

# Rick's Tricks

## THE BIGGER THEY ARE THE HARDER THEY FALL



By Rick Roeder

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One of the most epic sports stories in American history occurred in 1954. The high school basketball tournament format in Indiana then employed is virtually unheard of in 21st century America. Their post-season had no separate tourneys for schools of different enrollment sizes. One tournament for everybody. So, when tiny Milan High School (enrollment of 161) shocked much larger Muncie Central for the state championship, the feat was considered so extraordinary that their saga became the basis for a much-ballyhooed movie, "Hoosiers." (If truth be told, any movie with Dennis Hopper can't be bad!)

At age 19, I had my "Hoosiers moment" against Barry Crane in my very first regional I attended in South Bend. Unlike today, with many events on any given day of a regional, there was only 1 event for everybody on Saturday. The field count was massive, exceeding 500 pairs. My partner and I lurched into a 5 club contract which was doubled. +550 later, we were able to witness a scathing 2-minute diatribe by the legendary Crane directed at Chicago's Milt Rosenberg. A half century later, this remains one of my all-time bridge memories. Thank God there was no "zero tolerance" in 1971 because being a witness to such meltdown was nothing short of epic!!

Given the ACBL's direction in recent decades to have many, simultaneous tiered events, fewer chances exist for a lesser pair to have the singular joy I experienced in South Bend. As a result, I think some pairs are more intimidated when they go up against a "name" pair than in the day when no bifurcation existed. One byproduct from this lack of familiarity in playing against expert pairs is that people may be more likely to think that these experts, who they rarely play against, "walk on water." Let me assure you that this thought is a fallacy! Experts make fewer mistakes but they are SO far from perfect. To illustrate this point, let's take a look at a hand from Walt Schafer's invitational pairs.

First, a bidding problem for you in IMP pairs at no vulnerability.

YOU	LHO	PARD	RHO
Pass	Pass	1♥	1♠
?			

Holding ♠Qxx ♥xxx ♦Kxx ♣AQxx

I see 4 possible choices:

Showing a limit raise via a 2♠ call

Bidding 1NT (heavy)

Bidding 2NT (light with no heart honor and no double stopper)

Bidding a meek 2♥

Did you feel that my editorial comments were tilting you toward a limit raise? Psyche!!

A limit raise is a clear overbid. 4333 distributions are almost always worth a downgrade. Further, your ♠Q is not a proven offensive value and, to boot, Pard may well not have full values for a white, 3<sup>rd</sup> seat opener.

After reflection, I think a heavy 2♥ is fine, especially not vulnerable. My choice was the upscale 2NT—far from my proudest bid. Not as egregious an overbid as a limit raise but perhaps a misbid with 3 hearts and a soft spade stopper .

Pard bid 3NT and I received the ♠2 lead. Put yourself in the seat of the 1♠ overcaller and plan your defense.

DUMMY

♠xx

♥KQJxx

♦Axx

♣Kx

OVERCALLER

♠KJ1098

♥xx

♦QJx

♣Jxx

My RHO played “third hand high” with the King without hesitation. Do you concur?

Indeed, what is the advantage of playing the King? Suppose the overcaller plays me for my actual spade holding. Sure, you can take the first 3 spade tricks. Then what? You have no outside entry to cash your remaining two spades. Upon reflection, playing the ♠8 is a stronger play. Declarer becomes a cooked goose.

At trick 2, the overcaller played the ♠8. Regrettably, it was my turn to badly screw up. My play of the Queen was an understandable play – in matchpoints. But, in an IMP pair event, investing an extra 50 for another potential undertrick seems worthwhile. Upon reflection, the correct play is to give up on taking any Spade tricks and playing small at trick two. Now, the contract is colder than St. Paul in January. My questionable 2NT bid looks like pure, unadulterated genius and Helgemo might even ask for my autograph.

The following day, I remained upset at my inability to make the correct IMP play. Put it this way: If I were a Frenchman in 1940 with the mindset of my declarer play at trick 2, I would have supported the puppet Vichy government instead of joining the French Resistance.

When I have a failure, I always try to analyze where the wheels came off. While failure in bridge can be painful, repeating the same mistakes is nothing short of Shakespearean tragedy. I had not been playing great that session—definitely not my "A" game. (I fervently hope none of my past or current partners read this last comment. Their certain reaction: "Dude's got an "A" game?!?! ROFL!"). We all have situations where this happens, whether due to fatigue, a cold, job stress, financial stress, relationship stress or, pre-pandemic, closing down the piano bar the previous evening. It is important to adjust your bridge game accordingly.

When you do not have your "A" game, in golf parlance, it is OK to hit a 3 wood down the middle of the fairway so that you safely "lay up" in front of the green. Better recognition of my "limitations" this session would have resulted in a meek, but sound, 2♥ bid. I just wasn't up to making the Spade play that would have occurred on one of my good days.

So, next time, you play against a heralded pair: Be polite and suppress your laughter at their mistakes! ♣