

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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# 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♦ <sup>1</sup>
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♣ <sup>1</sup>	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 <sup>1</sup>	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?

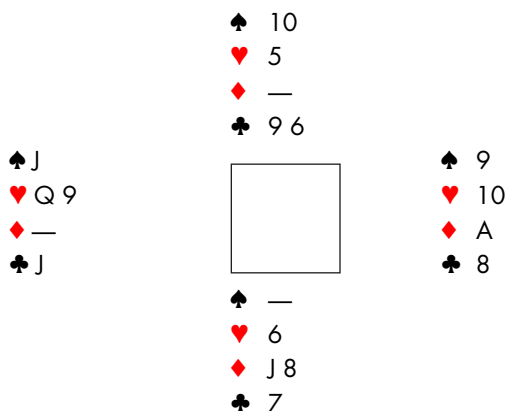
Even if trumps are 2-2 it is difficult to see how you can avoid losing three tricks. East has ♠Kxxx, so you can't finesse the spade. You can't ruff three spades in hand and also cash your long diamond, as there will still be trumps outstanding.

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.

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