



The 2026 Charity Challenge Pairs Tuesday 10th March

We are raising funds for two support Charities again this year - [Mind](#), that wonderful charity supporting people with mental health problems, and [Macmillan Cancer Support](#) ... the work they do is just amazing. Please help us raise lots of lovely funds for them.

Last year you managed to raise over £11,000 in total which was just amazing and incredibly generous of everyone. If you haven't already done so, please [click here to go to the page](#) that gives you all the information. And if you want to send a cheque or pay by bank transfer please note the change of bank account !

July sees our [Summer Charity pairs](#) for Kidney Research UK and the British Heart Foundation and then of course there will be the [Children in Need Pairs](#) in November – well we couldn't NOT run that could we !

Do join us for some of these events if you can – it's lovely to see lots of people joining in and we love to have your company.

We do hope you have enjoyed the event - thank you so much for joining us and please do so again in future !

Board 1. Dealer North. Vulnerability None

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

E/W can make 4♣ while the N/S limit is 2♠. If North passes and East opens a weak NT or 1♣, they should be aware of the combined limit of their hands and know to stop short of game, however much N/S competition they get from then on.

If it starts with 1♣ from East and 1♥ from West, North should overcall 2♠. An astute partner should wonder why a hand that can make a weak jump overcall did not open with a weak two bid as dealer, and come to the correct conclusion – a decent four-card holding in the other major. Whether or not South works this out, he can compete to 3♠, but should then retire gracefully from the auction.

But these days pre-empted are far less disciplined than when I took up the game, and there will surely be some Norths who open 2♠ despite their heart holding. East is just shy of a 2NT overcall, though no doubt some will make that call and be raised to game via Stayman. The more disciplined Easts will pass, having the wrong shortage for a take-out double, and South should raise to 3♠. That is not a strong bid and, knowing that partner has values, I think West should double – 10-count or no 10-count. It shouldn't work out so well this time, because 3♠ rated to go down one, while East's 3NT response should also be beaten.

Board 2. Dealer East. Vulnerability N/S

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

Most roads lead to West becoming declarer in 3NT.

East opens 1♣ and South overcalls 1♠. Some will jump to 2NT on the West hand and be

raised to game, while others will bid 2♦ and bid 2NT over East's 2♥ rebid. Either way, 3NT by West should be the final contract.

After a spade lead, the fate of the matchpoints hangs on declarer's diamond guess. Get the diamonds right, and declarer has 11 tricks for an excellent result; get them wrong and the contract is held to nine for a below average result.

Is there a good reason to get the diamonds right? Not really. South is known to have the longer spades, so more cards in the other suits than North, but against that it is South who has bid, so will have more of the missing high cards. I expect the majority to get diamonds wrong for the simple reason that it is more convenient to play South for the queen.

Board 3. Dealer South. Vulnerability E/W

<p>♠ A K 8 3 ♥ Q 10 7 6 ♦ J 4 ♣ Q 4 3</p>	<p>♠ J 9 2 ♥ A K J ♦ A 10 8 6 3 ♣ 7 2</p>	<p>♠ Q 10 4 ♥ 5 ♦ Q 9 7 5 2 ♣ J 10 9 8</p>
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<p>♠ 7 6 5 ♥ 9 8 4 3 2 ♦ K ♣ A K 6 5</p>
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If West opens a weak NT, there will be two passes to South. Would I overcall 2♥ on that heart suit? Probably not if by doing so I just showed hearts, but if I could show hearts plus a minor, as in a number of popular defences to INT, then I would feel much happier with the bid.

Two Hearts is the top spot for N/S, who can make seven tricks in any other denomination, but eight in hearts, and +110 should score well for them.

If West opens 1♣, North can either overcall 1♦ or double. Were the five-card suit a major, or if more of the strength of the hand was in diamonds, the overcall would be clearcut. As it is, I can live with either choice.

The majority will overcall 1♦ and, after a pass from East, South should respond 1♥. North raises that to 2♥ and that will probably be that.

Where North doubles, East may raise to 2♣ – more would be risky facing a bid that doesn't

promise four cards – or bid 1♦. Either should see South bidding 2♥.

So, most roads lead to 2♥ by South, making eight tricks. Only where South cannot stomach a 2♥ bid over West's INT opening is West likely to be left to play there for down one after a diamond lead and heart switch.

Board 4. Dealer West. Vulnerability All

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

Four small hearts should not be an impediment to anybody opening a weak 2♠ on that good suit. Now, what should East do after a pass from North? East should certainly do something with spade support and substantial playing potential. It doesn't have to work on any given board, but I like a direct jump to 4♠, which could be making if partner has diamond shortness, and if not puts terrible pressure on South if his action is not clearcut.

On this occasion South has an easy 4NT overcall to show a genuine two-suiter. If North could be sure that one of those suits was clubs, he might jump to 6♣, but of course South might have the red suits, when prospects are much less rosy, and he will have to settle for 5♦ or 5♥, according to whether he is willing to go on slam facing the minors.

If East raises only to 3♠, things are much simpler because South's 4NT overcall now promises the minors and, being a jump over a semi-pre-emptive opposing bid, should also show a good hand. There are still no guarantees, but North should jump to slam with the superb club support and major-suit controls.

E/W are unlikely to save over 6♣. If they do, double dummy West can be held to seven tricks – but that requires an impossible heart lead followed by club underlead to get the second heart ruff. Realistically, there is more

likely to be no heart ruff at all and nine tricks for declarer.

Board 5. Dealer North. Vulnerability N/S

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

North opens 1♦ and East overcalls 2♦, both majors. That silences South and now West, with five-cards on one of the majors, should simply jump to 4♠ – if partner is strong this should make, while if partner is weaker it will make life very difficult for the opposition.

Four Spades makes exactly. Meanwhile, N/S have a paying save in 5♣ doubled, despite the adverse vulnerability – there are just three aces to lose (If the defence sets up a diamond ruff, this can be thwarted by South's third diamond being discarded on the king of spades).

North will need to be brave to bid 5♣ over a 4♠ raise, and not all will find the bid which, after all, could work out very badly on a different day.

If West bids less than 4♠, things are somewhat easier for N/S. Over 3♠, it is easy for North to bid 4♣, and now South has a double fit so should bid 5♣ over 4♠. N/S could even go plus occasionally if E/W misjudge and go on to the five level.

Board 6. Dealer East. Vulnerability E/W

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

The popular N/S auction will be 1♠ – INT – 3NT, against which East will presumably lead a

club. East's choice of club could swing a lot of matchpoints.

Say that East leads a fourth-best club. Why would declarer do other than play the queen? That, of course, loses to the bare king, and West switches to a diamond. Declarer can duck once but, with West having a heart entry, the diamond winners cannot be shut out and declarer comes to nine tricks – five spades, three clubs and one diamond.

Now suppose that East leads a second-highest eight of clubs. Is there any reason why declarer should not take that at face value and put up the ace? The fall of the king may be somewhat fortunate but, if West is marked with that card, there can be no benefit in taking the finesse. That gives declarer a fourth club winner and 10 in all.

Board 7. Dealer South. Vulnerability All

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

The normal expectation is that there will be three passes (Even if playing two-suited weak openings, that West hand is not a vulnerable 2♥ bid) round to East, who will open either 1♥ or one of a minor, as dictated by the agreed methods.

West will make a three-level invitational raise of a 1♥ opener, or respond 1♥ to a 1♣/♦ opening. In the latter case, East has a 3♥ raise and West goes on to game. So the contract should always be 4♥ by E/W, with system deciding who becomes declarer.

Does it matter who plays the hand? Yes, it very much matters.

If West is declarer, North has the natural lead of the queen of spades, and that collects two defensive spade tricks straight away. Declarer claims the rest once the hearts are found to lie favourably, so that is 11 tricks.

If East is declarer, it doesn't matter what South leads – with the exception of a rather unlikely low spade. Whatever the lead, declarer can cash three diamonds for a spade discard before taking the heart finesse, and is left with just one spade loser; 12 tricks and a nice pile of matchpoints.

Board 8. Dealer West. Vulnerability None

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

North will open the bidding, as the three tens more than outweigh the poor club holding.

If the opening bid is a weak NT, that will often end the auction, as not many people have a bid to show a four-card major and longer minor. Those who do have such a bid at their disposal may get to 2♣, but then South will compete with 2♦, which is the N/S top spot. With no intervention from East, INT will end the auction.

If North has to open either 1♦ or 1♥, East may overcall 2♣ and South raise to two of his partner's suit. That may in turn see West compete to 3♣. That will end the auction except in the case where South is facing a 1♦ opening, and may compete one more time.

If North's systemic opening is 1♣, not all Easts will be able to make a natural 2♣ overcall. If they have to pass, they may view to come in with 2♣ at their next turn, and we are back to the scenario where N/S compete in diamonds and E/W in clubs.

If the defence is accurate, each side can make eight tricks in its chosen trump suit.

The best that E/W can do is therefore to go down one undoubled in 3♣, while they should score quite poorly for allowing N/S to make 2♦.

The best that N/S can do is to defend against 3♣ – it will be hard for anyone to double 3♣, but good luck to anyone who manages to do

so. Going on to 3♦ will be tempting for South, if facing a 1♦ opening, particularly at Love All, the vulnerability at which it is best, in the long term, to declare on these competitive partscore deals.

And finally, what if North is allowed to play in INT. A top club lead obviously puts the defence in control but, while a low club lead gives declarer a chance, in practice he is very unlikely to take it, because it is surely normal to play on diamonds, which works whenever one or more of the missing honours is onside. On this layout, that leads to defeat.

Board 9. Dealer North. Vulnerability E/W

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

Many Easts will open with a weak NT. A pessimistic West may downgrade the bare king and stop out of game but, with no idea as to the value of this card, most will make to practical decision just to force to game.

Playing weak NT, the easiest way to deal with the West hand is to use Stayman and follow through with 3♥, Smolen, showing game values with five spades and four hearts – this agreement works better than anything involving transfers for hands of this type. East will confirm spades as trumps, perhaps bidding only 3♠, which should be stronger than a jump to 4♠ as it leaves room to explore slam prospects. Not this time, of course, with West quickly signing off in 4♠.

Double dummy, there are 11 tricks in a spade contract, but I wouldn't be surprised to see 10 tricks become the more common outcome. Prove me wrong, all you declarers!

If E/W are playing a strong NT, East will open 1♣, West respond 1♠ and, if there is not too much N/S diamond bidding, East will rebid INT. West uses some version of checkback and 4♠ again becomes the final contract.

In the event that East becomes declarer in 3NT, a diamond lead should hold him to nine tricks for a poor score.

Board 10. Dealer East. Vulnerability All

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

As the cards lie, N/S can make 6♦, however, it is far from clear that everyone will get to game, or that they will get to the right game.

Say that South scrapes up a 1♦ opening. Might North respond 3NT with the 3-3-4-3 hand with something in every suit? That would be far from an unreasonable shot, but a spade lead beats 3NT, as long as the defence avoids blocking the suit.

Even if South opens 1♦ and North has a forcing 2♦ raise at his disposal, avoiding 3NT is not automatic – we are all, after all, hard-wired into playing NT whenever possible at matchpointed pairs.

Game is likely to be missed altogether if South does not open. North has a weak NT and South may well not drive to game over that.

With nobody getting to slam, +620 in 5♦ should score very well, and even making partscores possibly scoring OK if enough people are going down in 3NT.

Board 11. Dealer South. Vulnerability None

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

If South opens 1♥ and West overcalls 2♣, most Norths will make a negative double. East will

have nothing to say at this point and South will rebid 2♥. That should run round to East, who can double for take-out, and West respond 3♣.

If that ends the auction, 3♣ should make exactly for a handy E/W score of +110. However, North has seen partner bid and rebid hearts, and should surely compete to 3♥ over 3♣. That is down one unless the defence slips up and allows declarer to get a diamond pitch on the spades. It's hard to see anyone being able to double 3♥, so E/W +50 for down one should be a common result. Actually, having said that, the defence does have to be careful – it's easy to see how a spade winner could get established if declarer sets about the suit early enough.

Board 12. Dealer West. Vulnerability N/S

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

After a pass from West, North opens 1♣ and East overcalls 1♦. South may bid 1♥ now, or may not be able to stomach bidding such a weak suit and instead choose to treat the majors as equals and make a negative double.

If South bids 1♥, West will surely bid 1♠. North jumps to 3♣ because of the seventh trump, and East is likely to compete with 3♠. That can be beaten a couple if the defence draws trumps then South plays a club through, but that defence may not be obvious. On a heart lead, declarer can take two club ruffs before playing a diamond to the queen and ace, and may get out for down one.

If South makes the negative double it is less clear that West will introduce the jack-high spade suit, expecting that RHO has four cards in the suit. If he decides to redouble to show his values, North will still bid 3♣, but now East may repeat the diamonds. Three Diamonds is a better spot than 3♠ and should be only down one.

And if N/S buy it in 3♣ or 4♣? There are three red losers and a trump, as there is only one entry to the dummy so the clubs cannot be picked up without loss.

Board 13. Dealer North. Vulnerability All

<p>♠ 10 4 3 ♥ A 9 8 ♦ 9 ♣ K 9 8 7 6 2</p> <p>♠ 9 7 5 ♥ Q 10 7 6 2 ♦ J 10 6 ♣ Q 3</p> <p>♠ A 6 ♥ K 5 3 ♦ A 8 7 5 4 2 ♣ A J</p>	<p>♠ K Q J 8 2 ♥ J 4 ♦ K Q 3 ♣ 10 5 4</p>
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Most Easts will open 1♠, though a weak NT is a legitimate alternative – I prefer to open a chunky five-card major rather than INT, but each to his own.

South can overcall 2♦, but my bet is that INT will be the more popular choice. Facing a five-card opening, West may compete with 2♠, though that is far from being compulsory on three low spades and 5 HCP in jeans and quacks. Over 2♠, North can compete in clubs, ideally via either a transfer bid or a 2NT puppet to 3♣ as in Lebensohl. If North does make a purely competitive bid, South should do as requested and will then play in 3♣.

But suppose that West passes over INT. North has no ideal bid unless he plays a 3♣ jump as invitational. Failing that, the odds are to just transfer to clubs and play the partscore, rather than gamble with a jump to 3NT.

Eleven tricks can be made in a club contract, declarer playing on diamonds to set up the necessary discards for major-suit losers. Some, however, may take the club finesse and make fewer tricks.

In NT, the automatic spade lead leaves declarer to bring in clubs without loss while having only one entry to the North hand. That means that declarer has to play ace then jack from the South hand, and requires that West hold ♣Qxx and East ♣10x, or that someone has queen-ten doubleton – not today.

Board 14. Dealer East. Vulnerability None

<p>♠ J 5 4 ♥ 9 7 2 ♦ A Q 9 2 ♣ 10 8 5</p> <p>♠ Q 9 8 3 ♥ J 10 ♦ K J 8 4 ♣ Q J 2</p> <p>♠ A 10 2 ♥ Q 6 4 ♦ 7 6 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3</p>	<p>♠ K 7 6 ♥ A K 8 5 3 ♦ 10 ♣ A K 9 4</p>
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The popular E/W auction may be 1♥ – 1♠ – 2♣ – 2NT – 3♠ – 3NT. West would like another point for the 2NT bid but it is surely better than giving simple preference to hearts.

It doesn't really matter whether North leads a diamond against 3NT or not, so long as South plays a diamond through on winning the queen of hearts – declarer will take the heart finesse as soon as he gains the lead. 3NT is quite secure, but this should hold the contract to nine tricks.

The money, as they say, is in four of a major, with 10 tricks available on either 4♥ or 4♠, though 4♥ is much the easier contract to play.

Whatever the lead against 4♥, declarer can play on trumps, losing to the queen, and later set up a diamond winner on which to deposit the third spade, losing just one trick in each major plus a diamond. However, it would be a big decision to play in hearts rather than NT with the West hand – the eight of diamonds will often ensure a second diamond stopper.

Board 15. Dealer South. Vulnerability N/S

<p>♠ K Q 7 2 ♥ K J 10 ♦ A 6 3 2 ♣ Q 5</p> <p>♠ A 9 6 ♥ Q 6 ♦ K J 9 5 ♣ A K J 9</p> <p>♠ 5 ♥ A 9 8 7 5 3 ♦ Q 8 7 4 ♣ 4 3</p>	<p>♠ J 10 8 4 3 ♥ 4 2 ♦ 10 ♣ 10 8 7 6 2</p>
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South opens with a weak 2♥ bid. Yes, the suit is a bit empty, but this is balanced to some extent by the six-four shape. West has an easy double, and North may be unwilling to give up

on game just yet facing a vulnerable opening. If so, he can bid 2NT, just as if West had passed. East should pass despite his shapely hand – if he bids freely on such a hand, how will partner ever know when he actually has something? If South now rebids 3♥ to show a minimum, will West double again. The doubleton hearts is not great but, even discounting the ♥Q, West still has 16 other points, significantly more than promised by the initial double. If he doubles for a second time, East will respond 3♣ and North should double that for penalties, concluding the auction.

Three Spades doubled should be down one – losing two spades, two hearts and one diamond – for –100. That will be good for E/W if N/S are making 3♥ for +140. While diamonds are badly placed for declarer, the ace of spades is well placed, and West will have the choice of allowing declarer to get away without a spade loser, or of having two spade winners for two diamond discards. That is enough to leave declarer on the heart guess for the contract. The heart guess is interesting. If West doubles twice, he should probably be played for a singleton heart, while if he doubles only once, he should probably be played for doubleton.

Board 16. Dealer West. Vulnerability E/W

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

At most tables there will be two passes to East, who will open with a weak two bid. South might be tempted to overcall 2NT, but there is really no need. If 3NT is the spot, North will bid facing a simple 3♦ overcall and now South can bid 3NT. Sure enough, South overcalls 3♦ and North cuebids 3♠, initially asking for a spade stopper. South bids 3NT and that is that.

If West leads a spade, whether East puts in the ten to retain communications with partner, when declarer can set up a second spade trick, or he wins the ace, giving declarer two immediate winners, there are 10 tricks. The

contract can be held to its top nine tricks by a heart lead, which must be ducked, and a club switch. The defence can establish two clubs to go with the heart already taken and the ace of spades, giving then four tricks in all.

The defence to prevent the overtrick is very tough to find, so I would expect a big majority of the field to be making 10 tricks for +430.

Board 17. Dealer North. Vulnerability None

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

North opens 1♥ and South is immediately thinking about a possible slam. The best way forward is to show the club shortage to help partner to judge the value of his high cards.

For some, the South hand can respond 4♣, showing four-plus hearts, game values and club shortage – a splinter bid. That would see North, with a minimum including wasted club values, sign off in game at something close to the speed of light.

However, most pairs put a limit on how strong a splinter can be, and would say that this hand is a point or two too strong. No problem – South starts with a 2NT, game-forcing heart raise and, if North does not jump to 4♥ in response, showing a bad minimum opener, South plans to bid 4♣ at his next turn, to show a hand too good for an initial splinter. Once again, North will dislike the fact that half his strength is facing the shortage, so should sign off in game.

It is important not to go past the four level on this deal, as N/S have three top losers so can be beaten if they go higher.

Board 18. Dealer East. Vulnerability N/S

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

If playing a strong NT, that is what South will open, and at most tables that will be the end of the matter. Yes, it's true that West could overcall in hearts but, with an excellent lead against INT, most experienced players are likely to pass.

West will lead the queen of hearts. Declarer has six top tricks and needs to find one more. With the clue from the opening lead that hearts are not likely to provide the extra trick, declarer's attention will focus on diamonds. The first chance in the suit is that both king and queen are onside, so declarer should win the heart on table and lead a diamond to the jack. That will lose and hearts will be cleared, the second chance offered by the diamond suit is a three-three split. Declarer wins, plays ace a third round of diamonds, and has seven tricks for +90.

If playing a weak NT, South may open 1♥, playing Acol, and pass North's INT response, or may open 1♣. The latter will see West overcall 1♥. North will either bid INT or double, according to his agreements. South will respond INT to the double, or pass INT. Most boards then lead to a final contract of INT, though sometimes by South, less often by North. If East leads a spade, North will play on diamonds in the same manner as previously discussed and for the same reasons. Obviously, the outcome should be the same, seven tricks for +90.

If E/W do come into the auction, they can make seven tricks in any suit except diamonds. Two Hearts down one would therefore be a very good result for -50, while 2♥ doubled won one for -100 would be terrible.

Board 19. Dealer South. Vulnerability E/W

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

Say that West opens a weak NT and is left to play there. What would you lead from the North hand?

I would be uncomfortable leading either minor, as both are dangerous holdings from which a lead could blow a trick – as indeed proves to be the case on the actual lay-out. If declarer is given a trick in this fashion, he can then bring home his contract by getting spades right for three tricks.

I would lead the jack of hearts. This is not a completely safe lead either, but it does combine relative safety with some attacking potential. And it works perfectly on this deal – no, I am not result merchanting – honest! After this lead careful defence results in down one.

The point is that there is rarely a necessity for a dangerous lead against INT, as the defence has enough high-card strength to expect to get in and be able to switch to the right suit later in the play, rather than take a stab in the dark on opening lead.

If a weak NT ran round to me and I held the South hand, I would bid 2♣, Landy, to show both majors. Yes, this usually promises at least five-four, but non-vulnerable I would chance it, just to disturb INT, which is so often a good place for the opposition to play. That gets us to 2♥, which is probably down one.

And if West has to open 1♣? If East responds 1♦, South can afford to double, being a passed hand so that partner will not get over-excited. The chances are, however, that one of East or West will bid INT and play there.

Board 20. Dealer West. Vulnerability All

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

West opens 1♥ and North has a classic example of a 3♠ overcall. That is not sufficient to shut out East, who has an easy negative double, and West repeats the long hearts.

If 4♥ ends the auction, as it will at a substantial majority of tables, there are just the obvious three top losers, so declarer makes exactly for +620.

Four Spades doubled would only be -500, but not many will find it, I suspect. North certainly should not be bidding again, so it will be up to South to guess well and earn a lot of matchpoints for his side. Well done to anyone who finds that bid.

Board 21. Dealer North. Vulnerability N/S

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

North has another classic pre-empt, this time 3♥. If left to play there, he is likely to escape for down one by covering the queen of clubs lead. Failure to cover leaves open the option for East to switch to the queen of spades, which gets him a third-round spade ruff for and down two.

When 3♥ comes round to West, he will double – yes, it would be nice to have a fourth spade, but we can't have a perfect hand every time, and to pass with 17 HCP would be far too pessimistic an approach to take.

East has a very unattractive choice of calls in response to the double, forced to go to the four level with a weak hand and no long suit. The gamblers may even leave the double in and achieve a huge score when the contract is defeated. Well done them – while you couldn't afford to risk at Teams scoring, it is far from being a ridiculous option at matchpoints. The alternative is to take it out to 4♣, which should end the auction. Though the spade and diamond finesses are working, the five-one trump break means that 4♣ has no chance and is likely to fail by a couple of tricks. Four Diamonds would be a trick better but, unless South makes a greedy double of 4♣ and West runs, there is no sensible way to get there.

Board 22. Dealer East. Vulnerability E/W

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

If West opens a weak NT North will double. East will be content but South should run to 2♣. After a spade lead, that should be down one, but with assorted partscores making their way, even down one doubled is not good enough to compensate for what can be made on the E/W cards.

When 2♣ comes round to East, he will presumably double – whatever that means in their agreements. If it is penalty, West will leave it in. If double is for take-out, West will respond 2♥ and that will end the auction. That isn't as good as playing in 2NT, where eight tricks cannot be prevented, but +110 in 2♥ should score well with many E/Ws defending 2♣, doubled or otherwise.

If West has to open 1♣/♦/♥, North overcalls 1NT and East has enough to double. South will run to 2♣ and, in what will surely be a forcing situation for them, E/W will have to do something. A take-out double from West would be left in, while a take-out double by East would once again see West at the helm in

2♥. A penalty double would, of course, be left in.

Board 23. Dealer South. Vulnerability All

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

When South opens 1♥, that should silence West, who has no sensible option but to pass at this stage. North will respond 1♠, South rebid 2♦, and now West can double for take-out, implying length in hearts for the failure to double on the previous round. North can raise to 3♦ but that will be all.

West has no attractive opening lead. The unbid suit will be a disaster, costing one of the two defensive club tricks, while a heart helps declarer enormously in that suit. A spade looks dangerous but is actually fine on the actual deal and, while leading the king of diamonds looks as though it costs a diamond trick, the chances are that declarer will be playing to take so many ruffs in one hand or the other that he will be forced to drop it eventually anyway.

There are three black losers on a non-club lead and if declarer drops the diamond he can come to the rest. Often, however, he will either lose to the ♦K or lose a different trick in the wash. Plus 130 should be an excellent result, with +110 the other common outcome. If E/W try declaring anything, they are likely to regret it.

Board 24. Dealer West. Vulnerability None

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

Assuming no trump loser, 4♠ is on the diamond finesse. Spades three-nil with South having the length is about an 11% chance, so the game is only actually just under a 40% shot. You would therefore want to be in it vulnerable at teams but not otherwise – except, of course, when the just under 40% shot comes in, as on this deal – then you would want to be in it.

East will open 1♠ and some Souths will pass. If playing traditional methods, West will raise to 2♠ and, after two passes, South should balance with a double. North will bid 3♣ in response, but East will take the push to 3♠ quite comfortably.

If South overcalls at his first turn, will that make any difference to West? Maybe facing a five-card opening West will do something more dynamic than a simple 2♠, and that may tempt East to bid on to game. It's all a bit vague though, unless West can show just what he has – what is known as a Mixed Raise, about 7=9 HCP with four-card support. Even then, it is far from automatic for East to go on to game.

Anyway, if we go back to the start of our discussion of the board, game is a less than 40% shot. Those who bid it will find that it is cold, and will score well, while those who stay out of it will score poorly. Success and failure are just a little random at times in this game of ours.

Board 25. Dealer North. Vulnerability E/W

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

Some will think the North hand a maximum 2♣ rebid, some a minimum 3♣ rebid. If playing weak NT, the evaluation problem can be side-stepped by opening 1♣ and rebidding 1NT, 15-17. South uses Checkback and the partnership aligns in 3NT, played by North. If playing a strong NT, that option is not available, and each North must follow his own personal

beliefs regarding the 2/3♣ conundrum – or they too can side-step the issue by opening 1NT. That isn't nearly so comfortable a choice as when playing weak NT, because clubs can be lost altogether.

Anyway, one way or another, N/S should normally get to 3NT, though it will sometimes be played by South.

It's normal to play on spades, the suit which offers a guarantee of extra tricks, rather than on clubs, so if West leads a heart round to declarer's nine, declarer will cross to the ace of diamonds to play the jack of spades. That produces five spade tricks but now declarer would like to take the diamond finesse and has to use one of dummy's aces to do so, thereby establishing a winner or two for the defence and, of course, if the diamond finesse doesn't win, there will then be no entry back to hand to cash the diamond winners. So communications are not as good as they might be, despite all the combined high-card strength.

One thing declarer can do, is to put in dummy's ten at trick one. When that scores, it preserves the ace of diamonds as a dummy entry for after the spades have been played.

What about if East is on lead against 3NT and chooses the two of diamonds? The average player will put in the ten or jack for a 'free' finesse – but that tangles their communications. The ♦Q is marked with East if E/W are leading normally, so it is perfectly safe to play low from dummy, win the ace of diamonds, and take the spade finesse. The diamond finesse can be taken near the end of the play. See how much more difficult things are if you win trick one with the ten or jack of diamonds. It's amazing how often these 'free' finesses prove to be anything but free.

Double dummy, 12 tricks can be made, except on a club lead from West, which breaks up a late endplay against East in certain play variations. However, making 12 tricks means reading the position to be just as it is, and I suspect that 11 will be the more common outcome – we shall see.

Board 26. Dealer East. Vulnerability All

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

East has only 10 HCP, but the hand is surely too good to open a standard weak two bid, with its six-four shape, and every point working well, and no soft queens or jacks. South doesn't quite have a double of a 1♠ opening, so West will get to respond 2♦ then raise the 2♠ rebid to game.

Eleven tricks are easy on anything but a trump lead, declarer simply playing to take two club ruffs in the dummy.

After a trump lead, declarer should appreciate that he will not be permitted to take two ruffs so should look for an alternative line of play. Best is to win the lead in hand and play ace and another diamond. A trump return can be won in hand and dummy's two club entries used to ruff out the diamonds. One club ruff and one club discard on the fifth diamond brings the total up to 11. Of course, had diamonds been three-three, it would have been even easier.

Board 27. Dealer South. Vulnerability None

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

E/W can make 3NT unless the contract is played by West and North leads the nine or eight of spades. Those lead traps East's ♠10 and enable the defence to come to three spade tricks and two red aces. Played by East, North never gets on lead and there are only two defensive spade tricks. Declarer should have

no problem in establishing the extra tricks he requires for his contract by playing on the red suits.

This could be a good hand for the weak NT. Why, because if South opens INT it is quite likely to go All Pass. The contract may go three down, but -150 will be just fine if the opposition are bidding and making game at other tables on their combined 25-count. In fact, even if E/W don't get to game, they should match that +150 by playing a NT partscore.

Now imagine that South has to open one of a suit. One or other of East and West will come in with either a double or, possibly, a balancing INT, and the other is likely to drive to game.

Board 28. Dealer West. Vulnerability N/S

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

The cards lie so well for E/W that they can make 4♠ – if they bid it – declarer just needing to play for spades to be two-two. He will do so because that is the most convenient thing to do, given the other work he has to deal with.

But why would E/W bid to game? West just barely has a hand that some will open but, with one of the 11 HCP a bare jack, it would hardly be criminal to pass as dealer, would it?

Say that West does open 1♠ and East makes a limit raise to 3♠ – West has a complete minimum so no reason at all to consider going on to game.

So will anybody get to 4♠? Maybe the most likely way to get there is if N/S bid to 4♥ and West bids 4♠ as much as a sacrifice as with the expectation of making. Say it starts 1♠ – (Pass) – 3♠, and South makes a take-out double. Personally, I would be inclined to respond 4♣ to that, as more often than not clubs will be our best spot, but many would zero in on the unbid major. If 4♥ comes round to West, it is understandable if he fears that it might be making. South might even double and concede -590.