

Eric Rodwell with Mark Horton

DEFENSE

DECLARER

THE RODWELL FILES

SECRETS OF A BRIDGE CHAMPION

DOs and DON'TS



THE RODWELL FILES

SECRETS OF A BRIDGE CHAMPION

Eric Rodwell with Mark Horton

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	11
INTRODUCTION	12
How the Book is Organized	13
Who Should Read This Book?	13
PART 1 — THE BUILDING BLOCKS	15
Chapter 1: Some Basic Ideas	16
Cashing Solid Tricks	16
Promoting High Cards	18
Establishing Small Cards	19
Finesses	20
Ruffing Finesses	25
Ruffing Losers in the Hand with Shorter Trumps	26
Trump Control	26
Crossruff and Dummy Reversal	29
Basic Defensive Ideas	31
Chapter 2: The Basics of Advanced Cardplay	38
Eliminations and Throw-ins	38
Squeeze Play	42
Chapter 3: Tools for Analyzing a Hand	53
Counting Losers	53
Counting Winners	58
Counting the Hand	60
Assume the Best — or the Worst	64
A Short Math Break	65
Trick Packages	75
Chapter 4: Making Your Plan	79
The Basics	79
Defogging — More on the Thought Process	85

Chapter 5: Declarer Play	106
The Entry or K.O. Fly	106
The Entry Overtake	108
The Exposing Overtake	109
The Re-entry Unblock	111
The Chinese High Card Promotion	111
Playing High as Declarer	115
The Finesse through Safety	118
The Finesse through Danger	122
The Crossover Stopper	123
The Rodwellian Intrafinesse	124
The Intrasquash	128
The Sky Marshal Finesse	129
The Martellian Squash	130
The Speed of Lightning Play	132
The Notrump Fork	135
Cash and Thrash	138
Ducking Plays for Declarer	142
Block Ducking	144
The 322/1/6 Super Duck	145
The Trump Promotion Prevention Duck	146
Shortshake	147
The Running Suit Eradication Endplay	149
The Freeze-passing Endplay	150
The Lunar Menace Access Squeeze	151
Intent to Deceive (the Lair Play)	153
Chapter 6: Defense	154
Gouging	154
Days of Thunder	156
Suit Suffocation Play	160
Protecting a Minor Tenace	161
The Left Jab	162
The 007 Play — License to Kill	165
Ruffing Declarer's Loser	167
Unblocking for a Pusher	168
The Unblocking Concession	169
Middling	169
The Reese Play	170
The Morton's Fork Concession	172

The Empty Signal	174
Cashing the Imputed Trump Ace to Ask for a Ruff	175
Clarifying the Lead of an Unsupported Honor	177
Bait-and-Switch	178
Option-removing Pseudo-squeeze	179

PART 3 — DEFENSIVE STRATEGIES 181

Chapter 7: Trump Contracts	182
Tapping the Dummy	182
To Ruff or Not to Ruff	186
Accurate Forcing Defense when Defender Has Axxx of Trumps Versus a 5-3 Fit	193
Chapter 8: Foiling Declarer	197
Defending against a Possible Endplay	197
Countering a Holdup Play	216
Obligatory Falsecards	219
Chapter 9: Countering a Menacing Side Suit	226
When Declarer Has Entry Trouble	226
Defending with a Long Side Suit in Dummy	231

PART 4 — COUNTER-INTUITIVE DEFENSE 241

Chapter 10: Reasons to Play Second Hand High	242
Passing the Freeze	242
Unblocking	243
Not Letting Them Slip a Trick Through Before the Rats Get At It...	244
The Left Jab	245
Preventing a Cheap Finesse	245
Killing an Entry	248
Danger Hand High	249
Preserving Partner's Entry	254
Creating a Losing Option	255
Preventing an Opponent from Executing an Endplay Duck	258
The Intrapop	259
Appearing to Have Shortness	260
Countering a 4-4 Fit	261
Promoting a Trump	262
Protecting Partner's Honor(s)	263

Chapter 11: Reasons Not to Play Third Hand High	265
Futility	265
Preserving Communications	266
Tempting Declarer to Win and Leave Open Communications	268
Retaining a Major Tenace	272
Making a Withholding Play	273
Finessing against Dummy	275
Chapter 12: Reasons to (Abnormally) Play an Honor	277
Danger Hand High	277
Creating a Losing Option	278
You Want to Win a Trick from Your Side of the Table	280
Not Letting Them Slip Through a Ruffing Finesse	280
Preventing a Later Ruffing Finesse against Yourself	281
Pinning the Opposition in the Wrong Hand	281
Endplay Prevention Cover	283
Preventing a Goldman Trump Finesse	284
Chapter 13: Reasons for Ducking a Winner	285
Making a Holdup Play	285
Hoping Partner Can Win It	286
Waiting for Clarification	286
Creating a Guess in the Establishment of a Semi-solid Suit	287
Ducking to Create a Guess	288
Concealing the Position of a High Card	289
Capitalizing on Short-Short	292
Chapter 14: Reasons for Leading an Unsupported Honor	293
Leading a Pusher	293
Pinning a Card in a Short Suit	294
Waiting for a Signal	296
Planning a Follow-up	297
The Deschappelles Coup	298
The Merrimac Coup	299
Blocking a Suit	301
Gouging	302
Deceiving Declarer	303
Protecting Partner's Cards	304
Preventing a Ducking Play	305
Clarifying the Lead	306
Protecting Your High Card	307
Cashing Tricks in the Right Order	308

Chapter 15: Reasons for Leading into a Tenace	309
Setting Up a Force	309
Breaking Up the Entries for a Squeeze	310
Taking Out an Entry Prematurely	311
Pretending to Have a Singleton	313
Preserving Your Own Position	314

PART 5 — THE DOs AND DON'Ts OF CARDPLAY **315**

Chapter 16: The DOs of Cardplay	316
1. Count HCP's, Shape, Winners and Losers	316
2. Reconstruct <i>Both</i> Unseen Hands	319
3. Pay Attention to Negative Inferences from Earlier Plays and/or Bidding	320
4. Check Your Work for Errors — Do It <i>Twice</i>	321
5. Anticipate Possible Snags	324
6. Check Out a Minor Option Before Taking the Main Line	329
7. Look for the Possibility of a Dummy Reversal	332
8. Use the Defogging Questions when Your Analysis Gets Bogged Down	335
9. Make Sure You Are Aware when the Play Follows a Tightrope	337
10. Keep Up with the Facts as They Become Available and Restock Regularly	338
11. Make Sure You Register Information as it Becomes Available	339
12. Be Alert to the Need for a Change of Tack	341
13. Trust the Opponents' Carding	344
14. Notice and Take Correct Inferences from Surprising Actions by an Opponent	344
15. Look for Ways to Create a False Impression in the Mind of an Opponent	345
16. Prepare Your Falsecards	348
17. Lead Toward High Cards to Prevent Them Being Ruffed Out	349
18. Cash Your Tricks Before the Opponent(s) Can Discard in a Suit and Subsequently Ruff Your Winners	350
19. Routinely Unblock Spotcards	351
20. Be Alert for Situations Where One of the Opponents Can Be Cut Off	355
21. Be Alert for Unusual Types of Holdup Play	357
22. Be Alert for (Perhaps Unusual) Ducking Plays	360
23. Try to Neutralize the Opponents' Winners	362

24. Always Consider Partner's Problems on Defense	363
25. View the Play from the 'Danger Hand' Perspective	366
26. Try to Figure Out Why an Opponent Is Playing a Hand in a Certain Way	367
27. Be Prepared for a Play	368
28. Watch for Situations where Communication Problems Exist, or Could be Made to Exist	369
29. Always Consider the Merits of Passive Play	370
30. Be Prepared to Make an Attacking Shift if the Situation Demands It	372

Chapter 17: The DON'Ts of Cardplay **375**

1. Don't Take Speculation as Fact	375
2. Don't Mire Your Thought Processes in Speculation Once Facts Are Available	376
3. Don't Make a Play in a Crucial Suit Before All Possible Information Is Obtained	376
4. Don't Strip Out Your Side's Suit as a Defender	379
5. Don't Forget to Use Trick Packages in Your Analysis	380
6. Don't Lose Your Train of Thought	382
7. Don't Succumb to Emotional Prejudice	385
8. Don't Get Locked into a Pattern	387
9. Don't Get Caught in a 'Thematic Freeze'	388
10. Don't Concede to Analytical Fatigue	389

GLOSSARY **392**

APPENDIX **399**

Suggestions for Further Reading **399**

FOREWORD

Eric Rodwell and his partner Jeff Meckstroth are the best-known pair in the world — ‘Meckwell’ is a neologism that is in every bridge player’s lexicon. Having reported their efforts for more years than I care to remember, I can safely say that they are also the most formidable partnership in the world. Brian Clough, a legend in English soccer, was once quoted as saying, ‘I wouldn’t say I was the best manager in the business, but I’m in the top one.’ So, here’s a question that I’ll answer for Jeff and Eric (they are far too modest to make such a claim):

‘Are they the best pair in the world?’

‘Perhaps not, but they’re in the top one.’

The theme of Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus* is Salieri’s envy of Mozart, a classic example of the inequality of inborn talent. The play contrasts Mozart’s genius with the more modest abilities of Salieri, which appear mediocre by comparison. As a journalist, I have been fortunate enough to be able to enjoy the company of many world-class bridge players and to discuss with them countless situations in bidding, play and defense. I am close enough to these stars to realize just how far away I am from achieving their level of play.

If you can’t play with (or against) the stars, the next-best thing is to study their methods and try to understand how they think about the game. However, it is very rare for a top-class player to tell you exactly how he or she does it. You will appreciate, then, the exceptional nature of this book, as someone who is surely one of the Bridge Immortals lets us in on his unique approach to play and defense. It has been my privilege to work with him as a researcher, sourcing and selecting example deals to illustrate the principles he describes.

To some extent bridge is a puzzle without an answer — I’ve been at it for forty years and I still have no idea how to play. This book represents one of the best opportunities you will ever have to get inside the mind of a champion — don’t fail to take it.

Mark Horton
March 2011

INTRODUCTION

Back in the 1980s I developed a series of notes on an approach to hand analysis and cardplay that I found useful. The methodology included giving my own names to many different types of plays, strategies, and analytical techniques — I had learned in college that giving unusual, even funny names to things makes them easier to remember.

I gave a digital copy of the notes (the original ‘Rodwell File’) to Fred Gitelman, a promising Junior at the time, and it circulated amongst a small number of players in Toronto. One person who saw the notes was Ray Lee, who suggested to me many years ago that I turn them into a book. I resisted the idea, partly because I knew that my notes were a long way from becoming what I intended, which was a good book on advanced cardplay. Then at the Washington NABC in 2010, Ray approached me again, this time with the idea of adding Mark Horton to the project as a co-author. This idea excited me, as I didn’t really have time to research good examples to illustrate all the concepts.

Mark has done a marvelous job of finding all sorts of suitable deals, mostly from high-level play. In fact, when I got his material it occurred to me that the book could be made useful to a much wider range of players. So I wrote some new introductory chapters that establish the foundation for what is talked about later. For some time I had not been keeping records of hands I played, but during 2010 and 2011, with the book in mind, I collected interesting deals that illustrated the concepts and that in some cases introduced additional concepts. The combination of all these efforts is a larger book than we had first planned, but I believe a better one.

Most of the deals presented here are ‘real’ — they occurred and were played as described. I wish I had recorded more of my own deals but there are many good hands here involving other players. I have constructed some deals when none that we knew of from actual play illustrated the point properly. A few of them are randomly generated by my computer.

In some cases, I talk about a line of play or defense that was not actually selected at the table but that would have made things interesting, but I don’t then present it as a first-person account of a hand I actually played. In a few deals I made minor modifications to spot cards to make the deal more interesting.

Finally, the names. In some cases, the name is descriptive. In other cases it is just something that came into my mind, often somewhat silly as I think they stick in the mind better. I hope those few that are named after other players won’t offend anyone.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The first two chapters in Part I set the groundwork for the more advanced concepts: how to develop tricks, entries, trump management, counting, calculating the odds, and the basics of squeezes and endplays. They move quickly, and are intended more as a refresher than a fundamental text. I recommend you study these chapters carefully unless you are at a level where it is all easy, and even then you should still skim them to make sure you can connect the later concepts properly. This part of the book ends with two important chapters on the analytical process: they describe the steps involved in selecting a line of play or defense, and include a checklist of ‘defogging’ questions to fall back on if you get stuck.

The rest of the book is largely concerned with identifying, naming and illustrating a wide variety of bridge plays and situations. Where I have invented names, they made sense to me at the time, and in most cases had something to do with the play itself. If you want to call them something else, be my guest: at least the wheels are turning for you and that should be beneficial.

There are numerous examples that just illustrate a principle, but others are presented as problems in declarer play or defense. The depth of the explanations does vary somewhat also, to accommodate varying levels of player. As I said earlier, the emphasis, wherever possible, is on real-life deals instead of the constructed layouts that fill most ‘solve these problems’ books. This has made our task both tougher and more interesting, as real deals sometimes don’t have a clear-cut answer. Quite a few of the examples involve me as a player, and in some cases I went wrong at the table. I tend to find the decisions I get wrong to be more interesting, and potentially more instructive, than those I get right.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

This book is for anyone who wants to understand, even partially, higher-level cardplay, or for anyone who just enjoys reading about it and appreciates its beauty. There are numerous books on bidding and conventions but I feel that cardplay technique is a more valuable subject to study, and that improvement in this area will help your scores quite a bit.

- *Experts*: I’m sure you will find this presentation different from anything you have encountered before, and the examples interesting and useful. I hope you find the names of things helpful as well.
- *Strong Regional players*: This book gives you the chance to improve the level of your play significantly.
- *Flight B players*: Depending on your innate ability and desire to delve into things, you can make enormous progress in cardplay.
- *Flight C and Club players*: Don’t be put off! You can learn more than you imagined was possible, and I predict you will have fun doing it.

If advanced cardplay concepts are difficult for you, just try to grasp what you can. Go over it again after a time and you will be able to learn more and more. If you are having trouble following the play from the text, I suggest using your own deck of cards to lay out the hand and follow the play trick for trick. I recommend reading the material in the order it is presented, but there is no reason you can't skip around if it suits you. Whatever your level, and however far you get into the book, you will get better results and more pleasure when you play. It is not necessary to understand everything in here to benefit from it. And in due time, you just might get there anyway!

As large as this book is, it isn't big enough to include everything you might wish to study about some topics (especially the more basic ones), and some suggestions for further reading are given in an Appendix. This book is intended to be many things: a textbook, a reference book, a book suitable for teachers to use, and a problem book — but most of all, I hope you'll find it to be entertainment. Enjoy!

Eric Rodwell
March 2011

PART 1

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

DEFOGGING — MORE ON THE THOUGHT PROCESS

With luck, a ‘sure-trick’ answer will occur to you without having to go through all these various stages. They are designed to allow you to see a solution early, if one is available, without missing something important. I consider this to be a proper and acceptable sequence in which to consider things. However, life isn’t always that straightforward.

Before I move on to discuss technical plays, the subject of much of the rest of this book, I want to suggest a number of questions that you can ask yourself to help with any unresolved issues in your analysis. While we are still primarily thinking about the start of play here, you will find many of these questions useful in the middle of the hand too.

7. *What end position am I angling for?*

As baseball great Yogi Berra once commented, ‘If you don’t know where you’re going, you probably won’t get there.’ Projecting the play and visualizing the final end position can be important when you are considering the possibility of an endplay, squeeze or coup.

Here’s a deal from the 2011 NABC in Louisville:

♠ A 10 3
 ♥ 10 5 4
 ♦ A K 10 9 2
 ♣ 8 7

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

Dealer South			
NS Vul.			
West	North	East	South
2♥	3♥*	pass	1♦ ¹
all pass			
1. Precision, 2+ diamonds, 11-15.			

West leads the ♠9, which goes to the ten, jack and king. The reason to cover is so if West has the ♠98, East won’t know he can continue spades safely. How do you play from here?

Prospects aren’t great. If you can run diamonds you are fine, otherwise you will need a ninth trick and the most likely source is in hearts, perhaps via an endplay. In any event you must attack diamonds now before the ♠A is knocked out. I led the ♦6; West played low, and when I played the nine from dummy, East pitched a low club (encouraging)! That’s a surprise. What now?

West is likely 5-6 in the red suits, with an unknown black card (6-6 is possible but I think unlikely; he would have overcalled 1♥ not 2♥). My plan was to force a split in diamonds, eliminate his black card, then engineer a red-suit endplay. So I led a club to the jack and ace (West pitching a diamond), and then a diamond up, taking West's jack with the ace (East pitched a spade). Now I cashed the ♠A, to which West followed. These were the remaining cards:

```

♠ 3
♥ 10 5 4
♦ K 10 2
♣ 8
[ ]
♠ 7
♥ A J 3
♦ —
♣ 10 5 4 3

```

How should I play?

I can exit a low diamond, but West will win and lead hearts: that gives me two heart tricks but then he is off any diamond endplay. So, I led a heart to the jack and king. After some thought West returned the ♥9. Should I cover with dummy's ten?

If West has ♥KQ98x, the ♥10 will win but I have no way to endplay him for a diamond lead. So I ducked in dummy, playing East for doubleton ♥Q. When East's queen did indeed appear, I won with the ♥A, cashed the ♥10, and now the ♦2 endplayed West for +600.

Many players will be familiar with endplaying an opponent who holds a doubleton honor in a suit, the idea being to force them to give you a ruff and discard. This is a frequent ploy when declarer is one trick short and appears to have one inescapable loser.

If a suit is distributed like this:

```

♠ Q 9 4 2      ♠ 10 8 5 3      ♠ K J
                [ ]
                ♠ A 7 6

```

then declarer can simply play the ♠A and exit with a spade.

However, if the suit looks like this:

♠ Q J 9 4	♠ 10 8 5 3 □	♠ K 2
	♠ A 7 6	

East can avoid the endplay by dropping the king under the ace.

♠ K J 9 2	♠ 10 8 5 3 □	♠ Q 4
	♠ A 7 6	

When the suit looks like this East will be endplayed if he wins the second trick, but West can come to the rescue by going up with the king — the so called ‘Crocodile Coup’ in which West’s ♠K swallows his partner’s card.

When declarer is going to attempt this type of endplay it is usually a good idea to cash the ace early in the play, as it may not always be obvious to a defender that an unblock is necessary. However, even late in the hand a defender may not always get it right, as on this deal from the 2001 Vanderbilt final:

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

Dealer West
NS Vul.

West	North	East	South
<i>Hamman</i>	<i>Petrunin</i>	<i>Soloway</i>	<i>Gromov</i>
pass	pass	pass	1♥
pass	2♣*	pass	4♥
all pass			

South is clearly in a poor contract (3NT is where you would like to be) but watch what happened. West led the ♣K and the defenders played three rounds of the suit. Declarer ruffed, cashed the ♥A and played a heart to the jack. When he next cashed the ♠A East did not unblock, so declarer played three rounds of diamonds, ruffing, and then exited with a spade, forcing East to concede a ruff and discard.

This type of endplay usually involves the higher honors, but that is not always the case, as on this deal:

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

Dealer North
NS Vul.

West	North	East	South
	1♣ ¹	pass	1♥
3♠	4♥	all pass	

1. Strong club.

West led the ♠K. Declarer won with dummy's ace, cashed the ♥AK and played a diamond to the queen. West took the ace, cashed a spade and exited with a diamond. Declarer won in dummy, cashed his other diamond and played a club to the king. When West did not release the jack, the next club left him endplayed.

Even if you can see the endplay coming, it's not always right to dump your honor. Here is a cautionary tale from the 2008 Buffett Cup:

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

Dealer East
NS Vul.

West	North	East	South
		2♥	dbl
4♥	pass	pass	5♣
5♥	6♣	all pass	

West led the ♥8. Declarer won, crossed to dummy with a trump and eliminated the red suits before going back to dummy with a trump. Now there is a choice of plays. One possibility is to play a spade to the jack, hoping West started with both missing honors. When West wins with the king and returns a spade you put up dummy's ten — and go down on the actual layout. Another option is to play a spade to the ace and then exit with a spade, hoping an opponent started with a doubleton honor, and as the cards lie that would work on this deal. For various reasons, West is more likely to have the ♠KQ than East is to have honor doubleton, so it's not clear declarer was going to get this right. However, when he played a spade from dummy, East resolved the issue of which line to take by putting up the

queen! He was playing for the situation where West held ♠KJxx and wanted to avoid any chance of his partner missing the Crocodile Coup.

This concept of visualizing the end position can help even on a complex deal where it is very difficult to work out how you can make your contract (both what layout you need and how to proceed). This deal, which first appeared in *Adventures in Card Play* by Ottlik and Kelsey, is a good example.

♠ A Q 10 3
 ♥ 5 4 3
 ♦ 10
 ♣ Q 9 6 5 4

 ♠ 2
 ♥ A K 6
 ♦ J 8 7 6 5
 ♣ A 7 3 2

West	North	East	South
		1NT ¹	pass
2♣*	dbl	2♠	5♣
all pass			
1. 16-18.			

West leads the ♥2 (fourth best) to the ten and ace. What is your plan?

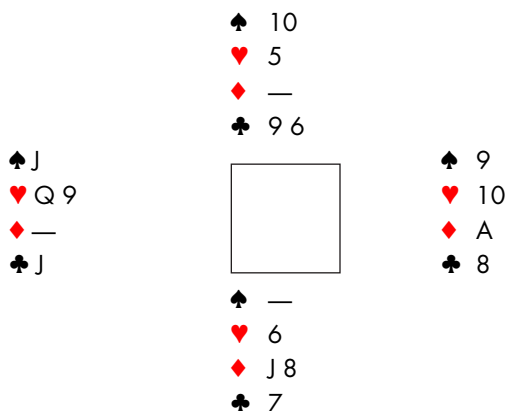
Even if trumps are 2-2 it is difficult to see how you can avoid losing three tricks. East has ♠Kxxx, so you can't finesse the spade. You can't ruff three spades in hand and also cash your long diamond, as there will still be trumps outstanding.

It is very difficult to see the possibility, but what you have to do is threaten a crossruff with a long diamond in tow. You must draw some trumps also. You lead a diamond from hand, West plays the ♦2 (standard signals), and East wins dummy's ten with the queen. He comes back the ♥J, which you win. Now you ruff a diamond in dummy and lead a club — *the queen*. You are hoping East has ♣K8 doubleton, so that he can't overruff a late red card.

If you set up a long diamond, West will get a chance to discard a spade unless he has the ♠J. So, this is the original layout you are looking for:

	♠ A Q 10 3	
	♥ 5 4 3	
	♦ 10	
	♣ Q 9 6 5 4	
♠ J x x x	<input type="text"/>	♠ K 9 x x
♥ Q 9 x x		♥ J 10 8
♦ 9 x x		♦ A K Q x
♣ J 10		♣ K 8
	♠ 2	
	♥ A K 6	
	♦ J 8 7 6 5	
	♣ A 7 3 2	

How do you plan the play? *You need to visualize the end position you are angling for.* You will have ruffed two diamonds in dummy and two spades in hand. You need to ruff another diamond and then ruff a spade (and not get overruffed), so that you can lead your good diamond. So, this is the ending you want to reach:



You have lost a diamond and must lose the ♣J, so you need three of the last four tricks. When you lead the ♦8, West can't ruff lest you pitch the heart loser. Also, he can't pitch the ♠J or you would ruff in dummy and cash the ♠10 to discard your heart loser from hand. So, he pitches a heart and you ruff, ruff the ♠10, and lead the fifth diamond, scoring the ♣9 *en passant*.

Note that this ending won't work if West has two spades left since the ♠10 is not then a threat. So, after playing a diamond to the queen and a second heart return to your king, you know you need to ruff two spades and two diamonds ending in hand, and that means you need to start by ruffing diamonds: diamond ruff, ♣Q covered by the king and ace, spade to the ace, spade ruff, diamond ruff, ♠Q covered by the king and ruffed, leading to the desired end position.

This is a very difficult hand indeed but this is the technique that you would need to employ to get it (or an easier hand) right.

THIS BOOK WILL CHANGE THE WAY YOU PLAY BRIDGE

In this ground-breaking book, multiple world champion Eric Rodwell describes his unique approach to cardplay. First, he explains his process for deciding on a line of play — using concepts such as +L positions, tightropes, trick packages and Control Units. Then he moves on to a host of innovative ideas, stratagems that can be used as declarer or defender — the Speed of Lightning Play, the Left Jab, the Super Duck, Days of Thunder, Bait and Switch, Gouging, and many, many more. The next two sections explore defense, especially situations that require counter-intuitive strategies. Finally, he talks about the mental aspects of the game, areas that mark the key differences between an average player and a successful one. Throughout, the ideas are illustrated with examples from high-level play, many of them involving the author.

The first draft of this book has been in existence for more than twenty years, but it is only now that Rodwell has decided to allow his 'secrets' to become public knowledge.

I'd been looking for a regular partner, and when I met Eric in 1974, I mentally clapped my hands together and said to myself, "That's the guy." Read this book, and you'll begin to see why.

Jeff Meckstroth, multiple World Champion.

As a young player I was fortunate enough to be among the few to see the original 'Rodwell Files'. They taught me more about the game than anything else I studied. Eric is already well-known for his many contributions to bidding theory. Thanks to this book he will soon be known as a great theorist of cardplay as well.

Fred Gitelman, World Champion.

ERIC RODWELL (Clearwater, FL) has won seven World Championships and fifty National titles (so far); his partnership with Jeff Meckstroth is acknowledged to be the world's best. This is his first advanced-level book.

MARK HORTON (Bath, UK) is editor of *BRIDGE* magazine and a regular *Daily Bulletin* team member at World and European Championships.



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