

Leading to defeat *by Derrick Browne*

Often the fate of a contract is determined by the opening lead. This year's women's world champions, China, were trailing as they went into the fifth of six sessions of the semi-finals against France. Then this, the second board of the set, sent them to the lead:

Dealer East, NS vul.

NORTH
S 983
H A7
D 7
C AK96532

WEST
S T6542
H JT43
D AT
C T7

EAST
S AK
H 9652
D 95432
C Q8

SOUTH
S QJ7
H KQ8
D KQJ86
C J4

At both tables, South opened 1NT and North transferred to clubs. Over South's 3C, the Chinese North bid 4D, a splinter bid, showing a singleton or void in diamonds and interest in slam. The idea of a splinter is to help partner diagnose how well the hands fit and with wasted values in diamonds, South was quick to sign off in 5C. West led the HJ, taken by the ace. Declarer drew trumps in two rounds then cashed the K-Q of hearts, discarding the diamond from dummy, so only the two top spades were later lost.

At the other table, the French pair made control bids in the red suits so West found the spade lead. East won the ace then king of spades (reversing the normal order of play, to show a doubleton) then got West in with a diamond and ruffed the spade return, for two down.

There were similar swings on this deal in other matches. A few pairs managed to stop in the safe 3NT. The worst result was for the Polish Seniors pair who got overboard to 6C, three down.

Sometimes it is necessary to play the hand from a particular side to avoid the risk of a damaging lead. Here is a deal from the quarter-finals of the world championships. Most pairs made 12 or even 13 tricks in a heart contract played by North, after an auction like this one:

Dealer South, both vul.

NORTH
S A5
H AKQ98642
D K8
C 7

WEST
S Q94
H J
D J9753
C Q985

EAST
S JT63
H T3
D AQ42
C JT2

SOUTH
S K872
H 75
D T6
C AK643

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	<i>Hamman</i>		<i>Zia</i>
Pass	2C	Pass	3C
Pass	3H	Pass	3S
Pass	4H	Pass	5H
Pass	6H	All pass	

There are 12 top tricks so that was 1430 for USA. At the other table, the Netherlands had an artificial sequence where South bid hearts first then finished as declarer in 6H. This time West was on lead and pulled out a diamond; the lead was going "through" North's K-x so the defence took the first two tricks, for a swing of 17 IMPs to USA, who won the match 204-200 IMPs then went on to win the world championships. If West had not led a diamond – or if North had been declarer as at the other table (in which case it doesn't matter what is led) – then USA would not be the world champions.