

You Don't have To Be A Mathematician

My father always wanted me to be a doctor. I never really thought about becoming a lawyer until my last year of college, by which time I had failed several chemistry courses, and just slid by in math class. I was not getting into medical school. But the prospects of three years of law school, instead of three years in Viet Nam, was a no brainer. I still cannot work out quadratic equations and have found no reason to in my adult life, I still don't know how you can have a square root of a negative number. But I do know some basic percentages, and I do know that sometimes you can get an extra chance, for free, if you know how to take it. Everyone understands free.

My long-time partner Denis is a mathematician and a math teacher. He knows all the odds and is a pretty good bridge player because of it. But the computer hands drove him nuts because the usual percentages simply do not apply. He quit playing because of the computer hands.

So let's talk odds. A finesse works about fifty per cent of the time, if there is not information from the bidding or play that would lead you the surmise that it would not work. A suit splits 3/3 just about one third of the time. So if you have a choice, you would take the finesse.

But what if you could do both?

Take this hand from the December Bulletin, Challenge of the month.

A 6 2
J 2
A 5
A 8 6 5 4 3

K 7 5 4
A 9
K 8 3
Q J 10 9

You get to 6 clubs, and West leads the Jack of Diamonds. You take stock. 11 winners off the top. They did not lead hearts, so you are in no immediate

danger of a heart loser. If the club finesse works, you are home. 50%. Can you do better? Well, if you can set up the fourth spade for a heart discard, you can ditch your heart loser. The problem is that you have to lose a spade to make this work. And then a heart will come back. But if you try the club finesse first, and it doesn't work, it is too late to try the spades.

One thing is certain. If the club finesse will work at trick two, it will work later in the hand. If a particular card can move from side to side during the game, you are in the wrong game. So it cannot be wrong to try the spades first. Of course, you had the foresight to win the first diamond in dummy so, you can get to your hand to cash the last spade. You play ace, king and a third spade, everyone follows, and back comes a heart. You don't need the finesse any longer. So you play the queen and hope West covers, but when he doesn't, you pop the ace, come back to your hand in diamonds, and toss a heart on the small spade. They get the king of clubs, which was in the East hand all the time.

You don't have to be a math major to understand free chances.