

The 2018 Open Pairs Championship

by Raymond S P Chow

10 October 2018

Barney Lui and Rocky Tam won the 2018 HKCBA Open Pairs Championship. Terence Chan and William C K Chan finished second. Baron Ng and Tony Lau came third. For the first time in the HKCBA's tournament history as far as I can recall, the winners were offered prize money by the event's new naming sponsor.

I am very grateful to the winners Barney Lui and Rocky Tam for providing me with some interesting hands upon my request. It doesn't surprise me that they are such brilliant players, world class even, after having read their analyses and been shared their thoughts. It surprises me a little that they are so humble and polite. They attributed all their success to luck. Luck plays a part, but winning requires a lot more than just luck. I foresee they will be a big part in Hong Kong's future, and sky is their limit.

Let's look at Board 22 from the second round of the Open Pairs final. The deal was first brought to my attention by John Tsang who made 3NT from the west seat on a diamond lead.

22/W/EW

♠J874	
♥Q1085	
♦J63	
♣84	
♠Q32	♠K5
♥J62	♥K973
♦AK	♦10952
♣AJ1063	♣K75
♠A1096	
♥A4	
♦Q874	
♣Q92	

The computer says east-west have only 8 tricks in notrump. That's an obvious result if north leads a spade. The computer also says that east is also limited to 8 tricks. So a spade lead is not absolutely necessary.

It's not an easy job making 3NT. It seems that defending against 3NT is even more difficult. That's why all the 4 declarers in 3NT make 9 or 10 tricks. If west starts by cashing all his minor suit winners (guessing right in clubs of course), the defence is under pressure, and will find it hard to keep the correct cards. This is the 7-card ending:

♠J87	
♥Q108	
♦J	
♣-	
♠Q32	♠K5
♥J62	♥K97
♦-	♦109
♣3	♣-
	♠A109
	♥A4
	♦Q8
	♣-

When west plays his last club, the north player at John's table chooses to discard a spade. East discards a heart, and south is squeezed! Whatever south discards, west can come to 9 tricks*. This is exactly what happens at John's table. North of course should have discarded a heart. Dummy throws a heart and south can now afford a spade. What follows may lead to a very rare defensive squeeze! Let's take a look.

(I'll dot the "i"s and cross the "t"s. The 6 cards south must keep are 2 spades, 2 hearts, and 2 diamonds. If south discards even one diamond, say the DQ, declarer can see the defence has only 4 tricks and can safely endplay NS into opening up hearts. Declarer can play a spade to the K now. The defence cannot play hearts, and can only return a spade. They can cash a diamond but declarer can afford a heart.

What if south keeps 4 spades and 2 hearts? Surely, declarer can read that, and can counter accordingly. He sees that the defence may be able to score 3 spades, a diamond and a heart. The simple line is to shut north out and allow south to win 3 spades. South is endplayed in hearts. The interesting line is to go after hearts himself: H2 to the H10, HQ and HA. South cannot attack spades from his side and can only return a heart to establish a heart winner for declarer. If north does not cash the DJ now and returns a spade instead, declarer puts up dummy's SK. The SQ provides an entry to the good heart. If north cashes the DJ, declarer can afford a spade. Now here is an interesting ending. North returns a spade, and dummy puts up the SK. South can elect to duck this and watch declarer score his 9th trick with dummy's D10, or win the SA and allow declarer to score the SQ and HJ. It's head declarer wins and tail the defence loses.)

In the above 7-card ending, west plays his last club. North's correct defence is to discard a heart. East does the same. South pitches a spade. West now leads a spade to east's K and south's A. In turn, south's correct defence is to underlead a diamond to north's J and north returns a spade. The defence has 5 tricks: 2 spades and 1 heart (or 1 spade and 2 hearts) and 2 diamonds.

Let's say south errs by not underleading a diamond. Say he returns a spade. West wins SQ and exits with a spade hoping to endplay NS into yielding a heart trick at this 4-card ending:

♠J		
♥Q10		
♦J		
♣-		
♠3	♠-	
♥J62	♥K9	
♦-	♦109	
♣-	♣-	
	♠-	
	♥A4	
	♦Q8	
	♣-	

West's S3 is headed by north's SJ. Dummy (east) is squeezed in broad daylight! If east discards a heart, south discards a diamond. If east discards a diamond, south discards a heart. A simple positional squeeze, except that it is dummy that is squeezed in open view.

But we are not here to talk about 3NT making or not. We are here to see how the eventual winners Barney Lui and Rocky Tam score a cold top in 2S doubled!

This is the bidding at their table, with Rocky Tam and Barney Lui sitting north and south:

West	North	East	South
		P	1NT
X	2H	X	2S
X	P	P	P

1NT is 10 to 13. 2H is escape with possibly 4-4 in majors. East-west's doubles thereafter are penalty suggesting.

Against 2S doubled by south, west starts with the K and A of diamonds, an obvious doubleton. East follows with 2 and 5, and declarer 7 and 8 (hiding the D4 and muddying east's possible suit preference signal). West shifts to the H6, H10, HK and HA. Declarer goes to dummy with the HQ to play a small spade: S4, S5, S9, SQ. (It doesn't help if east rises with the SK.) West returns H2 to H5, H7, and declarer trumps with the S6. The SA next brings down east's K. This is the 6-card ending with declarer (south) on lead:

	♠J8	
	♥8	
	♦J	
	♣84	
♠3		♠-
♥-		♥9
♦-		♦109
♣AJ1063		♣K75
	♠10	
	♥-	
	♦Q4	
	♣Q92	

Declarer now plays the D4. What do you think west plays?

So far, west has 3 chances to shift to a club (trick 2/3/6), and he hasn't done so. He is obviously under the impression that declarer has the CK. When declarer now plays the D4, west is still under the illusion that declarer has the CK. He sees that if he trumps, he is endplayed in clubs. Hoping that his partner has the DQ, west discards instead of ruffing. 2S doubled makes by the skin of the teeth. A clear top nonetheless.

Let us come back to the above 6-card ending. Can you see the winning line? Sure, you can say by the process of elimination (can play neither clubs nor diamonds), declarer's only choice is a trump. But can you see the path to 4 tricks BY MERIT rather than seeing nothing better to do? Well, Barney Lui can, and has come up with the following beautiful analysis.

Declarer has scored 4 tricks so far. He can see 4 more tricks in 2 spades and 2 diamonds, but blockage and entry problem prevent declarer from scoring them. Barney's solution is brilliant.

The club honours must be split. Barney is also confident that east's distribution is 2-4-4-3. By going to table with the SJ and cashing the S8, east is squeezed in all 3 suits! What's more, west is subjected to a single-suit endplay! What a way to navigate around the blockage.

On the SJ, east can afford a small club, but what is he going to discard on dummy's last spade? Clearly, a heart or a diamond is tantamount to conceding. So a club it is, but which club?

A small club? Declarer discards a small club also, trusting east is down to a bare honour. Dummy's DJ is cashed and a club is led. East can win his CK (west cannot overtake) and cash his heart winner, but he becomes declarer's stepping-stone to the contract-going DQ.

The CK? Declarer discards DQ, cashes the DJ, and plays a club, covering east's club as cheaply as possible. West is endplayed into giving south a club trick.

West has obviously defended on the assumption that declarer has the CK. Otherwise, two rounds of clubs and a diamond ruff will easily defeat the contract. I will "reconstruct" the hand, exchanging east's CK with south's CQ and see how things can turn out.

♠J874
 ♥Q1085
 ♦J63
 ♣84
 ♠Q32 ♠K5
 ♥J62 ♥K973
 ♦AK ♦10952
 ♣AJ1063 ♣Q75
 ♠A1096
 ♥A4
 ♦Q874
 ♣K92

Take a good look at that west hand. It's under the threat of being endplayed all the time. We have already seen that a heart shift at trick 3 will not do. What about a trump shift?

Say west shifts to a small spade at trick 3: S2, S4, SK, SA. Declarer plays back a spade. West wins the SQ and returns S3. Do they look like they are playing ping-pong?

Now declarer wins in dummy. He can see 7 tricks: 3 spades, a ruff in either hand, the HA, and 2 diamonds. It's not so difficult to establish a heart trick with that combination. Just guess the (presumably split) heart honours, shutting east out of the lead (to prevent a club through) in the process.

If east has HJ and west HK, play the H10. Dummy's HQ will become your 8th trick. More likely, east has HK and west HJ. Play the HQ. Dummy's H10 will be established in due course.

So a small spade doesn't do the job. What if west returns a devilish SPADE QUEEN at trick 3? South may win, and east will have an entry in the SK to give west a diamond ruff. But of course, if west can return a double-dummy SQ, declarer can counter by ducking! You still cannot beat 2S.

May as well return a club at trick 3, in the hope of finding partner with the CK.

But wait! From west's standpoint, if declarer has the CK, east can have the CQ. Now, since west is endplayed anyway, why not give declarer a club trick early instead? If west plays the CJ at trick 3 to declarer's CK, east has an entry in the CQ to give west a diamond ruff! The defence will have 5 tricks. Play passive from then on and a heart trick will come. One down. The conclusion is, west should shift to CJ at trick 3 no matter what. (Finally, the club suit lay-out warrants study. Try changing the spot cards and you may come up with a west hand that is subject to a single-suit squeeze endplay. Say, give west AJ1092 and east K87.)

We normally only see this kind of ending in books. Excellent analysis by Barney Lui.

We will look at more Open Pairs hands in my next article, for now I have to do some follow-up work on last column's "crucial deal".

A week after the September 25 article was posted, I found out from Steve Wong in a chat group that there was a twist regarding the "crucial deal" I reported. According to Steve, the open room play finished 2 boards earlier than the close room. The deal is repeated here for your convenience.

W/All ♠AK62
♥QJ7
♦1076
♣Q62
♠J98 ♠104
♥98 ♥AK64
♦QJ5 ♦AK82
♣KJ874 ♣A95
 ♠Q753
 ♥10532
 ♦943
 ♣103

So, Bubble Ho and Gordon Ho, sitting north-south in the open room, had to wait anxiously for the close room proceedings to unravel. They knew they had a result that could win a vulnerable game swing on the last board and with it a semifinal berth, but they needed their teammates Charmian Koo and Flora Wong to make 3NT to make it happen. Of course we know by now that Charmian and Flora delivered, at the crucial moment. But Charmian and Flora wouldn't want to take credit. They cited Bubble's pass as the cause for the winning swing.

Thanks to Steve for straightening out the facts.

There is one more lovely deal from the Asian Games that I wouldn't want to miss sharing with you, in case you haven't seen it. It was again Bubble Ho who authored this little gem of a play*. It was Board #9 in the 3rd segment of the Super Mixed Teams' final.

N/EW ♠9763
♥KJ95
♦1052
♣A4
♠Q8 ♠AK1052
♥643 ♥Q72
♦86 ♦J9
♣J108652 ♣Q73
 ♠J4
 ♥A108
 ♦AKQ743
 ♣K9

West	North	East	South
	P	1S	X
P	2H	P	3D
P	3S	P	4H
P	P	P	

Bubble was north, and he became declarer in 4H. The defence started with 3 rounds of spades. Bubble ruffed with dummy's H10 and simply played a low heart from both hands. East won the HQ, but that was the last trick for the defence.

This neat manoeuvre did not escape the attention of the tournament daily bulletin editors. This is an excerpt from the August 30 daily bulletin:

".....China Hong Kong reached a very good contract (4H)....East led two top spades and continued the suit, forcing dummy to ruff with the H10. From here, there was nothing the defence could do as the trumps were 3-3. Declarer's next move was to run the H8. When east took the queen, it was all over.....China Hong Kong +420....."

The reason I bring this deal up is that the bulletin editors did not name names. I feel Bubble Ho deserves an honourable mention.

The bulletin editors, though, analysed it well. 4H is a very good contract. On the surface, the 6-3 fit 5D appears to be superior. But on the same spade lead and continuation, 5D is reduced to relying on trumps breaking 2-2, a 40 percent chance. On the other hand, 4H makes on any 3-3 heart break (36%) plus one-third of all 4-2 heart breaks (16%, that of HQ doubleton). Actually, if 3 rounds of spades are led, 4H is cold unless hearts break worse than 4-2, or east has Qxxx of hearts in addition to his AK10xx of spades, AND defended correctly.

Anyway, that was very well handled by Bubble Ho.

*I kept mentioning Bubble but not Gordon. To put the record straight, they are both top-notch. A brilliant Gordon Ho manoeuvre came to mind. At love all, holding nothing but AKJ10xxx clubs, he bid 3NT (!) opposite his partner's weak 2 opening. This tactical manoeuvre silenced everybody. He went 7 down for -350, but his opponents were cold for 7S! (Don't bother trying to work out how much 3NT 7 down doubled costs. 4C doubled would cost 800.)