

The President's Cup Final 25 April 2009

The President's Cup Final is the FA Cup of Oxfordshire bridge, a knock-out teams-of-four event which pits all the best local players against each other over 32 or 48 boards. After various intense battles in the earlier rounds, this year's final was between my team, whom we shall call the Old Codgers, against Chris Cooper's, the Young Guns. The future belongs to the Young Guns, of course, but could the old timers hold them at bay in one more shoot-out?

The Young Guns had been a squad of six but they were somewhat disadvantaged for the final by the unavailability of one of their three partnerships, Michael Clark (the EBU's IT guru) and Luke Porter. Chris Cooper, our county captain, was partnered by Bryony Youngs, perhaps the most talented young female player in the country, while Ed Jones, who won silver for Britain U20s in the Beijing 'Olympics', joined up with Andrew Murphy, a former England Under 25 international. Both these pairs had performed with distinction for Oxfordshire in this season's Tollemache.

My team was a slimmed down version of the team which won the President's Cup in 2006 and 2007 – Alan Wilson and myself playing a Precision-style system, with Richard Lonsdale and Stuart McPhee playing Acol. Richard, after a long and distinguished bridge career (including many years maintaining the OBA website), had announced his retirement from the game before Christmas but we had managed to wheel him out and oil him up for the semi-final and final.

Both sides were expecting a close contest, I think, but Chris Cooper got off to the worst possible start when he mis-sorted his hand on the very first deal. It was only when he and Bryony had bid up to 4♠ that he discovered that most of what he took to be his chunky spade suit were actually clubs and he was just doubleton in spades! The ensuing minus 800 gave my side a 14 IMP start and useful gains on boards 2, 6 and 7 meant that we found ourselves 25 IMPs up after the first eight boards.

This handy lead increased to 35 IMPs after the second eight. Cooper/Youngs bid a tight but making 6♠ to keep the deficit to 41 IMPs going into the half-time break. Was this the start of a comeback? The fourth set hinted that the tide may have turned as the margin was down to 37 IMPs but it increased to 42 IMPs in a tight fifth set. One set to go ...

This is a substantial but not impossible margin to make up, as long as you have some swingy boards to work with. There was plenty of swing potential in the final set! Cooper/Youngs were up against

McPhee/Lonsdale and made a terrific start on the first board when our pair bid up to 4♠ on #45. It was a far from ridiculous contract but Chris held ♠J9853 and took the opportunity to double. A tight defence yielded 1100 for the Young Guns. Meanwhile Jones/Murphy bid the same deal to the more obvious 3NT contract in our room. The cards were not well placed for that either but Alan and I were not able to take it more than two off. So that was 14 IMPs to the YGs, with seven boards remaining to make up the other 28.

Cooper/Youngs defended well to defeat 3NT on #46 which looked like it might be another swing to the YGs (although it turned out to be flat). Could they do the same on #47?

N/S Vul Dealer: S	♠AK863 ♥AJ10532 ♦- ♣K10	
♠- ♥Q74 ♦QJ9742 ♣8762	♠J97 ♥9 ♦AK108 ♣A9543	♠Q10542 ♥K86 ♦653 ♣QJ

This was the auction:

West	North	East	South
<i>Cooper</i>	<i>McPhee</i>	<i>Youngs</i>	<i>Lonsdale</i>
	1♥	Pass	2♣
3♦	3♠	Pass	3NT
All Pass			

Chris Cooper (West) led the ♦Q against Richard Lonsdale's 3NT contract and Richard won in hand with the Ace. Looking just at the North-South hands, how would you plan the play?

Richard tried a spade to the ace and had to revise any plans he had when Chris discarded a diamond on this trick. It's tempting to hope for better luck in clubs instead. Nevertheless, Richard persevered with a spade off the board and Bryony flew in with the Queen to play a second diamond. Richard let Chris win this with the nine.

Unable to continue diamonds, Chris tried a small heart which was ducked in dummy and Bryony won with the King after some thought

(noting the fall of declarer's nine). She tried another diamond and Richard won. Where should he go from here?

As the cards lie, he *can* now make by playing ♠J, crossing to table and cashing ♠K, squeezing West nastily in the other three suits. He can then play clubs and exit in diamonds and Chris is forced to lead away from ♥Q for the ninth trick. When Richard crossed to the ♣K in dummy, the Queen appeared on his right and the seven from West. Chris said afterwards that he had desperately decided to give true count hoping that declarer would expect him to false-count (i.e. a double-bluff!).

Was that a singleton Queen? Richard tried to piece together Bryony's likely hand and decided it might be something like this:

♠Q10542
♥KQ86
♦653
♣Q

If so, he could cash ♥A and then exit with ♥J, hoping to leave Bryony forced to put him back in dummy. Thus he would have made three spades, two hearts, two diamonds and two clubs. But, as you can see, it was Chris who had ♥Q. With hindsight, Richard's view is that he should have played to endplay Chris with a diamond, as he planned originally before he saw ♣Q fall on his right.

Unfortunately, from his point of view, Chris still had two diamond winners to take, so the contract was one off. Well defended indeed! There seemed to be every chance that this would be 12 IMPs in.

But the auction was to take a very different turn in our room....

West	North	East	South
<i>Smith</i>	<i>Murphy</i>	<i>Wilson</i>	<i>Jones</i>
	1♥	Pass	1♠!
3♦	4♦	Pass	4♥
Pass	5♥	Pass	6♣
Pass	6♠	All Pass	

Ed Jones, conscious that positive swings were needed and holding ♠J32, decided to respond 1♠ to his partner's 1♥ opening, with a view to bidding 3NT on the next round and thereby deterring a spade lead. But the 1♠ response seemed like wonderful news to his partner and my 3♦ intervention enabled him to show a huge hand with spade support by cue-bidding 4♦. The auction meandered up to the six-level before Andrew finally decided to give up on the idea of a grand

slam in spades. I led $\heartsuit Q$ and, when dummy went down, it looked to me as though $6\spadesuit$ might be quite straightforward.

Ed won the diamond lead, crossed to $\heartsuit A$ and ruffed a heart. He returned to dummy with $\clubsuit K$ to ruff another heart. With both clubs and hearts behaving extremely well, his hopes were high, but the 5-0 trump break proved too much for him in the end. Overall, he was a little unlucky as $6\spadesuit$ is by no means a ridiculous contract. That was 100 to the defence in both rooms and a flat board.

Boards 41-48 were played in sequence at our table, so #47 was in fact the penultimate board and, to be honest, the result was no longer in doubt in our room. It had been a nightmare set for Jones/Murphy. On both #41 and #42, they had doubled us in vulnerable $4\spadesuit$ contracts, only to find that they were unable to defeat either of them. If the match was not quite over at this point, the next two boards were certainly conclusive. This was #43 (rotated for convenience):

Love All Dealer: N	$\spadesuit J32$ $\heartsuit AK6$ $\diamond AK1064$ $\clubsuit 74$		
$\spadesuit Q75$ $\heartsuit J98$ $\diamond J982$ $\clubsuit 1085$	$\spadesuit AK84$ $\heartsuit 10754$ $\diamond 73$ $\clubsuit QJ6$	$\spadesuit 1096$ $\heartsuit Q32$ $\diamond Q5$ $\clubsuit AK932$	

West	North	East	South
<i>Jones</i>	<i>Smith</i>	<i>Murphy</i>	<i>Wilson</i>
		$1\clubsuit$	$1\spadesuit!$
Pass	$2\clubsuit$	Pass	$2\spadesuit$
Pass	$4\spadesuit$	Pass	Pass
Double	All Pass		

Andrew Murphy (East in the diagram) opened $1\clubsuit$ (“prepared”) and Alan Wilson overcalled $1\spadesuit$. This was “not a great call”, as he admitted later, “but (a) I had hesitated and preferred to bid something, (b) we were not vulnerable, and (c) at least $1\spadesuit$ would give partner a good idea what to lead”.

Hmmm. My view is still that the reasons against such a call are more compelling. You should have a stronger hand to consider overcalling

in a 4-card suit and it would be more attractive with fewer hearts and more clubs.

With the strongest hand at the table, I made an unassuming cue-bid of 2♣, asking partner to describe his hand further. At this point, Alan really doesn't have any rebid that is not rather misleading. He decided to indicate that he was minimum for his overcall with a simple 2♠ rebid. Expecting rather better trumps (and conscious that we had made 4♠ doubled on both the last two hands!) I raised him to the spade game. Desperate for some points, and hoping that lightning would not strike three times, Ed doubled this one too.

The ♦9 was led against 4♠ doubled. Looking at just the North-South hands, how would you plan the play?

It looks like four losers even if the spades lie well, with a spade, a heart and two clubs to lose – and maybe another heart and a spade! Alan was worried that this could well be expensive. He won ♦A and played a club from dummy. Andrew went in with the King, cashed ♣A (West playing up the line) and exited with ♦Q while West completed a peter with ♦2.

The distribution looks tricky, with West having presumably two diamonds and three clubs – is he 4-4 in the majors or 5-3? Anyway, to Alan, there didn't seem to be anything better than cashing ♥A and ♥K (on which both defenders petered, suggesting an even number of cards!), crossing to ♠A and cashing ♣Q for a heart discard.

Now what? If West is 4-4 in the majors, East will be able to overruff the next heart (unless declarer ruffs with ♠J and West has ♠Q). But there will still be a chance to make ♠J this way on the next round, so Alan tried ruffing the heart low. Lo and behold, both followed!

Now trumps look like they are 5-1 and it is difficult to see what else to do but to ruff a diamond high and ensure a trick with ♠J by playing the last heart. But when Alan led a diamond from dummy it was East who showed out, not West! So Alan could see that West had led ♦9 from ♦J9xx and trumps must be 3-3 all the time! This is the position we have reached with three tricks still needed:

	♠J	
	♥-	
	♦1064	
	♣-	
♠Q7		♠109
♥-		♥-
♦J8		♦-
♣-		♣93
	♠K84	
	♥10	
	♦-	
	♣-	

Alan had led a small diamond from dummy. When East threw a club on this, Alan was able to ruff low, and lead the last heart to promote ♠J, with ♠K still to come. Ten tricks!! Nicely timed indeed. Our side scored +590 for this and with 3NT going one off in the other room, this was worth 12 IMPs.

Note the difference if East ruffs the diamond at trick 10 with ♠9. What can declarer do? If he discards, he will lose this trick and also ♠Q later. So he must over-ruff with the King and perhaps lead ♥10 for a ruff in dummy. But West discards his last diamond on this trick and now has ♠Q7 sitting over declarer's ♠84. So he can claim the last two tricks for one off. Declarer has no winning option at this point. So East missed a bit of a chance here but it is only fair to add that he was expecting South to have started with five trumps, not just four, and it is not easy to judge a complicated end-position in those circumstances.

Could things get any worse for Jones/Murphy? Yes, they could. On #44, we were treated to this rather unusual auction:

West	North	East	South
<i>Smith</i>	<i>Murphy</i>	<i>Wilson</i>	<i>Jones</i>
		Pass	Pass
2♠ (weak)	4♥	Pass	6NT!!
All Pass			

What sort of hand could Ed Jones possibly have to pass originally and yet jump to 6NT over 4♥? In fact, he held:

♠K865
♥2
♦AQ96
♣KJ104

Having made an original “trap pass” (I don’t think he had simply miscounted his points), he was doing his best to catch up. Alas dummy was not quite as strong as he had hoped:

♠Q

♥AKQ10973

♦K3

♣Q32

The hearts broke kindly enough but there was no way to avoid losing the two black aces. In the end, Ed was two off and that was another 13 IMPs when Lonsdale/McPhee settled for game in the other room.

There was no way back from there. Although Cooper/Youngs produced a card for the last eight boards which seemed to give their side a chance, the result was in fact another 25 IMPs to my team and a rather flattering final margin of 67 IMPs.

Although the Old Codgers were victorious on this occasion, I have no doubt that some or all of the Young Guns will win the President’s Cup many times in the years to come!

To the victors the spoils – a chance to represent the county in the Pachabo Cup where we will be hoping to improve on the fifth and seventh place finishes we achieved in 2006 and 2007.

NICK SMITH 1 May 2009