

OXFORDSHIRE V LEICESTERSHIRE 14TH January 2007 at Oxford Bridge Club

This was the crunch match for our A and B teams and sadly, we both let the county down, losing 0-20 and 4-16 respectively to put serious dents in our chances of winning the respective divisions. Fortunately the C team came through 19-1 to keep their own challenge alive, though this seems to have been thanks mainly to the extraordinary efforts of Cathy Rowland and Mary-Ann Sheehy, who had an amazing card judging by the cross-IMP figures below. I should add that I'm hampered in writing this belated report, partly by the fact that the cross-IMP figures went astray in the ether and partly because I still don't have the scorecards and have no idea what contracts people were in (except where players have sent in comments). I'm therefore giving this report solely from an A team perspective via three of its pairs who've had the courage to write about their misfortunes – Dickinson/Smith, Cooper/Piper and me and my slightly bent walking-stick.

The situation with us having one match only to go before we sit out the final weekend, is:

A: 1st Oxon (played 7) 88, 2nd Leics (6) 82, 3rd Warwicks (5) 60, 4th Derbys (6) 55

B: 1st Oxon (7) 115, 2nd Leics (6) 90, 3rd Warwicks (5) 80, 4th Derbys (6) 61

C: 1st Oxon (7) 97, 2nd Warwicks (5) 88, 3rd Derbys (6) 68, 4th Leics (6) 61

There's a remarkable symmetry about the tables, added to by the fact that we play Warwicks in our last match, whereas Leics play Warwicks and Derbys and Warwicks play us, Derbys and Leics. On paper Leics are now favourites for div A, Oxon for div B and Warwicks for div C but there's plenty of room for triumph and/or disaster yet.. Another oddity is that the mighty Gloucestershire lie 9th, 9th and 8th out of 9 in the three divisions. Let's not forget that whatever happens over the next few weeks, Oxfordshire have had a terrific season!

I'm indebted to Michael Robinson for the following cross-IMP results v Leics

	<i>Cross-IMP</i>	<i>Butler:</i>
Rowland/Sheehy (C)	+70.83	+92
Brown/Keep (C)	+05.33	+16
Dickinson/Smith (A)	+02.17	+08
Webley/Wilkes (B)	+01.67	-01
Kazmierczak/Nicholson (C)	-05.67	-02
Procter/Robinson (B)	-06.33	-04
Angus/Moss (C)	-18.17	-14
Talbots (B)	-22.33	-17
Williams/Wilson (A)	-27.83	-24
Landy/Hayes (B)	-28.33	-28
Cooper/Piper (A)	-31.83	-29
Slater/Stephens (A)	-44.83	-39

I have to say that these figures are dafter even than usual, in that anyone fortunate enough to IMP up against the Rowland/Sheehy card has a major bonus. Speaking for myself, my cross-IMP score felt more like minus 127.83 than what actually shows..

Board 1: love all, dealer N

North ♠92 ♥Q93 ♦Q763 ♣A942 South ♠AJ4 ♥AKJ1052 ♦A8 ♣65

As Chris Cooper says, 4♥ is solid despite the 4-0 trump break, provided you cash winners and take a spade ruff in dummy before drawing too many trumps, but not everybody managed this simple feat. Against me, a Leics declarer was in the equally solid 3NT but miscounted his 9 top tricks and went 1 down.

Board 2: NS game, dealer E

You're East holding ♠Q982 ♥AJ2 ♦Q432 ♣63 and the oppo bash quickly to 3NT. You lead a spade, dummy hits with ♠K106 ♥1095 ♦K85 ♣K975 and declarer wins in hand with the Jack before taking four clubs (courtesy of a winning finesse for the Queen) and playing a heart to his King and your Ace. Next move? Well, my man had diamond Queen on the table in a flash, just as well as I held AJ109. OK, I'd Smith-petered to deny interest in a spade continuation, but still he did well. The 24-point game slipped through at several tables.

Board 4: game all, dealer W

You're on lead again against 3NT, this time after the uninterrupted sequence 1♦-1♠-3NT and you hold ♠3 ♥AKJ3 ♦J6 ♣KJ7632. Chris and I play Ace for attitude/unblock, King for count. As he couldn't necessarily afford for me to unblock ♥Q if I held it, Chris led ♥K and I gave count with the 2 (ie showing 3 or 5). Dummy revealed ♠AK9542 ♥98 ♦1097 ♣Q8. Chris bravely continued with the Ace, under which I encouraged with the 10 (though this was murky water) and followed with the Jack, which I could overtake to cash my 5 tricks. And yes, declarer had seven solid diamonds and would have made 11 tricks on a club lead. Well done again! Nick Smith led ♥A and seeing the 2 from partner, switched to a spade. As he says, whoops!... Cooper/Piper had possibly lost the board anyway when South removed 3NT to 4S (you can't be sure, 3NT made on more than one occasion, I believe).

Board 16: EW game, dealer W

(I've avoided describing events on board 6, where all three pairs messed up, one with disastrous consequences. Well, I'm very pushed for time.)

	♠1086	
	♥AKQ108	
	♦KQ6	
	♣Q9	
♠AKJ32		♠Q97
♥52		♥74
♦A8542		♦1073
♣5		♣AKJ104
	♠54	
	♥J963	
	♦J9	
	♣87632	

At my table West opened 1♠, partner overcalled 2♥, East passed (!) and I raised defensively to 3♥. West found 4♦ (! again), partner bid 4♥ and East managed to find a bold 4♠ (I jest, of course). You can understand why Chris decided to defend, after this auction, bearing in mind his promising diamond holding. It started OK when two

rounds of hearts stood up but the diamond switch brought no reward when the clubs came in for 4 tricks (the Queen was doubleton onside), making 10 in all. After a very different auction, Tim and Nick's opponents took the save in 5♥ for a par result of –300 but the real calamity occurred when Chris and Nathan pushed on to 5♠ at the third table and had to go 1 down when there was no fifth club trick available. (John and Nelson took only 100 with the EW cards to complete our misery.)

Board 18: NS game, dealer E

	♠J82	
	♥K986	
	♦J10654	
	♣Q	
♠K10732		♠AQ96
♥J1072		♥A4
♦AKQ3		♦None
♣None		♣J1098754
	♠4	
	♥Q53	
	♦9872	
	♣AK632	

This was one of the exotic deals of the day, obviously, and led to a very mixed bag of results. I avoided any excitement by taking a dim view of my hand in the sequence 1♣-1♠-4♦-4♠. With a void in partner's suit and his shortage in my own best one, I settled for game and didn't beat myself up looking for overtricks. Tim and Nick showed much more adventure and Tim played the hand nicely in 6♠ after ♣Q lead. He ruffed, drew three rounds of trumps ending in dummy, took a ruffing finesse against ♣K, pitched a heart on ♦A, crossed to ♥A and conceded a club trick, claiming the balance. Cooper/Piper got the slam one down after the same lead was followed by a less professional line. Note, however, that the one lead to beat the slam for sure is a heart, because it takes out a critical entry to set up and enjoy the long clubs. At the fourth A team table, John Slater found just that lead but the "for sure" was missing because when declarer won and played a low club, Nelson decided he had to rise with ♣A and that was that...

Board 20: game all, dealer W

West ♠K1086 ♥K76 ♦KQ5 ♣KQ7 East ♠52 ♥QJ84 ♦93 ♣AJ982

We all know that strong club systems were invented originally with the idea of ensuring that game was always reached with 16 HCPs opposite 9. Standard Acrol still has a problem when the 16-count opens 1 of a suit and responder bids 1NT showing 6-9. Does the 16-count rebid 2NT, risking a silly result when partner is minimum, or does he pass and risk missing game when partner is max? This was just such a hand and I was persuaded by the spade intermediates to try for game. (Dubious really – a 5-card suit is more of an excuse). Anyway, Chris was bound to accept with an 8-count and a 5-card suit opposite a possible 17-18. He was favoured with a club lead and could have got home by playing for the long odds of hearts 3-3 (as they were), but embarked on a more complicated line which eventually ran out of steam. Getting hands like this right is a good day/bad day thing, to be honest. Going down vulnerable when team-mates were also minus at the other table cost 7 IMPs, but the 11 we could

have gained instead is what hurt. However, I'm in no position to cast stones, as can be seen from the final two exhibits...

Board 30: love all, dealer E

As South I held ♠AQ4 ♥KJ103 ♦3 ♣AJ763. East opened 3♣, alerted as “not rubbish” and I had only two possible courses of action – pass or 3NT. If I pass (and it needs to be in tempo) the chances of partner being able to make a TO double are not great, and being able to protect with some sort of balanced 10-11 count are even less. Having given all this what passes for thought, I'd backed into a corner where pass seemed scarcely an option, so I took the infinitely more dangerous option of bidding 3NT. LHO had an easy double, and partner's 2-count offered no vestige of salvation. So I took the 5 tricks available on first sight of dummy, for a penalty of 800. Had I passed 3♣ it would have made for -110. Nick Smith found the hand hard too: he doubled the opening 2NT (pre-empt in a minor) and the ensuing 3♣ rescue, knowing that if partner bid 3♦ he'd be forced into the same 3NT, but Tim bid 3♠ on ♠10753 ♥Q6 ♦1076542 ♣5 - raised to 4♠ (?) – and managed to get out for minus 300 by scrambling a reasonable number of trump tricks. Nick felt this was better than defending 3♣ doubled, which as the cards lie seems to be unbeatable.

Board 31: NS game, dealer S

	♠KQ74	
	♥J10932	
	♦1074	
	♣A	
♠53		♠J986
♥K74		♥AQ
♦AKQJ92		♦None
♣65		♣KQJ10987
	♠A102	
	♥865	
	♦8653	
	♣432	

Nick comments that his partner almost got this board right, defending 3NT by West. He led ♥J and when declarer necessarily won with the Queen to play ♣K, thereby revealing no future in the heart suit for the defence, he found the second-best switch - ♠K rather than low to Nick's 10. This cost 10 IMPs when, at the other table, Cooper/Piper had to go down, losing a club and all four spades. However, all this was as nothing compared with the cataclysmic disaster at my table. Chris overcalled the 1♦ opening with 1♥, East (Bowyer) bid the obvious 2♣ and then alerted Mason's 3NT as promising a club fit. Showing touching faith in this presumed agreement, he shot 6♣ (!) which was passed out. To be fair, he also suspected by this stage that he was playing the blind school, and events were to prove him right. I led partner's suit and Bowyer was able to win dummy and discard all his four spades on the diamonds as partner ruffed in futilely with Ace of trumps on the fourth round. He duly apologised for this outrageous stroke of luck but stopped short of commenting on our own actions. From my point of view it could be said that I should have considered declarer was evidently prepared for a heart lead, so might have tried Ace of spades

instead. On the other hand, of course, 1-level overcalls are meant to be lead-directing (or, to be fair, to show either a good suit or a good hand. Chris had neither and if he wanted to intervene, might have considered either a TO double or even, more adventurously, 1 ♠. (I'm not mud-slinging, you understand.) The other point to be borne in mind is that there was a Lightner double available to steer me away from the heart lead. Chris said he considered this briefly but thought that a double would ask for dummy's first-bid suit. I don't believe this is true: such out-of-the-blue doubles are reserved for NT contracts (usually 3NT) where we haven't bid suits of our own. Anyway, we've sorted it now (too late, you might cry). A Lightner double here would have said primarily: find a non-heart lead to beat the contract. A spade would have stood out, of course – even to a numbskull like me.

I guess you can picture how many sleepless nights have ensued. Read it and weep!

Incidentally, I expect this to be the last report I'll write, as I decided some time ago to quit the captaincy at the end of the season and told the selection committee accordingly. After a good few years, it's high time for someone who still has hair and teeth to shoulder the burden. So this is a good time to stop myself re-thinking, by going public. Also, thanks to all our squad for their support and good play, not only this season but in seasons past. Let's hope we can finish on a high v Warwickshire! And let's hope I get a few games for the D team next year – if Chris'll have me.

JOHN WILLIAMS

08/02/07