

HAND 16

SUGGESTED BIDDING

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
Pass	7♥	Double	Pass
Pass	Pass		

DLR: WEST

NORTH

♠ A K Q
♥ A K Q J 10 9
♦ —
♣ A K Q J

WEST

♠ J 9 8 7 6
♥ —
♦ 8 7 6
♣ 10 9 8 7 6

EAST

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

SOUTH

♠ 10 5 4 3 2
♥ —
♦ 5 4 3 2
♣ 5 4 3 2

	N	
W		E
	S	

DECLARER: NORTH
OPENING LEAD: ♦ A by East

Suggested Auction

When things look too good to be true, they usually are. If you ever pick up a hand like that held by North, you should probably be suspicious . . . especially after you have read the story about the hand. Still, if you were dealt this hand, you'd probably expect to take all the tricks with hearts as the trump suit, even if partner has nothing. Open with what you think you can make, a grand slam in hearts. If you are a duplicate player, you might want to take your time and open with a strong two-bid. If partner has the ♦ A, you would want to reach the slightly higher-scoring contract of 7NT.

As North, you might be surprised to hear East double your 7♥ contract. Perhaps East has the ♦ A and is expecting to take a trick with it. You might even redouble.

East will be quite surprised to hear North bid a grand slam in hearts. The astonishment shouldn't prevent East from making a penalty double, since East knows the heart suit is breaking badly for declarer . . . very badly. If that wasn't the case, of course, there would be no story behind the hand.

Suggested Opening Lead

East has an easy choice of leads against a heart contract. East would start with the ♦A, not caring too much whether or not it wins a trick.

Play of the Hand

As you are likely to have discovered by now, if you have played the hand, it is a disaster for North-South. In a heart contract, North can take no more than six tricks. East keeps leading diamonds at every opportunity and North never gets a trick with any of the high cards in spades or clubs.

In fact, North-South can't make even a game contract. Seeing all the hands, the best the partnership can do is make a contract of 3♠ or 4♣. Not what one would expect with all those high cards.

Defense

There's nothing that needs to be said on the defenders' behalf. Before congratulating each other on the large penalty they are likely to collect, perhaps it's time for the complete story . . .

The Story Behind the Hand

This is the notorious 'Mississippi Heart Hand' and it dates from the days of whist. An equivalent version was published by Edmond Hoyle—of 'According to Hoyle' fame—in 1747, and the modern version was published in 1804 by Thomas Matthews.

The hand was well known among Mississippi river boat gamblers during the Civil War period. They would try to convince an unsuspecting North to make a heavy bet on taking at least seven tricks with hearts as trumps. Of course, the hand is specially set up so that North can never make more than six tricks with hearts as trumps.

The hand was also popular with the professional cheaters in the days of bridge whist when there was no limit to the number of times a player could double or redouble. Even in a low-stake game, the doubling and redoubling could lead to an enormous sum being wagered on whether North could take a seventh trick. It's rumored that Charles Schwab, a wealthy financier and the president of the New York Whist Club, was duped out of \$10,000 on this hand.

The hand is another illustration of the tremendous effect that distribution can play in the outcome of a hand (see also Hand #5). When you are looking at a good hand and everyone else at the table is bidding up a storm, it's probably because the distribution is wild. Don't be too shy about bidding more when you hold a very distributional hand, and don't be too quick to double the opponents on high cards alone. Most importantly, be cautious when you are offered that 'sure' bet . . . especially if you're on a river boat steaming along the Mississippi!