

How to get a zero

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With neither side vulnerable, as South you hold the hand below and the auction proceeds as shown:

♠AKQ62	W	N	E	S
♥432		P	1H	1S
♦K83	2H	3H	Dbl	3S
♣83	P	P	4H	?

Partner's 3H bid showed a good raise to 3S, but with a 7-loser 5332 hand you attempted to sign off below game. East, who had doubled to show a willingness to play in at least 3H, then continued to 4H. What will you do?

It does sound suspiciously like East is bidding to make, so a sacrifice in 4S appears to be a good idea – even if you finish two down doubled that's -300 which is better than -420 if East-West can indeed make 4H. But maybe you aren't convinced that they will make and/or decide discretion is the better part of valour. If you pass 4H, what will you lead?

I'd be surprised if you chose anything other than a top spade. As it turns out, there is now no way to stop East-West raking in 10 tricks, because this was the full deal, from Monday 22 April:

BD: 1	♠JT75	Dlr: N	
	♥Q6	Vul: None	
	♦74		
	♣AQJ92		
♠		♠9843	
♥JT7		♥AK985	
♦JT965		♦AQ2	
♣KT764		♣5	
	♠AKQ62		
	♥432		
	♦K83		
	♣83		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
		T	
N	3 1		10
S	1 3 1	5	13
E	4 3		12
W	4 3		

On a spade lead, East ruffs in dummy and plays a small diamond towards hand, inserting the queen. Or at least this is what East *should* do – if instead East leads $\spadesuit J$ and plays a low card from hand, the diamond tricks in dummy will be forever lost.

Now if South wins the king it's actually not possible to stop East from making 11 tricks – South has to duck the queen to hold declarer to 10 tricks, as declarer ruffs two more spades in dummy and then $\heartsuit AK$ drop the queen.

Yes, it is possible to beat 4H, but that requires South to lead a trump or a club, neither of which is likely in the real world. That makes the sacrifice in 4S the best way for North-South to achieve the par result of -100 after they are doubled.

Partner and I did reach 4S – in fact partner passed at the point in the auction shown above, but I decided that a 4S sacrifice was in order. We weren't doubled. Partner duly made 9 tricks and both of us believed at the time that a mere -50 must be a very good score.

See how wrong we were:

Contract	Result	Score	Frequency
4 $\spadesuit X$ by NS	=	590	1
3 \spadesuit by NS	+1	170	1
5 \heartsuit by EW	-3	150	1
3 \spadesuit by NS	=	140	1
2 \spadesuit by NS	+1	140	1
2 \spadesuit by NS	=	110	1
4 \heartsuit by EW	-1	50	2
4 \spadesuit by NS	-1	-50	1

Yes, an absolute bottom! Sometimes I wonder ... anyway full credit to John Philp for raising to 2H based on shape and a fit, as well as to Steve Brabyn for pushing on to 4H to put maximum pressure on us.

