

352. Empty Spaces

Playing the first board of a pairs' event at the Bill Quinn Labor Day sectional against top-flight opponents, I hold:

♠ K 4 ♡ J ◇ A J 6 4 ♣ A 10 8 7 6 4

East, on my right, deals and opens **one club**. I have nothing to do for the moment, so I pass. West also passes, and partner balances with **one heart**. East passes. Partner's balancing bid shows the approximate values of an overcall. I have a full opener and a useful card in partner's suit, but I don't think I can do better than **two notrump**. Partner thinks a moment and raises to **three notrump**. Everyone passes. The full auction:

West	North	East	South
—	—	1♣	Pass
Pass	1♡	Pass	2NT
3NT	All Pass		

West leads the two of spades and partner puts down an eleven-count with a void in my best suit.

♠ J 10 8 6
♡ A K 9 6 5
◇ K 10 8 3
♣ —

♠2 led

♠ K 4
♡ J
◇ A J 6 4
♣ A 10 8 7 6 4

I try the ♠J from the board, and East wins the ace and shifts to the ♣2. The eight pushes the ♣J and the ♣5 is returned to East's queen and my ace.

If I can find the queen of diamonds, I will have eight tricks and the ninth will have to come from the endgame. Entries are a concern and my solution is to rely on the fourth round of diamonds. I cross to the king of diamonds and successfully finesse the jack, as both defenders follow. I can afford to give up a heart trick, so I lead the jack of hearts and let it ride to East's queen. East exits with the queen of diamonds, which I win with the ace, as West throws a spade.

There is no future in clubs, and it appears that I may be down to dropping the ten of hearts. I cash the king of spades, and enter dummy with the ◇8. Both defenders discard clubs. On the ace of hearts, the three and four appear from the defenders. This is what I see:

♠ 10
♡ K 9
◇ —
♣ —

♠ —
♡ —
◇ —
♣ 10 8 7

On the last two diamonds, West discarded a spade and a club. Undoubtedly, she is no longer in touch were her partner in clubs, and is down to the queen of spades and two hearts. This allows me to delay my decision by exiting with a spade to her queen. As expected, she plays the seven of hearts. If I finesse and East has the ten, I will be down two. But it is certain that she started with four hearts and East with three. One of East's three was the queen, leaving West with four empty spaces to East's two. The odds are two to one that West has the ten. I insert the nine of hearts and it holds for my ninth trick.

The full deal:

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

When partner balances, a jump to two notrump shows the equivalent of a trap pass with a sound opening bid.

In the end position, there were three reasons to finesse the ♡9 as opposed to playing for the drop: the percentages favored it; there was little to lose from going down an extra trick when most of the field was playing a part score; and the psychological boost from making a strip-throw-in at the outset of a pairs' session.