I doubt if many will, though.

Board 6East Deals
E-W Vul

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

Back-to-back slams, but this one is clearly against the odds for E/W. It needs a nice lie of the diamonds and an extra trick from the black suits, as well as a favorable lie in hearts, if N/S lead that suit. Few will find slam, though, because of the irresistible lure of 3NT, on a combined 27 HCP with all the side-suits stopped. Minor suits tend to go to the wall in such circumstances, though West may be worried that his singleton spade will make notrump unplayable. 3NT has only 11 top winners, but diamonds break and the ♣A and ♠Q are onside, so all routes appear to result in +690.

Board 7South Deals
Both Vul

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

When South opens 1♦, West has a number of viable approaches. He can simply bid spades, then (if necessary) hearts, or he can show both majors at once, each of these options looking better than doubling. North has enough values to want to join in, while East will be happy not to contribute unless forced to do so. With both major suits behaving perfectly from West's perspective, he can use the club entry to take a heart finesse and come to 11 tricks in either major. The club ruff means N/S can be held to eight tricks in diamonds, but N/S are more likely to collect 650 than 800.

Board 8West Deals
None Vul

♠ 9 8 5
♥ K 6 3
♦ A J 6 4 2
♣ 9 2

♠ K Q 10 4
♥ 5 2
♦ 10 9 8 7
♣ K J 6



♠ A 6 2
♥ A 10 7
♦ Q 3
♣ A 10 8 7 4

♠ J 7 3
♥ Q J 9 8 4
♦ K 5
♣ Q 5 3

While stick-in-the-muds will pass in third seat here, some Easts will open 1♥ or 2♥. Either call might silence N/S, though with the sight of all 52 cards N/S take 10 tricks in notrump. The catch is that if declarer doesn't find the ♣Q, the defenders have eight winners — four hearts, three diamonds and a club. This feels more like a partscore deal, with N/S declaring a black suit for nine or 10 tricks or defeating a low-level heart contract. Equally, one could imagine South stretching to open or overcall a strong notrump and bringing in clubs for 630.

Board 9North Deals
E-W Vul

♠ K Q 9 3 2
♥ 9 7
♦ Q J 8
♣ Q 7 4

♠ A 10 7 6 5 4
♥ 2
♦ K 5 4 3
♣ J 5



♠ 8
♥ K J 10 3
♦ 6 2
♣ A 10 9 8 3 2

♠ J
♥ A Q 8 6 5 4
♦ A 10 9 7
♣ K 6

Most Norths will open 2♠, and when East overcalls 3♥, West should bid 3NT rather than raise hearts. East has to choose now between bidding 4♦, 4♥ or passing, and must guess well if he is to go plus. 4♥ has three trumps and two aces to lose, while diamonds may be uglier still. 3NT is clearly best; it goes down on a diamond lead, but on a low spade lead West ought to overtake the ♠A to run the diamonds via the finesse. He may then work out to exit with a low heart from dummy to endplay South, who will then be forced to concede the ninth trick.

Board 10East Deals
Both Vul

♠ 8 6 5
♥ A J 4
♦ 9 6
♣ K 6 5 3 2

♠ Q 10 7
♥ 9 5 2
♦ Q 10 5
♣ Q J 10 4



♠ A 9 4 3
♥ Q 6 3
♦ A K 4 3
♣ A 8

♠ K J 2
♥ K 10 8 7
♦ J 8 7 2
♣ 9 7

Even the most aggressive bidders can be discouraged when both sides are vulnerable. So here a strong notrump from South figures to get passed out against any but the wildest of Easts. Passing would be wise today, as E/W can make nothing at all. If South declares 1NT on a low club lead, it feels right to win the ♣Q and advance the ♠Q, which today will ensure he takes at least eight tricks. On winning the ♠J, it looks logical for East to shift to hearts; if so, the ♥10 might be the right card. One way or another, +120 for South looks the expected outcome.

Board 11South Deals
None Vul

♠ A Q J 9 8 7
♥ 2
♦ K Q 9 3
♣ J 8

♠ 5 3 2
♥ A Q J 9
♦ 8 7
♣ K Q 6 3



♠ K 4
♥ 10 6 4
♦ J 10 4
♣ 10 9 5 4 2

♠ 10 6
♥ K 8 7 5 3
♦ A 6 5 2
♣ A 7

When West opens 1♠, some Norths will seize the opportunity for an off-shape double. The vulnerability argues for action, I admit, but I hate North's pattern in spades and diamonds. If North passes, then E/W rate to bid to 4♠, where they can score 450 in peace and quiet after a top club lead. Technically, you could make 6♦, since both spades and diamonds behave in extremely friendly fashion, but few will contemplate trying for that. However, might any E/W pair try to collect a number on defense? That seems unlikely, given N/S's nine-card fit.

Board 12West Deals
N-S Vul

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

No sequence gets West's values across perfectly, but opening 1♥ and jumping to 3♥ over a 1NT response looks best. East must surely pass 3♥, with no extras in the way of fit or high cards. Whatever North leads, West will simply lose the obvious four tricks, as his spades are good enough to ensure a ninth trick from that suit in straightforward fashion. It seems likely that some pairs will misjudge strain or level, meaning that +140 is likely to score West fairly well. And yes, a few Souths may let through 3NT by East, by never playing on clubs.

Board 13North Deals
Both Vul

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

With 29 HCP between them and no obvious fit, E/W are likely to stop at a safe level, in notrump. But if West shows game-going values, he may over-excite East. Since they are missing two aces and have only nine top tricks, the question is if anyone will reach 4NT or 5NT and have to guess the play accurately to make their contract. With both minor suits breaking, it looks easier to collect +660 than +630. Nonetheless, you can certainly imagine that at some tables declarer will put his faith in a finesse for the ♥J and end up with just 10 tricks.

Board 14East Deals
None Vul

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

Most Wests will open 1♦ in third seat, not 1NT, and North will overcall 1♥. If East responds 1NT, then maybe North can bravely balance with a double and get his side to spades. It looks simpler for N/S to find their black-suit fit than for E/W to locate clubs, where predicting a result is hard. The lead of the ♥10 against 3♣ makes declarer's life easy; otherwise, the play is quite challenging. The 3-3 heart break likewise facilitates declarer's task in 2♠. Yet again, winning the contract when nobody is vulnerable proves to be a sound policy.

Board 15South Deals
N-S Vul

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

When West overcalls 1♥ over 1♦, most Norths will be able to bid spades to promise five. Now you'd expect a competitive battle in the majors, with each side prepared to go to the three level. But will anyone risk going higher? E/W have the balance of high cards and a little extra shape. 4♥ is a perfectly playable contract — needing the club or heart finesse plus a little racing luck — and it duly makes. Meanwhile, N/S have a painless nine tricks in spades, so my prediction is that (again) whoever declares the hand is favorite to score respectably.

Board 16West Deals
E-W Vul

♠ K 8 7 4
♥ 9 3
♦ 9 5
♣ 10 8 6 5 2

♠ 10 9 5
♥ A K J 6
♦ Q J 7 6
♣ A 9



♠ A Q J 6 2
♥ 8 4
♦ 10 8 2
♣ K J 3

♠ 3
♥ Q 10 7 5 2
♦ A K 4 3
♣ Q 7 4

You may see this deal one day in Bridge World's "Challenge the Champs." It looks tough to diagnose that playing the 4-4 diamond fit is worth an extra trick over the 5-4 heart fit. Admittedly, North has to be declarer in 6♦ to protect the ♣Q. If so, he can take five heart tricks, a club and six trump tricks via two spade ruffs in South. On a heart lead, one might also need some luck in the red suits. So slam is not cold, even if it meets Hamman's Rule — slam cannot be bad if it makes. Collecting +450 in 4♥ seems likely to be worth close to an average.

Board 17North Deals
None Vul

♠ A 8 3
♥ 4 2
♦ 10 9 3 2
♣ A J 3 2

♠ J 7
♥ 9 8 3
♦ K Q 7 4
♣ 9 6 5 4



♠ 6 2
♥ A K 10 6 5
♦ J 6
♣ K 10 8 7

♠ K Q 10 9 5 4
♥ Q J 7
♦ A 8 5
♣ Q

Nonvulnerable, East is just worth a 1♥ opener, due to his concentrated values in the long suits and comfortable rebid. Roth-Stoners will have to back in after South opens 1♠ and North responds 1NT. Even so, South might still buy the hand in 2♠, unless East steels himself to re-enter the fray. With 3♣ a claimer for E/W, and 3♥ also making, it is incumbent on East to compete to the three level over 2♠, which makes eight tricks in comfort. This is yet another hand where whoever declares the contract figures to score respectably, whether he makes or goes down one.

Board 18East Deals
N-S Vul

♠ A Q 7 6 4
♥ 8 7 4
♦ 10 5 4
♣ J 9

♠ 8
♥ A J 9 5
♦ K Q J 7
♣ A K 8 2



♠ 10 9 5 3 2
♥ Q 3
♦ 8 2
♣ Q 6 5 3

♠ K J
♥ K 10 6 2
♦ A 9 6 3
♣ 10 7 4

Another third-in-hand conundrum. Will West pass, preempt or open at the one level? All routes will have their supporters, but N/S are favorites to find their heart fit and play game, whatever West does. On this occasion locating the trump queen will make the difference between 10 and 11 tricks, with quite a few matchpoints riding on that trick. So if West pretends he has an opening bid, he may successfully persuade his opponents to go wrong. Truly, the wicked flourish like the green bay-tree.

Board 19South Deals
E-W Vul

♠ A J 9 6 3
♥ 6 5
♦ A 6 3 2
♣ Q 6

♠ Q 10 8
♥ J 10 7
♦ K Q J 7
♣ 9 5 4



♠ K 7 5
♥ A K Q 9 8 3 2
♦ —
♣ A 10 2

♠ 4 2
♥ 4
♦ 10 9 8 5 4
♣ K J 8 7 3

In second seat at unfavorable vulnerability, West would have to stretch to open. Should he act, East may drive to 7♥, prepared to gamble on bringing in spades for no loser, or being able to ruff out the suit after pitching a loser on the ♦A. (Imagine West with the ♣K, not the ♣Q, for example.) If West passes initially, the danger that E/W will miss slam increases of course, especially if North deems his hand worth a 1♦ opener in third seat. In that case, N/S might well sacrifice in diamonds at some extreme level — which may cost less than the E/W slam, if more than their game.

Board 20West Deals
Both Vul

♠ 8 6
♥ K Q 10
♦ A 10 7 6 2
♣ 9 8 4

♠ K 4 3
♥ J 6 5 4 2
♦ J 8
♣ 7 3 2



♠ J 7 2
♥ 3
♦ Q 9 5
♣ K Q J 10 6 5

♠ A Q 10 9 5
♥ A 9 8 7
♦ K 4 3
♣ A

Another third-in-hand problem, but one where I suspect many Easts will opt for a 3♣ preempt. When South doubles, West will almost certainly pass, then hear his opponents bid to 4♥. West might now risk a double with his three tricks. Alas for him, he would catch his partner with a defensive Yarborough. After a club lead, won in dummy, declarer should play a spade to hand, then a heart to the 7. He can next cash the ♥A and run spades, letting West take his three winners whenever he wants. E/W do have a decent save in 5♣ — not one many will find.

Board 21North Deals
N-S Vul

♠ 8 5
♥ J 9 7 4 2
♦ Q 9 6 5
♣ 4 3

♠ A Q 10
♥ A K Q 8
♦ K 8
♣ J 6 5 2



♠ J 4
♥ 6 5 3
♦ A J 7 4 2
♣ K 10 9

♠ K 9 7 6 3 2
♥ 10
♦ 10 3
♣ A Q 8 7

Whether North opens 1♣ or 2NT (the latter is not recommended in first/second seat if you play a 20-22 range), it may be hard for N/S to determine whether to head for slam or game, and which strain they should finish up in. 6♠ by North is quite a decent contract. The defenders must lead a diamond, or South's losers go on the hearts. After that start, declarer may be able to draw trumps and test hearts before taking the club finesse. In practice, 4♠ by South on a diamond lead will collect 11 tricks, for what rates at best to be an average minus result.

Board 22East Deals
E-W Vul

♠ —
♥ 9 8 4 3 2
♦ K Q 9 7
♣ K 10 9 7

♠ K J 4
♥ Q
♦ A J 10 5 2
♣ A 5 4 2



♠ Q 9 3 2
♥ A J 10 6
♦ 8 6
♣ J 8 6

♠ A 10 8 7 6 5
♥ K 7 5
♦ 4 3
♣ Q 3

When South opens a weak 2♠ (you'd rather have a better suit but nonvulnerable beggars cannot be choosers), only the most hot-headed of Wests will intervene. North ought to raise to 4♠, to end the auction at almost every table. West has a logical lead of a top diamond, rather than the passive heart that would hold declarer to +420. Similarly, when South wins the ♦A, it is not clear whether to play a top spade or ♥Q from dummy. Either way, declarer looks likely to take only 10 tricks; so anyone who manages an 11th may collect almost all the matchpoints.

Board 23South Deals
Both Vul

♠ A J 9 5 4
♥ A
♦ A 10 3
♣ A K Q 7

♠ Q 10 7 3 2
♥ 6 3
♦ K 9
♣ 8 6 5 4



♠ K
♥ 10 9 7 4 2
♦ J 7 6
♣ J 10 9 3

♠ 8 6
♥ K Q J 8 5
♦ Q 8 5 4 2
♣ 2

Some Souths may preempt to 2♥, but if South passes, a 2♣ opener from West will see E/W in game. 5♣ (or even 6♣) looks a decent contract, but after a trump lead from North, you'd figure coming to even 11 tricks would be a struggle today. 3NT by East is the next most probable final contract, rather than 4♠. After a top heart lead, there are just eight top winners; however, the defense may have to give declarer an additional trick one way or another, despite the unfriendly spade break. Making 600 will surely score E/W well here.

Board 24West Deals
None Vul

♠ Q 6 3
♥ K 9 4 3 2
♦ K 6 5
♣ 10 7

♠ K 10 4
♥ Q J
♦ Q 10 9 3
♣ K 8 5 3

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ 9 2
♥ A 10 8 5
♦ J 7 4
♣ J 9 6 2

♠ A J 8 7 5
♥ 7 6
♦ A 8 2
♣ A Q 4

South has the choice in fourth seat between a 1♠ or 1NT opener. Arguably, the small doubleton and decent five-card suit in a minimum notrump point towards a 1♠ bid. If South agrees, that will surely result in a 4♠ game, where declarer will have to find the ♠Q and may also have to negotiate the diamonds. By contrast, a strong notrump should see West cash out the hearts against 3NT, with declarer not close to having a claim for the balance. Moral: the combination of small doubletons and five-card majors is not ideal for notrump openers.

Board 25North Deals
E-W Vul

♠ K 3
♥ K Q 10 7
♦ K J 3
♣ 9 8 7 3

♠ 9 8
♥ A 8 5 2
♦ Q 6 5 2
♣ Q 4 2

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ 10 5 4 2
♥ J 9
♦ 9 4
♣ K J 10 6 5

♠ A Q J 7 6
♥ 6 4 3
♦ A 10 8 7
♣ A

When South opens a third-seat 1♠, some Wests will feel obliged to double, arguing that acting now is safer than coming in later. Whether West doubles or passes, North will surely respond 1NT, and will later have to choose between a diamond and spade partscore. In diamonds the route to +110 looks simple enough. In spades, declarer runs the risk of being tapped out in clubs. However, he can discard heart losers on clubs to avoid some of the jeopardy. Anyone finding a route to more than eight tricks in spades should achieve a splendid score.

Board 26East Deals
Both Vul

♠ A J 9 6
♥ A 7 4 3
♦ 7 4
♣ J 9 7

♠ K 7 4
♥ 10 9 6
♦ J 9 5
♣ K 8 6 5

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ 8 3
♥ Q 8 5 2
♦ A 10 6 3
♣ 4 3 2

♠ Q 10 5 2
♥ K J
♦ K Q 8 2
♣ A Q 10

With South having no conceivable reason to upgrade his hand out of a strong notrump, he will open and close the auction with that call at most tables. A spade lead works poorly for West, a low heart is better in theory, but may turn out even worse in practice, unless East can somehow refrain from 'third-hand high' — and why should he? After a heart lead to the queen and king, declarer has an easy route to nine tricks, whereas after a spade lead South will need to read the cards accurately to come to +150.

Board 27South Deals
None Vul

♠ J 10 6 2
♥ K Q 10
♦ Q 10 7 3
♣ A 7

♠ A Q
♥ A 8 7 2
♦ 9 8
♣ 9 8 6 4 3

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ 8 7 5 4
♥ J
♦ A K J 5 4 2
♣ Q J

♠ K 9 3
♥ 9 6 5 4 3
♦ 6
♣ K 10 5 2

Talk about 'Bidding Challenge' deals! I'd confidently expect most E/W pairs to achieve one down — or worse — from spade games here. Meanwhile, 3NT by West is an excellent spot and is surely going to take at least nine tricks — more, perhaps on a club lead into the tenace. But how can E/W avoid the doomed 4-4 fit? I have little idea, but it would certainly help if East were to raise diamonds and West then focused on his stoppers. Even so, it may turn out to be more a matter of luck than judgment to get this right.

Board 28West Deals
N-S Vul

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

	♠ J 10 9 6
	♥ K 4 2
	♦ 9 3
	♣ K Q 8 2

	♠ 8 3
	♥ A 10 6 5 3
	♦ K 8 5
	♣ J 10 5

Facing a strong notrump, South has a hand worth a transfer ... but then what? Some will pass (especially if their notrump range suffers from galloping inflation). Other Souths will invite to 2NT — an overbid by approximately the ♥9. North has enough quick tricks to gamble out 4♥ now, and the spotlight turns to East. The lead of the ♠J looks entirely normal but ineffective, that of the ♣K a huge winner today. Even after a spade lead, declarer is not entirely out of the woods; but with the ♦Q onside, any sensible approach in trumps should see him bring home +620.

Board 29North Deals
Both Vul

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

	♠ Q J 9
	♥ Q J 7 5 4 2
	♦ Q 5 4
	♣ 8

	♠ 7 6
	♥ —
	♦ J 10 8 2
	♣ A Q 9 7 6 5 2

East's cards may not be everyone's (anyone's?) idea of a vulnerable 2♥ call. If East acts, West will simply bid 4♥ to end the auction, unless South gambles out a sacrifice. 5♣ doubled would escape for minus 500, but E/W could always bid on to 5♥ and collect their 650. If East passes initially, the issue of whether N/S save in 5♣ may be driven by whether South preempts to 3♣ or 4♣. North might not want to risk a penalty by raising a third-in-hand three-level preempt. The play rates to be simple here, whether it be in hearts (for 11 tricks) or clubs (for nine).

Board 30East Deals
None Vul

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

	♠ A J 7 3
	♥ J 5
	♦ A K 7 5
	♣ A 6 2

	♠ K Q 6
	♥ 7 6 3 2
	♦ 10 4
	♣ K Q 10 5

At most tables Stayman will reveal the spade fit; West should then invite game, allowing East to accept. 4♠ is a fine contract: unless N/S can generate a ruff, declarer seems to need either spade honor onside or for the ♦Q to fall. Today will not be East's lucky day, though, unless South finds the bizarre lead of ♦10 — and even then, declarer might misguess what to do. Of the alternative opening leads, a heart is most passive, while a club may be necessary to set up tricks there before East can discard his losers. Either defense ought to set 4♠ today.

Board 31South Deals
N-S Vul

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

	♠ A K 10 9 4
	♥ 6 5
	♦ 7 5 2
	♣ A 10 2

	♠ Q J 6
	♥ A J 4 3
	♦ K 6
	♣ K J 8 5

Yet another 1NT opener, this time for South. The vulnerability may tempt West into a 3♦ preempt now, which in turn may force North to guess whether to double for takeout or bid 3NT. Either way, it is hard to imagine N/S staying out of game. After a diamond lead, 3NT takes precisely five — count 'em! — tricks. 4♥ (which might be doubled) goes down three on a club lead. Does that mean N/S should opt to defend? No: doubling 3♦ is hardly a panacea either, since West has an easy nine tricks there. Thus any N/S who go plus here will surely scoop the pool.

Board 32West Deals
E-W Vul

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

When West opens 1♣, we have a bizarre parallel to board 5, where it was South who had the choice of an inverted raise or of a splinter raise of clubs. This time East as the responding hand has real slam interest, and E/W might well find their way to the excellent 6♣. Slam is not quite a claimer: after a spade lead, declarer will need either the spade finesse or the club guess. On any other lead, West can do rather better by stripping off the red suits after cashing the ♣A early. That line achieves an endplay if South has both black kings.

Board 33North Deals
None Vul

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

All routes appear to lead to a contract of 4♥, typically declared by South after a strong notrump opening and Stayman. Even if North plays the hand, East may well have heard his partner bid diamonds. In either case, declarer is likely to duck one diamond, win the next, then take a spade finesse and draw trumps, before repeating the spade finesse. The fall of the ♠Q allows declarer to pitch the club loser and wrap up 11 tricks. Any N/S pair failing to bring home +450 will score very poorly.

Board 34East Deals
N-S Vul

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

The vulnerability may tempt E/W to try to find a way into the N/S auction, but their lack of high cards might discourage all but the most aggressive of optimists from getting too high here. Having said that, if N/S bid to their normal game of 3NT on a spade lead, they will take at least nine tricks (more, if West unwisely covers a spade honor from dummy at trick one). So should E/W consider a sacrifice in 4♠? The defenders do best to go passive, and now, despite the favorable lie of the diamonds, declarer can do no better than lose minus 500. That would still be a good save, though.

Board 35South Deals
E-W Vul

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

When N/S's bidding begins: 1♠-1NT; 2♦, North has too much to pass, but a hard choice between giving preference to 2♠ or raising diamonds. Bidding 2♠ feels right to me; both spades and diamonds rate to make, but spades scores more. In fact 2♠ is a real struggle when South turns up with very weak spades and the suit does not break. Declarer can score +110 in spades by tackling trumps before diamonds. However, after a club lead, he might try a diamond to the jack at trick two, which would be fatal. +130 will surely score N/S very well, and +110 will not be bad.

Board 36West Deals
Both Vul

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

When East hears his partner open 1♣ and rebid 1NT over his 1♠ call, he should probably convert to 2♠, figuring his hand will be almost worthless in notrump. 2♠ can indeed be made — but by South, not by East. Still, after a heart lead against East's 2♠ contract, declarer might finesse in desperation, then play three more rounds of hearts. If he can emerge with six tricks after that start, he won't score too terribly, despite the doom and gloom traditionally associated with minus 200 at matchpoints. The traveler will be littered with worse results for E/W here.