

Pepsi's choice *by Derrick Browne*

How should you play the following holding?

WEST	EAST
S KT542	S A763

First you should cash the ace, to preserve West's tenace (big cards with a gap between them, a possible finessing combination). When you do this, North follows suit with the jack while South contributes a low card.

You lead a second spade, with South playing low. Should you finesse the S10, hoping that South started with Q-x-x and North with a singleton, or should you play the SK, hoping that North started with Q-J doubleton?

It may seem that a singleton jack or doubleton Q-J are equally likely, as each represents one possible card holding. However, according to the Principle of Restricted Choice, with a singleton honour North has no choice what to play, whereas with Q-J doubleton, North would sometimes have played the SQ rather than the SJ, and this reduces the likelihood of that holding relative to the singleton honour.

Given that it is more likely that North's jack is a singleton rather than from doubleton Q-J, you should finesse to the S10. This will be successful roughly twice as often as playing for North to have Q-J doubleton.

Even mathematicians and statisticians struggle to grasp this theory. Some players find it helpful to think of the queen and jack collectively as "quacks". When the first round of spades was played, there were three relevant holdings from which North might have produced a quack. These are: singleton jack; singleton queen; doubleton queen-jack. Because there are two possible singleton holdings and only one doubleton holding, it is proportionately more likely that the honour was singleton.

If, like most, you still find this unfathomable, just accept that when the queen or jack appears, it is more likely to be singleton than from queen-jack doubleton.

Today's deal comes from this year's Cavendish Invitational Pairs, one of the world's big money events. Since the demise of New York's Cavendish Club in the 1990s, the event has been held in Las Vegas.

Dealer North, nil vul.

	NORTH	
	S 5	
	H QJ	
	D J87654	
	C T743	
WEST		EAST
S KT94		S AQ
H AK982		H T654
D T		D AKQ3
C AK8		C Q95
	SOUTH	
	S J87632	
	H 73	
	D 92	
	C J62	

Most East-West pairs played in hearts, making 12 tricks. After cashing one top heart from the West hand and seeing an honour appear from North, these players all knew that the odds suggested the honour was likely to be singleton, so they finessed on the second round. This was the time it didn't work, so they made only 12 tricks.

At one table, however, North opened 3D – a nauseatingly under-par pre-empt. If he wanted to stop his opponents finding their fit, he succeeded. East, Jacek Pszczola (known as Pepsi-Cola or Pepsi), bid 3NT and finished in 7NT.

Whereas the other declarers had played hearts immediately to draw trumps, Pepsi in a notrump contract faced no such urgency. South led the D9 and Pepsi took the first two diamond tricks then cashed the HA, noting the fall of North's queen. Rather than assume this was a singleton, Pepsi took time to find out more about the hand.

He unblocked the A-Q of spades, then cashed the A-K of clubs, the SK, and the CQ. What did he now know?

North had discarded on the second round of spades, meaning South, Zia Mahmood, had started with six of those. South had also shown up with three clubs and two diamonds, a total of 11 cards. Thus when South followed low to a second round of hearts, that was all 13 of his cards accounted for – he could not have the HJ. Pepsi confidently called for the HK, felling North's doubleton honour and claiming his grand slam.