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Winsome & Loathsome

Tales of the Trail

The right combination

The next time you are tempted to describe your partner as maniacal, try a term that is more genteel — like optimistic, sanguine or enthusiastic. My own favorite is eupeptic. First of all, nobody knows what it means. (It means optimistic or sanguine and originally was related to good digestion.) I must have picked it up somewhere — perhaps a grade school spelling bee — and I've flaunted it ever since. Second, the word has a peppy sound. Many of my partners are wildly aggressive bidders. Thinking of them as "eupeptic" seems to settle my churning stomach. Keeping cool is essential in desperate situations.

For example, I opened a 15-17 1NT and my eupeptic partner, holding:

♠K J 3 2 ♥J 9 4 ♦A 6 5 ♣A K 8

went straight to 6NT. I held:

♠A Q 9 ♥A 7 5 2 ♦K 7 4 ♣Q 10 5.

The combined hands held 31 high-card points. In my experience, even 33 HCP without some source of tricks is not a favorite to produce a slam. Nonetheless, adding the right 2 HCP to the mix would have improved my chances substantially.

As things stood, I could count 10 top tricks. I might create an 11th in the heart suit, if, say, honor-10 doubleton was on my left; still not good enough. So, explore with me that anemic-looking heart suit. Have a Tums. Do you see any card combination that would generate three heart tricks? How about if the suit is distributed as follows:

♥ Q 10 ♥ J 9 4
♥ K 8 6 3
♥ A 7 5 2

You can lead low toward dummy. If West rises with the queen, you can go to dummy and lead the jack, smothering the 10 — but that's only two tricks. You can study card combinations religiously, but sometimes you simply have to visualize what will work. Make a change; take the queen from West and give it to East, then take the 8 from East and give it to West. Will that do anything?

Well, let's see. West now holds 10-8 opposite East's K-Q-6-3. Lead the ♥ 2 toward dummy: ♥ 8 from West, ♥ 9 from dummy, ♥ Q from East. Win the return in dummy and lead the ♥ J. If East covers, you play your ace, pinning the 10, and you hold the 7-5 over East's 6-3. If East ducks, so do you and the 10 is smothered and you again hold a tenace over East (A-7 over K-3). You have just found the magic card combination that justifies your partner's eupeptic bidding. You won't find that combination listed on most card combination charts. Sometimes you have to visualize the layout you need, and play for it.

This is another intrafinesse, a genre I described last month. Intra means within or between. An intrafinesse involves visualizing layers and finessing between those layers. It

always involves pinning a key card on the second round of the suit. That oughta be clear as mud.

Last month, we discussed the percentage play with card combinations missing the queen. Let's try some missing the king. Neil Rechtman's intriguing political novel *The Twenty Eighth Amendment* has a bridge-playing protagonist with a mysterious proclivity for singleton spade kings. You will do better to rely on a card combo chart.

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| 1. Q-J-10-9-8-7 | A-6-5-4-3 |
| 2. A-Q-4-3 | J-7-6-5 |
| 3. A-Q-9-5-4 | J-7-6-2 |
| 4. A-Q-9-8-7 | J-5-4-3-2 |
| 5. A-Q-9-8 | J-4-3-2 |

ANSWERS:

- Lead the queen, but play the ace regardless (unless you have a reason). The odds are 13 to 12 against finessing when missing only the K-x.
- Lead low to the queen, hoping for K-x outside.
- Lead low to the queen.
- Lead the jack and finesse if LHO plays low. Leading the jack caters to K-10-x outside and costs nothing.
- Lead the jack and run it if LHO plays low. If the jack wins or if LHO covers with the king, next finesse the 9 or the 8. This line picks up K-10-x or K-10-x-x outside, the best you can do without being a great guesser.

Sharon joins me in wishing you a happy and healthful New Year! May your troubles be small, your slams grand, and your outlook unflinchingly eupeptic! □