The 2026 Charity Challenge Pairs
Wednesday 11th 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. None Vul. Dealer North

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

E/W can make 11 tricks in a spade contract but, realistically, declarer will normally take the losing trump finesse so make only 10. Meanwhile, N/S can make either 2♥ or 3♦, but should rarely be allowed to play at a making level in the face of their opponents' 10-card spade fit.

If North opens 1NT, East may overcall to show both majors, despite being only four-four in the two suits. While partner will expect a ninth card, passing at Love All would, for me, be a bigger lie – this hand really needs to get involved in the auction. South will compete in diamonds, but West is well worth a 3♠ bid and West can go on to game.

If East does pass over 1NT, South may transfer to diamonds, as much to shut out potential spade competition as to improve the contract. However, East can double 3♦ for take-out and West bid the spade game.

If North opens 1♦, East has a classic take-out double. South can raise strongly, but that will have to be at the five level to shut West out.

A 1♣ or 1♥ opening is less good for East, who may pass and hope to see the opposition get together in diamonds, when he can make a delayed take-out double.

As long as East comes in at some point, E/W should bid up to 4♠, meaning that the best that N/S can do is to save in 5♦. Whether or not that is easy to double will depend on just how the auction tempos out, as it may not always be clear who can make what. Minus 100 should be very good. As for –300, that is harder to judge, depending on how many E/Ws get to play in 4♠.

Board 2. N/S Vul. Dealer East

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

At a different vulnerability, a few Souths might be tempted by an Unusual 2NT overcall of East's 1♠ opening. Vulnerable against not, however, that would be real kamikaze stuff. West will respond 2♥ and East raise to game, best being to do so via a 4♣ splinter bid.

West has an ideal club holding facing shortage – the ace but then no wasted lesser honours, and length, so that there will be some ruffs in the dummy to provide extra tricks. However, the lack of a diamond control means that any co-operation in a slam hunt will have to be beyond game, so quite committal. If West likes the hand and cuebids 4♠, East can ask for key cards then sign off in 5♥ when there prove to be two missing. If West doesn't like the hand, a 4♥ sign-off will end the auction.

There is a half-way house between these two approaches which is played by some expert partnerships – Last Train (named after the Monkees' song, Last Train to Clarksville, from which one might deduce the idea's vintage. Playing Last Train, where there is only one bid between the last cuebid or splinter and a sign-off in game, in this case 4♦, that bid says nothing about control of diamonds, but merely says that the bidder feels a little too good for a sign-off, but not good enough to cuebid past game. I rarely use Last Train myself, and consider that, while it can sometimes be very useful where both partners are on the same wavelength, it is a dangerous idea for a casual partnership, with plenty of potential for a misunderstanding.

Anyway, on this deal E/W should use Key-card and stop safely at the five level if not sooner, meaning an almost flat +450.

Board 3. E/W Vul. Dealer South

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

Where would you like to play this one – 3NT or 4♠?

Double dummy, there are 11 tricks in either contract, meaning that 3NT may appear to be the better spot, but consider the play. East will lead a low club and, if declarer plays a second club early, East can duck to maintain communications with partner and declarer will be unable to come to a heart trick, so will score only +430. Eleven tricks are only possible because there is a heart blockage if declarer leads low to the king, and can then set up a second club winner. That is an unlikely play and heavily against the odds.

In 4♠, however, declarer can win the likely diamond lead, draw trumps and knock-out the ace of clubs. There is a heart discard on the third club, so a winning heart guess provides the eleventh trick. A wrong heart guess leads to only +420 and a poor matchpoint score, while a correct heart guess leads to 11 tricks and a good score of +450, beaten only by one or two +460s.

So how will +430 score? It depends how well the declarers in 4♠ are guessing. I expect that more than half will get hearts right – if there are no other clues, by just playing for the missing aces to be split – so that +430 will be below average.

What about the bidding?

North will open 2NT and South must decide whether to check for a spade fit, or just raise to 3NT. With plenty of points for the raise, a weak four-card suit and no ruffing values, I would be inclined to raise directly to 3NT, hoping that, particularly with East having been given a blind lead, there may be the same tricks in NT as in spades even should a spade fit exist.

Board 4. All Vul. Dealer West

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

This one looks to be pretty straightforward. West will open 1♥ and many Easts will make a limit raise to 3♠, with West going on to game.

A minority of Easts will judge their hand to be worth a game raise. If they content themselves with a simple bid of 4♥, that will be that; but if they go through their constructive game raise bid – usually 2NT – West will be interested in greater things. He is close to driving to slam now, and that has almost no play at all. If he does so, my sympathies lie more with West than with East, 2NT being a bit pushy on a flat 11-count with not that much outside the trump suit.

There is nothing to the play, 11 tricks being the universal outcome.

Board 5. N/S Vul. Dealer North

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

North has a classic example of a weak two bid and at many tables that could buy the contract. There are seven easy winners but no semblance of an eighth as the cards lie, so 2♠ should be down one for –100.

Neither East nor South has any reason to bid, and it is far from being obvious that West should come in either, a moderate weak NT including a doubleton queen in the suit opened and facing a partner who could not come into the bidding could easily see bidding turn a plus score into a minus.

Those Wests who do come in will presumably do so with a double. East will respond 3♣ – if playing Lebensohl, a popular method here, that will show some useful values, but not enough to tempt West into bidding on, so that should be that.

It would be a little more comfortable to play in the four-four diamond fit but, with things breaking kindly and the queen of diamonds where it would be expected to be, it looks normal to make nine tricks for +110.

Plus 110 should score OK for E/W as there will be those defending against 2♠, but anyone who goes minus on the E/W cards rates to score very poorly.

Board 6. E/W Vul. Dealer East

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

East will open 1♣ and West respond 1♠, much to the surprise of North, who was probably getting ready to make a weak jump overcall in the suit. North will stay silent now, of course, and East rebid 2♦, a reverse so a one-round force. West should bid 2♥, fourth-suit-forcing, as more flexible than bidding NT, and East completes the picture with 2NT, which West raises to game.

Say that South leads a heart, possibly second highest from a weak suit. Not knowing that the queen is doubleton, declarer will put in the jack or ten and the queen will lose to the ace. A heart back to the king will allow declarer to take a club finesse. If South is awake, that should be allowed to win, so declarer will cross back to dummy again in hearts to repeat the finesse. If he has watched the heart spots carefully, he should know to finesse the seven – unless South's methods include top oif nothing, as if he is playing second-highest he must have the eight.

When the second club finesse loses, South may see no point in returning the queen of spades – after all, it is a singleton, so there will be no way to get at any winners North may have in

the suit – but declarer doesn't know the suit is breaking six-one, so will often duck the queen and hold himself to 10 tricks. If South instead returns any other card, declarer can come to 11.

Board 7. All Vul. Dealer South

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

If South opens 1♠, this will be passed out at some tables and should make with a little care, possibly with an overtrick, after West's likely club lead.

Some Norths will raise to 2♠ or, possibly, respond 1NT, over either of which South should bid 2NT and that should be that.

Say that North plays in2NT on a diamond lead; his guess at trick one will make a big difference to the outcome – and it is a guess whether the lead is more likely to be away from the jack or from the ace. There will be no recovery from putting up one of dummy's honours. Playing low improves things more than a little, but if West switches to a low heart that takes the late heart entry out of North's hand so he cannot get to the fifth club if East ducks the queen.

If East leads the jack of hearts and declarer plays low from the dummy, West does best to let the queen win, again taking out the late entry to the North hand. Declarer will win the queen, lead a club to the jack followed by the ♣A, and look disappointed. Better, if he could but have known that the ♥K was with West, to rise with the ace at trick one and play on clubs, thereby preserving the queen as a later entry.

And if East leads a club? Declarer can win the ten and plays three more rounds of the suit to set up the fifth card. If he guesses well on the return, there is every prospect of eight tricks.

If South is declarer, West will lead a heart. Again, it is best for declarer not to put up the queen. He can win the ace and play on clubs, and the ♥Q is an entry to the long clubs.

Two No Trump is a tricky contract with plenty of scope in both play and defence. However, the defence can always prevail, however well declarer reads the position. I would therefore expect that there will be more –100s than +120s, and maybe even the odd –200.

If playing five-card majors, South will usually open 1♣, being too strong for even a strong NT. That will permit West to get into the auction with a 1♥ overcall. North may raise to 2♣, and South try 2NT. North might correct to 3♣, but that should be down one, just like 2NT.

E/W can make 2♦, but are unlikely to be allowed to play there.

Board 8. None Vul. Dealer West

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

The only making game is 3NT by N/S, though South would have to guess well on a low club lead.

Can anyone bid to 3NT? Well, it would be more thana bit of a gamble, but if West opens 1♣ I suppose that an imaginative North could overcall 3NT. The world and his mother will, however, overcall 4♠ and play there unless one of East and West takes an inspired view, getting West to declare the unbeatable 5♣.

So, why isn't 4♠ cold – after all, declarer has eight spade tricks, the ace of hearts, and the ace of clubs is onside to make the ♣K declarer's tenth trick?

If the opening lead is a club, or the defence plays two rounds of diamonds, 4♠ is indeed cold. Suppose, however, that East leads the queen of diamonds then switches to the king of hearts. Declarer can duck or win, ity doesn't matter, as East continues with a second heart if the king holds. In dummy for the one and only time, declarer leads a club towards his king, and West comes up with the ace and plays hearts. The three-nil spade split means that this promotes a trump trick for East, and the contract is down one.

I doubt that many will find the killing defence, so I would expect 4♠ making for +420 to be a popular result, but well done to those who do beat it, and even better done to those who get to 5♣ on the E/W cards.

Board 9. E/W Vul. Dealer North

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

North opens 1♠ and East passes – the thought of a vulnerable two-level overcall on that suit is too stomach-churning to imagine. South will also pass. That leaves the first serious decision to West. Vulnerable, and with only a balanced 10 HCP, some will choose to pass, and North will be left to play in 1♠. That cannot be defeated. After the likely diamond lead, West will see that he needs to switch, there being no future in diamonds, and a trump looks the most likely choice. If North wins the ace and ducks a heart, West can get in again to lead a second trump through. A heart ruff followed by a club to the jack sees the contract home.

A majority, however, will double. Some Norths will take the opportunity to introduce their clubs in the hope that South will be able to compete the partscore, others will pass or, perhaps redouble to show extra strength. It is all a little murky as to just how things will continue. East is well worth a jump to 3♥ and, should he do so, that will end the auction. A singleton club lead should beat this, while nine tricks cannot be prevented if South leads his partner's spades.

Say that West doubles but North does not bid 2♣. A few Easts will choose to bid their longer suit, clubs, rather than the major, and that will leave open the possibility of South competing in diamonds. Three Diamonds would be down only one, with some prospect of its being allowed to make. But, of course, having bid clubs first, East is likely to compete to 3♥ over 3♦, so it will be rare for a diamond contract to be played.

Board 10. All Vul. Dealer East

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

East opens 1♣ and rebids 2♣ over the 1♠ response.

Playing simple methods, West would have to jump to 3♥ now as 2♥ would be non-forcing. That is not really a very satisfactory way of bidding, however, it being much better if the second-round jump promises at least five-five in the two suits, else, opener doesn't know whether to raise to 4♥ with only three-card support, and is often guessing. On this deal, that would not be a problem, as East has four hearts so an easy raise to 4♥.

Most tournament pairs play either that a new suit from responder is a one-round force – here, West bids 2♥ and East raises to 3♥, West going on to game, or play that 2♥ would be non-forcing but that 2♦ is an artificial force. The former approach leaves a jump to 3♥ as GF five-five, while 2♥ followed by 3♥ on the next round is invitational with five-five. You can't stop in 2♥, but can have a sensible auction with a game-forcing or invitational hand. If you are keen to be able to play in 2♥, then the latter approach is for you. On the actual hand West bids 2♦, forcing but not promising diamonds, East bids 2♥, natural, and West raises to game.

If declarer attacks both black suits by leading low to the jack or ten, he will come to 11 tricks and a decent tally of matchpoints. If he tackles both black suits by leading low to the king, he may find himself a trick short, and –100 should score very poorly. Those who get one suit right, the other wrong, are likely to end up with 10 tricks. I would bet on 11 being a more common outcome than nine.

Board 11. None Vul. Dealer South

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

Once upon a time, everyone would have opened the South hand with 3♥, and if that is the style with which you are comfortable, don't let anyone tell you that you are wrong. West will, I think, prefer a take-out double to a 3♠ overcall on such an empty suit, and just as well, because North will have an idea what to do about it if West bids 3♠.

If West doubles, North will probably pass, though facing a sound pre-empter redouble is a possibility, encouraging partner to get involved in doubling East's response in search of a penalty if his hand is suitable – and it is! If East runs to 4♦, an ace, three trumps and a ruffing value might well be enough to try for a penalty, even with only three low diamonds. East will not enjoy the play in 4♦ doubled. And if East passes 3♥ redoubled round to West? Well then, I would guess that most Wests will bid 3♠ and most Norths double. Three Spades doubled can be down two, 4♦ doubled down three.

If E/W gamble out defending 3♥ doubled (or redoubled), that contract should be down one, as long as West keeps his fingers well away from the ace of spades lead or switch.

Now that it is twice upon a time, many players are opening 4♥ on hands of this type. They will argue, quite correctly, that they would open 3♥ with a 2-7-2-2 hand, so the actual hand has substantial extra playing potential, and that 4♥ puts more pressure on the opposition – the modern expert pre-empting world is a scary place for those used to a more traditional approach.

If South opens 4♥, West will have essentially the same decision to make as over 3♥. Double is far more flexible than 4♠, but does risk losing the fifth spade. Were the spades somewhat more robust, AKQxx in spades and Axxx in clubs, for example, I would vote for the overcall, but with the actual hand I favour double.

Four Spades will be doubled and should be down three – a triumph for the higher pre-empt. But double will win the Board for E/W and turn the bigger pre-empt into a disaster. Why? Because any sane East will know that he is light years away from making anything his way so will pass out the double and hope that partner has four tricks with which to defeat it. And again, unless he leads the ace of spades before four tricks have been taken by the defence, West has enough to see the defence prevail, and going minus on the N/S cards should score very badly.

Board 12. N/S Vul. Dealer West

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

West has a nice near-maximum weak two opener and, after a pass from North, East must decide whether to look for game or settle for a, hopefully, safe partscore.

The answer to this question will of course depend on West's style regarding weak two bids. At favourable vulnerability, my partners would probably pass and hope that I could scramble eight tricks, but game is a legitimate consideration for those who stick rigidly to 6-10 HCP with a decent six-card suit.

If East is going to try for game, he does so via a 2NT inquiry. When West shows a maximum, East bids game. But game is not that good on these E/W cards. Hearts are three-two, else there will usually be a trump loser, and the ten of diamonds is onside, meaning that the normal play of that suit is successful in holding declarer's losers to only one.

As I say, game is nothing special on the actual layout, but suppose that West hand the ♣K instead of the ♣A. Most people would still treat the hand as a maximum, and now game would be very poor.

So, our conclusion must be that looking for game is being a little over-optimistic. Yes, facing

the right maximum, 4♥ could be a very good contract, but there are far more where it is a borderline, or possibly no-play, contract. Remember that there is no premium on getting to thin games at matchpoint scoring – unless they are at least a 50% proposition, we are better off staying out of them.

Board 13. All Vul. Dealer North

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

East has a strong NT and, if that is what he opens, it should end the auction – South is far too balanced to come in when vulnerable.

A low spade lead will be won in dummy. Double dummy, declarer would now lead a heart to his queen and, when that held, play three rounds of diamonds to set up a seventh trick. However, in real life, if declarer plays on hearts at trick two he will lead low to the nine, losing to the ten. The spades will be cleared and now he plays three rounds of diamonds, but has only six tricks. Similarly, if declarer plays on diamonds at trick two, he sets up a sixth trick but that should be all.

Things are quite different if East is not playing a strong NT. For most, that will mean a 1♦ opening, with a minority opening 1♣. Over either of those, South will overcall 1♠ and North raise to 2♠, perhaps via a cuebid to show a sound raise. Though East has 17 HCP, the 4-3-3-3 shape should discourage him from getting further involved, so South will become declarer in 2♠.

If the defence plays in simple fashion, declarer may come to an overtrick, using dummy's top hearts as entries to lead up towards the spade honours, and in the endgame leading the queen of diamonds round to East when that defender is down to nothing but diamonds so that the diamond return gives the overtrick. The defence can prevent declarer from making the overtrick by playing four rounds of diamonds while West still has a triump remaining. This will promote a second defensive trump trick and hold the contract to eight.

Board 14. None Vul. Dealer East

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

This is another deal where styles have changed over the years. Go back 20 years, and the vast majority would have opened 2♠ with the East hand. I guess that most Souths would overcall 3♥ and West would make a penalty double. That would be a lot more fun for the defenders than for declarer, –500.

More and more players today would open 3♠ as East, the six-four shape adding significantly to its playing potential, while putting more pressure on the opposition. If left to play in 3♠, declarer will have to hold the trump losers to two, which is far from being guaranteed – low to the ten loses to the jack with the ace and nine to come. Low to the king followed by a low card, which drops either doubleton honour, is the successful alternative – low to the king followed by the queen works on the actual layout, but not if it is the ace which is doubleton.

But will 3♠ end the auction? South has a lot of losers, but many players would be unable to resist that heart suit so would overcall 4♥, and would swiftly learn to regret their enterprise. Declarer can come to just one club, one spade, and four trumps, so is down four for –800.

Board 15. N/S Vul. Dealer South

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

West has a 2NT opening and that will normally silence everyone. Sure, East could guess to transfer to spades then pass the completion, but that is by no means guaranteed to be the

winning decision. As it happens, 3♠ can be made, so congratulations to those who go down that route.

If North leads a low heart, declarer will win the jack, knock out the ace of clubs, and soon claim eight tricks. More likely, North will lead a heart honour. For many, that will mean the queen, as the king asks for an unblock or count signal. The queen will be ducked, South discouraging, and North will switch to a diamond. A heart, or indeed diamond, return now sets up enough defensive tricks to beat the contract by a trick.

If North doesn't fancy leading from his slightly vulnerable heart holding round to a strong balanced hand, he may prefer to lead a diamond. South will like that and will win the ace and will surely continue with diamonds. Declarer wins the king and plays on clubs and has eight tricks. Yes, South could win the diamond lead and switch to a heart, which would give the defence a chance, but why on earth should he?

Board 16. E/W Vul. Dealer West

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

Except for the small band who have an opening to show both majors in a weak hand, most will not have a way to describe the West hand. Even for those who are prepared to open a weak two while holding four cards in the other major, bidding 2♠ when holding ace-queen-to-five hearts may be a little too extreme.

If you don't have a way to show a weak major two-suiter initially, perhaps it is best to pass then plan to come in with a two-suited overcall? A good idea, but East soon puts paid to that by overcalling 1♦. When South now bids 1♠, West may need to pass for a second time to discover what is going on. When North repeats the clubs, East is caught with plenty of spare high cards but no sixth diamond and no heart support. Maybe it is his turn to have to go quietly. South will pass also, and now maybe it is time for West to compete with a gentle 2♥.

That's a lot of maybes. What we can be fairly confident about is that there will be many different decisions made by the various players, leading to many different auctions and many different final contracts – we have not even considered what might happen if North decides to open 1♦ so as to get both minors in conveniently.

Despite the five-nil trump break, West can make 4♠ and, unlikely though it may appear, can even make 4♥. Anyone who does open with something that shows six spades, may even get to game, though coming to 10 tricks is not quite guaranteed.

Board 17. None Vul. Dealer North

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

N/S have a borderline game – not borderline in terms of its success, as everything lies kindly and even an overtrick is possible, but borderline in terms of bidding it and just how good a contract it actually is. Just move the king of clubs into the West hand and see how tough the contract may be just with that one change, to see that it would not be a crime to stop in partscore.

If playing strong NT, that is what North will open. I would not criticise anyone who passed with the South cards – not for the first time in this set, may I remind everyone that there is not premium in bidding thin games at matchpoint scoring. However, those who do use Stayman will have to follow through with an invitational 2NT and North, with a complete maximum, will go on to game.

If playing weak NT, North will have to open something else. Playing Acol, one option is for the auction to begin 1♥ – 1♠ – 1NT (15-17). Much of the reason why South might bid facing a 1NT opening is in the hope of finding a four-four spade fit. After this start to the auction, however, there can be no such fit, so the odds against bidding are that much greater and I am sure that passing the 1NT rebid is the long-term winning action.

If North has to open 1♣ or 1♦ then rebid 1NT over the 1♠ response, South again knows there is no major-suit fit so once again should settle for 1NT.

So, those readers who bid on and get to game will outscore me on this deal, and +430 should be a very good result, with even +400 likely to be above average.

Finally, just considering the play; if East leads the jack of clubs, declarer should be brave and put up dummy's queen. Simply, it will be very tough to make the contract if the queen is not both a trick and an entry to dummy, so hope for something good to happen when you need it.

Board 18. N/S Vul. Dealer East

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

When East opens 1♣, South will double and, after a pass from West, North should bid 1NT. For the second Board in succession, my temptation is to pass, as game will rarely be a trivial make when we have at best 25 HCP between the two hands, while if North has bid 1NT on 6 or 7 HCP a raise to 2NT runs a serious risk of earning a minus score. And, for the second deal in succession, I will miss a makeable game.

Of course, if South does bid on over 1NT, perhaps because the partnership has an agreement that 1NT will always deliver 8-10, and never be weaker than that, the only sensible call is a raise to 2NT. Looking at all those tens and nines, North will go on to game.

Nine tricks are far from certain, depending on which suits declarer chooses to stake his contract on, however, four spade tricks and three hearts are possible if he plays for the opening bidder to hold almost all the missing high cards. Playing on diamonds is likely to be less successful.

Board 19. E/W Vul. Dealer South

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

There are those who will trade on the favourable vulnerability to open a shaded weak NT on the South cards. If they do so, West should compete – 2♠ showing five or more spades plus a four-card or longer minor is one popular method, and is certainly less daunting than having to make a simple spades-only overcall on that jack-high suit. If West overcalls 2♠, East can just raise to game. After the likely heart lead 4♠ should be made exactly.

Others will open 1♣ and West again overcall. Unless having an economical method to show spades and diamonds, that is likely to be with 1♠, despite the diamonds being so much stronger. Once again, East can raise to game – looking for slam is a little optimistic in the face of an opening one-level bid. If South has opened 1♣, North may lead that suit rather than a heart, and now there may be the possibility of an overtrick.

At the majority of tables, South will pass, as will West, unless playing weak two-suited openings. Personally, I would now take one look at the vulnerability and open a weak 2♥ with the North hand. I know, crazy, you may think, but the opposition are known to have the values for at least game so why not take a little bidding space away from them and make their exploration for the best contract a little more difficult. Who knows, partner may even be able to support hearts and take away even more bidding space.

On the actual deal, it is unlikely that anything N/S can do will prevent E/W from reaching 4♠, just as they will surely do if given an uncontested auction. Plus 650 should be very good, +420 normal, and anything less very poor.

Board 20. All Vul. Dealer West

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

West doesn't quite have an opening hand so North will be left to open with a weak two bid – yes, I would open 2♥, even vulnerable, though the suit is not great. Only a seriously weak suit such as Qxxxxx or worse would dissuade me from making a weak two opening. East should not consider overcalling at the three level on 9 HCP and with so many losers, so it will be up to South to make the key decision. The practical bid is to just raise to 4♥. Yes, there might be four top losers, but how will South ever know? If he instead uses the 2NT asking bid, North will show a minimum. Will South then settle for partscore? If so a very good game will be missed.

There is a defence to challenge 4♥, namely for the defence to play three rounds of clubs, threatening to create a trick for the queen of hearts. However, it will be clear that West has all the missing club honours and, as a passed hand, is unlikely to also hold the ♥Q. Declarer should therefore ruff the third club with the king and finesse East for the queen – contract just made.

Board 21. N/S Vul. Dealer North

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

With all the high cards concentrated in the two long suits, a fair number of Norths will open the bidding with 1♥. East has the wrong shape to come in over that so will pass and South respond 1♠. West passes, of course, and North rebids 2♣. There is still no good way into the auction for East, so he passes again, and South gives simple preference to 2♥, which will usually end the auction.

The deal belongs to E/W in a spade on NT partscore – in fact, E/W can make seven or more tricks in all five denominations, yet never get into the auction. That, however, is no bad thing, because N/S are vulnerable and cannot make anything on accurate defence. The common contract of 2♥ should be down two for –200 and, as we all know, that score is often the kiss of death on a partscore deal.

Not everyone will open the North hand. If North passed some Easts will open a weak NT. West will transfer to spades and North has a perfect double to show hearts. Having done so, he might even follow through with 3♣ when East's 2♠ completion of the transfer comes around. On another day, competing the partscore could be the right thing to do on the North cards, but not this time, and if N/S play the hand in 3♣ or 3♥ the contract is likely to be doubled for –500 or –800.

If E/W are left to play in 2♠, nine tricks are possible, though eight may be the more common outcome.

Another possibility is that East will open 1♣. South may overcall 1♦, West bid 1♠, and North make a competitive double. If South ends up in 2♦, that will, like everything else, cost more than the price of an opposing partscore, at least –200.

On this deal, silence is golden for N/S.

Board 22. E/W Vul. Dealer East

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

If South passes over East's 1♣ opening, some Wests will respond 1♠ and East rebid 2♣. If that ends the auction, E/W will score a very handy +90.

North, however, can make a balancing double of 2♣, and that should see N/S reach a

diamond partscore, where 10 tricks are possible for an equally handy +130.

Not all Wests will respond with only 4 HCP, so at some tables North will get to double 1♣. East can rebid clubs to take a level of bidding space away from the opposition and South may bid 2♠. If that ends the auction, it is likely to be made exactly.

Some Souths will make a mildly aggressive take-out double of 1♣. Looking at 13 HCP, North may well drive to game now, and any game should be defeated. A careful auction, however, may see N/S stop in 4♦. North cuebids 2♣ in response to the double and South bids 2♠. North again cuebids and then raises South's 3♦ response to 4♦. For some, this will be a forcing sequence and South will have to go on to the doomed 5♦, but others will realise that they have two clubs losers and will need a lot from partner for game to be making, so may take a view to pass out 4♦, stopping just in time.

Board 23. All Vul. Dealer South

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

If West opens 1NT, North may make a pre-emptive 3♣ overcall. It is possible that 7♦ is cold, and it is possible that 6♦ is a poor or hopeless contract, but the practical bid with the East cards is a majestic leap to 6♦. With the ♥K onside, that proves to be cold for +1370.

If West opens 1♣, that will silence most Norths – though a natural 3♣ overcall is possible if 1♣ promised only two cards in the suit. East will respond 1♦, West rebid 1NT, and East do whatever the system requires to set up a force before making a clear slam try in diamonds. The only real point in all of this will be to explore the possibility of a grand slam. At some point East will give up on that and settle for 6♦ when West fails to show any great enthusiasm for partner's efforts.

Board 24. None Vul. Dealer West

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

Unless the system includes a way to show an Acol two type in clubs, North should open 1♣ – a game-forcing 2♣ would be a bit of an overbid. East overcalls 1♥ and South, unless playing that a double denies four spades, is likely to pass. West raises to 2♥ and North can cuebid 3♥. That asks for a stopper – any general big hand would just double for take-out – so implies a long running club suit. South cannot oblige with a heart stopper, but does have some useful values. Rather than sign-off in 4♣, which partner might pass, South should therefore jump to 5♣. North may be tempted to go on to slam, but bidding on would be just a guess, and the wiser decision is to pass.

Assuming a heart lead, there should be one loser in each red suit, so just made for +400.

If East does not overcall, there is some possibility of getting to 3NT on the N/S cards, as South will respond 1♥ to the opening bid. If North rebids 3NT, will East find the killing heart lead? Or if North instead reverses into 2♦ and South bids 2NT, will West find a heart lead against an eventual 3NT contract?

Maybe East would find the heart lead, maybe not, but West will never find it. Three No Trump then, will not be a common contract, but there will be a few making +460 for a huge result. There will also be a few conceding –50, and that, of course, will not be so good, though they may be joined by one or two going down in 6♣.

Board 25. E/W Vul. Dealer North

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

N/S can make 2♠, E/W 2♣ or 1♦.

East will usually pass, the hand being a little empty for a 1NT opener and the hearts a little weak in such a balanced hand for a 1♥ opener. South will open 1♠ and West does not have quite enough for a vulnerable two-level overcall, particularly when facing a passed partner. Even if playing four-card majors, the North hand looks more like a simple spade raise than a 1NT response. Will either East or West bid over 2♠? It would be a bit scary for East to overcall 3♥, and the East hand lacks the shape for a take-out double, so he should surely pass, as will South. And West, vulnerable and with a potentially wasted ♠Q? He too will usually pass, so 2♠ will be the final contract.

Two Spades should be a comfortable make, with the play mostly centering on declarer's attempt to come to an overtrick. Although that can be prevented at double dummy, in practice I would think that a fair number will chalk up +140.

Board 26. All Vul. Dealer East

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

East has a weak two opening, and the South hand is strong enough to justify the use of Leaping Michaels, where a 4♦ overcall shows a good five-five or better in diamonds and hearts. While this is more committal regarding level than would be a take-out double or overcall, it is far more descriptive in terms of distribution and strength, hence the method's popularity at tournament level.

West should take the save in 4♠ now. This would cost –500 if someone doubled, but that is fine at Game All. More to the point, West's red suits strongly suggest that N/S will not choose to defend, being far more likely to take the push to the five level – which is perfect from West's perspective.

Though North would be happier if the king of spades was in a different suit, North has strong heart support plus length in partner's other suit, diamonds, and will probably go 5♥. South has a little to spare, so may be tempted to try slam, but North has bid under pressure so it is probably wiser to pass and settle for what should be a safe game.

It takes a diamond lead and continuation to beat 6♥, and good luck to any East who finds that defence, which id effectively impossible. Six Diamonds, meanwhile, is unbeatable. N/S will always play in hearts, I would imagine, and only if South becomes declarer is there a realistic possibility of a diamond lead.

There may be one or two making slams, but most N/Ss will be scoring +680, with a few +650s and +500s.

Board 27. None Vul. Dealer South

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

South will open 1♣ and West overcall 1NT. After a pass from North, East can use Stayman and find the four-four spade fit then raise to the spade game.

The cards could not lie much more favourably for E/W. Twelve tricks are possible in any of spades, diamonds or NT.

Not that anyone will play in a diamond contract, but making 12 tricks in that suit will require a trump reduction followed by trump coup to pick up North's trump holding. To make 12 tricks in NT, requires a red-suit squeeze against North – and that is after

spades have played for four tricks, hearts for two and clubs for two, with only the ace of hearts to be lost.

Plus 480 in 4♠ looks easily achievable and this should be the most common result. Plus 490 in 3NT will be a lot more challenging, so well done to anyone who manages that, though we might query what they were doing in 3NT rather than 4♠ in the first place.

Board 28. N/S Vul. Dealer West

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

If West opens a weak NT, North should come in with whatever bid he has in his methods to launch a hand with both majors. Say that that is 2♣, Landy. East would like to make an invitational bid to show his diamonds, and that can be achieved via Lebensohl. If an immediate 2♦ would be purely competitive, and a jump to 3♦ forcing, then bidding 2NT Lebensohl and following up with 3♦ over partner's forced 3♣ should be invitational – perfect! With a minimum opener, no great diamond fit, and wide open in spades, West will decline the invitation and leave partner to declarer 3♦, which should be made exactly.

More often, West will open 1♥ and North overcall 1♠. East is likely to bid 2♦ and South 2♠. That will go back to East, who has enough to bid again but not to force to game. He may compete with 3♦, or may make a take-out double. The winning action from West now is to pass and collect a penalty, but that is to do with only three low spades. More likely, West will bid a reluctant 3♦, and that will end the auction.

The key to making 3♦ is the fact that diamonds can be played for one loser by starting with the jack, as North's nine is picked up on the second round of the suit. Also, neither defender can afford to touch the club suit, as doing so would mean that declarer had no club loser.

That latter fact is an important part of the reason why E/W can also make 3♥, though few will play there. Declarer can establish the long diamonds and eventually use the ace of clubs as the late entry to cash them. The defenders can knock out that late entry, but at the price of giving declarer three club winners to go with four hearts and two other aces.