293. Until I Saw the Eight

Playing online in a speedball IMP-pairs game against two self-proclaimed experts, I hold:

♠ A K 9 4   ♡ K Q J 2   ◇ 9 3 2   ♣ J 7

At favorable vulnerability, I am the dealer. Our notrump range is 14-16 points. In this form of scoring, I see no reason to deviate from **one notrump**. West, on my left passes, and partner jumps to **three notrump**, ending a short auction:

South	West	North	East
1NT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

West leads the eight of clubs and partner puts down an 11-count:

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              ♠ J 6
              ♡ A 9 8
              ◇ Q J 8 7
              ♣ K 5 3 2
♣8 led
              ♠ A K 9 4
              ♡ K Q J 2
              ◇ 9 3 2
              ♣ J 7
```

I have six tricks on top and will need some good fortune in the minor suits. The first piece of luck occurs when East inserts the ♣10 on the opening lead. I win the jack, and start on diamonds. On the ◇2, West plays the ◇10, dummy the jack and East the king. A club is returned to West's ace, and West plays the ♣9 to dislodge dummy's king, East discarding the ♠2.

The fall of the ◇10 makes it safe to knock out the ◇A, but if West holds that card, as seems likely from his ♣9, he will have two clubs to cash which will leave me one down. Spades represent the only other chance for a ninth trick. East's early discard implies a five-card suit, so I will at least have the odds in my favor. I call for the jack of spades, East covers with the queen, and I win the king as West drops the eight.

When finessing against two cards with distribution unknown, the odds are one in four or 25%. If my assumption from East's spade discard is correct, the spades are divided 5-2. That increases my odds to above 60%. Now that the queen has shown up in the East hand, the odds in favor of the

♠9 finesse are even better—two to one, perhaps three to one. But that was all before I saw the eight of spades. If that card is honest, West appears to have started with the ♠108. On the other hand, the eight of spades in this context is an obligatory false card. I check West's classification—he claims to be an expert. I also check his partner, who also claims to be an expert. I am not so sure.

I cash three hearts ending in dummy, East discarding a diamond. I call for the six of spades. East plays the three. There are now two real possibilities: ♠108 or 87. The first one is forced; the other one requires West to be on the top of his game. I decide to play the ace, and the 10 comes down. I have nine tricks.

The full deal:

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              ♠ J 6
              ♡ A 9 8
              ◇ Q J 8 7
              ♣ K 5 3 2
♠ 10 8                      ♠ Q 7 5 3 2
♡ 10 7 6 5                  ♡ 4 3
◇ A 10                      ◇ K 6 5 4
♣ A Q 9 8 4                 ♣ 10 6
              ♠ A K 9 4
              ♡ K Q J 2
              ◇ 9 3 2
              ♣ J 7
```

An early discard is often from a five-card suit. This was later supported when East showed up with doubletons in hearts and clubs.

Without a read of the spade distribution, the initial odds of winning three tricks were 25%. That percentage increased on the assumption that the suit was breaking five-two.

It is invaluable to know the level of expertise of your opponents. My experience on BBO is that players are quite likely to overstate their prowess. There are other factors: 8 from 108 is forced; 8 from 8x is a good play. Actually, the 8 should be automatic in either case, but it was a speedball game and the hour was late. Even BBO "experts" may be fixed by their circumstances.