



Duck Declined in 2023 Bermuda Bowl Final: Masterstroke or Error

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A world-class declarer made a strikingly unusual play at trick one against Norway's Chrisian Bakke and Boye Brogeland (B&B) in the 2023 Bermuda Bowl final in Marrakesh.

♠ AQ92 ♥ QJ8 ♦ 1093 ♣ K84
 ♠ 1087 ♥ 752 ♦ KJ8742 ♣ 3 ♠ J653 ♥ A93 ♦ Q6 ♣ A652
 ♠ K4 ♥ K1064 ♦ A5 ♣ QJ1097

None vulnerable

W	N	E	S
P	1♣	P	2♣
P	2♦	P	2♥
P	2♠	P	2NT
P	3NT	P	P
P			

Bakke led the ♦4 (attitude) to dummy's 10 and Brogeland's Q. The world-class declarer (WCD) declined the normal-looking play, namely to duck. After his trick one ♦A, he placed the ♣J on the table; the defenders rattled off their 7 tricks. Down 3 on a hand where plebeian declarers would have ducked at trick one and made 4.

What was WCD thinking? Provide your answer before reading further.

Presumably, he thought that Bakke (playing 2♦ as Multi) was highly likely to have preempted 3♦ or bid 2♦ over 2♣ with KJxxxx in diamonds and neither A. Hence, the only hand where ducking or not would make a difference was where he had Jxxxxx in diamonds and the ♣A. Given that hand, taking the first trick would lead to success, since East's !K would block the diamonds.

Was this a masterstroke, where WCD looked more deeply into the position than would you or I, albeit a masterstroke with an unhappy ending? Or was it an error?

The answer to that question depends on your assessment of the probability that West would have stayed silent with the specific holding of DKJxxxx and neither ace. Call that probability s .

Ducking gains when West has that holding, in other words when East had Qx in diamonds and both aces. There are five relevant diamond holdings for that hand, one for each low diamond East could hold. Utilizing the empty-spaces calculation, the likelihood that East held both aces

was $11/18 \times 10/17$. Taking the DA immediately would gain for one diamond holding, KQ for East, with $\clubsuit A$ with West and $\heartsuit A$ with East. The empty-spaces calculation would show that the odds of those ace placements was $7/18 \times 11/17$.

The denominators on the odds were the same for the two relevant holdings. Thus, the relevant odds for the hands were: Better to Duck $5 \times 11 \times 10 = 550$ Better to Win Ace $1 \times 7 \times 11 = 77$

In short, it was better than 7 to 1 to duck, assuming that the bidding provides no information.

That leads the question of masterstroke or error question back to s, the likelihood that Bakke would have remained silent with KJxxxx and neither A. (He certainly would have stayed silent with Jxxxxx and the $\clubsuit A$.) It is better to take the A if $550s < 77$, namely if s is assessed as less than 14%. WCD did not reveal his assessment. But it seems plausible to suspect that he grasped the subtleties of the situation, as would be expected by a WCD, but never got around to doing even rough calculations. Those calculations would have strongly pointed to a duck, since 14% for silence seems like a very low value.

There is another possibility, of course. WCD may have thought that if he took the A at trick 1, West, starting with the J and low cards in diamonds, would have worried that WCD started with $\heartsuit AKx$. Then he might have mis-defended and switched after winning his hypothetical CA. That seems highly unlikely. B&B play Smith, and Brogeland with the $\heartsuit K$ would have shouted continuation when clubs were played.

This hand did not prevent, WCD, representing Switzerland, from winning the Bermuda Bowl.

Postscript. One of the most important skills for a bridge player is to assess subjective probabilities effectively in situations when the answer will not yield to computation. That was the situation WCD faced in assessing the likelihood that Bakke would have bid had he had KJxxxx in diamonds. Unfortunately, bridge quizzes, including in Bridge Winners, rarely if ever ask for estimates of such probabilities. Bridge columnists rarely if ever discuss them. Often those probabilities are but one component of a question such as: "What do you bid now?" When multiple considerations combine this way, we do not learn the subjective probabilities that underlay the answers received.