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SERIOUS ERROR

by Ton Kooijman

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We present 12 cases in which an offense occurs that might create damage to the opponents. In all cases the Tournament Director (TD) and/or the Appeals Committee (AC) decided that the damage was the result of a serious error while at least part of it was not caused by the infraction (see law 12C1b). Generally speaking, TDs and ACs are reluctant to compensate a bad score after an irregularity, not sufficiently protecting the innocent side. It seems necessary to draw some guidelines.

In all cases you are asked to decide whether the innocent side has made a serious error resulting in self-inflicted damage.

1 West holds:

♠ J 10 9
♥ 9 7 5
♦ J 10 9 6
♣ K 10 3

and has to lead after this auction:

S	N
1♣	1♦
1♥	2♠
2NT	3NT

2♠ was explained as natural but according to N/S agreements it is *4th suit forcing*.

West led ♦J; 3NT just made

West says he would have led a spade for 3NT-1

TD: score stands ; even if 2♠ is natural, North has at least as many diamonds as spades. In both cases, a spade lead is better than a diamond lead.

Is not leading a spade a serious error?

No serious error. It needs something idiotic to consider the opening lead as a serious error. For example, leading a small card instead of A and K in another suit against 6NT, or leading 9 from K Q J 9 as fourth best (example from Kaplan).

	♠ 8 7	
	♥ K J 4 2	
	♦ 8 2	
	♣ A K 7 4 3	
♠ AJ43		♠ KQ1095
♥ Q109		♥ A
♦ A1053		♦ KQJ64
♣ Q6		♣ J5
	♠ 62	
	♥ 87653	
	♦ 97	
	♣ 10982	

<u>W</u>	<u>E</u>	
	1♠	
2♦	4♦	2♦: suit, game forcing
4♠*	4NT	*long hesitation; denying ♥ control
5♥	6♠	

A ♥ was led; South called complaining about East's 4NT bid.

TD: Score stands. It should be obvious that East has a heart control; so leading a ♣ is more attractive.

No serious error. The issue is not whether a choice is more attractive, but whether the wrong choice is irrational.

It is within the range of being normal to try and deceive the opponents suggesting that there is a control. Why could not a heart lead defeat the contract even if EW have a control? The opponents are expected to have at least a second-round control in any suit if they play a slam, isn't this so?

3 W/NS

	♠ A Q J 10 7	
	♥ -	
	♦ K 10 6 4	
	♣ A K Q J	
♠ K		♠ 9 5
♥ Q J 10 8 5		♥ A K 9 6 4 2
♦ A Q 7 5 3 2		♦ -
♣ 2		♣ 10 8 7 5 3
	♠ 8 6 4 3 2	
	♥ 7 3	
	♦ J 9 8	
	♣ 9 6 4	

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
1♦	1♠	x	2♠
3♥	4♠	5♥	Pass
Pass	5♠	Pass	Pass
6♥	x	All Pass	

East hesitated; the 6♥-bid is not obvious.

Lead: ♣A and ♣K; contract made.

TD: North should have played ♠A at trick 2, subsequent damage.

North could have realized that it is much more likely that West has a spade left (would South bid 2♠ only if he had ♠K 6th?); but continuing on clubs is not a stupid action. **No serious error.**

4 N/NS

♠ Q J 8 7
 ♥ Q 9 8 5 2
 ♦ -
 ♣ Q 9 4 3

♠ 6 ♥ A 4 ♦ K 10 8 5 4 ♣ K 10 8 7 6	♠ A K 3 2 ♥ 6 3 ♦ Q J 9 6 ♣ A J 2
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♠ 10 9 5 4
 ♥ K J 10 7
 ♦ A 7 3 2
 ♣ 5

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♠	Pass	3♥	Pass
4♣	Pass	4♠	Pass
4NT	Pass	5♦	Pass
6♦	Pass	6NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

2♠ was explained as transfer to ♥!!; the rest of the bidding was also a mess.

South started with ♠10 to ♠A; and declarer continued with a diamond to ♦A; South returned another spade. East collected 4 diamond tricks on which North discarded, among others, ♣3, keeping ♣ Q 9 4. East then played ♣J, overtaken by ♣K, and ♣10 from dummy. North followed with ♣9!!

South claimed that he would have led a heart, if he had the right information (2♠ being a transfer for a minor according to West).

TD: serious error

No doubt, this is a **serious error**. With ♣Q 9 over ♣10 and the ♣J already played, it is 'impossible' not to play ♣Q on the ♣10.

There is subsequent damage. If we accept the claim that a heart lead would have been made on the right information, the normal result would be 4 off. The expected result (playing ♣Q) is 3 off. The difference in score between these two results needs to be compensated.

The difference between 3 off and making the contract is self-inflicting.

5 W/All

	♠ 6 2	
	♥ A 8	
	♦ A Q 9 4	
	♣ A Q 8 7 2	
♠ J 10 9		♠ K Q 8
♥ Q 6 4 3		♥ K J 10 9 2
♦ 5 2		♦ K 8 3
♣ K 10 8 4		♣ J 5
	♠ A 7 5 4 3	
	♥ 7 5	
	♦ J 10 7 6	
	♣ 9 3	

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
Pass	1♣	1♥	1♠
Pass	2♦	Pass	2NT
Pass	3♣	Pass	3♦
Pass	3NT	Pass	Pass
x	All Pass		

- the response of 1♠ shows a least 5 spades
- 2NT requires North to bid 3♣ after which South wants to play 3♦, but North fails to alert it.

West leads ♥3, East wins with ♥K and switches to ♠K won by ♠A. ♦J loses to ♦K, and EW collect two spade tricks before switching to hearts to ♥A - after which declarer makes his contract.

TD: not continuing hearts on time is a serious error; what meaning could the ♥3 lead have other than West has ♥Q?

This is an example that can be used to introduce the 'caught in an idea' principle. East listens to the auction: with 2NT being 'natural' and showing ♥Q, it does not occur to him that ♥Q is in his partner's hand. That cannot be considered to be a serious error. Apart from 2 heart tricks he sees 3 diamond tricks and enough (?) club tricks for declarer. A spade switch to keep declarer to 9 tricks should not be considered ridiculous.

No serious error.

6 S/EW

	♠ J 9 6 ♥ K 7 5 ♦ A Q J 8 ♣ Q 7 6	
♠ A Q 7 4 ♥ Q ♦ 9 6 3 ♣ J 9 4 3 2	♠ 10 8 2 ♥ A 8 2 ♦ K 10 5 4 ♣ K 10 8	♠ K 5 3 ♥ J 10 9 6 4 3 ♦ 7 2 ♣ A 5

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
Pass	1NT	2♦	Pass
Pass	Pass	2♥	x
3♦	x	3♥	x
All Pass			

• 1NT shows 12 -14 HCP; 2♦ is not alerted. The TD will not allow the 3♥-bid.

South starts with ♣8 to ♣Q and ♣A, ♥3 to ♥Q and ♥K; ♦A; ♦8 to ♦10; diamond ruffed by East; ♥J to ♥A; South does not cash ♣K but plays ♦4, and declarer is home.

	♠ J 9 6 ♥ 7 ♦ Q ♣ 7 6	
♠ A Q 7 4 ♥ - ♦ - ♣ J 4 3	♠ 10 8 2 ♥ 8 ♦ 4 ♣ K 10	♠ K 5 3 ♥ 10 9 6 ♦ - ♣ 5

TD decides that not playing ♣K in this position is a serious error.

North has promised 12 HCP, which places ♠K in East's hand. The only danger is a club discard by East on West's last spade, if the suit behaves. South has no option but to play ♣K. Not playing it is a **serious error**.

The normal result is $3\diamond x - 3$; the expected result $3♥ x - 1$: compensation for the difference; but no compensation for the difference between $3♥ x - 1$ and $3♥ x$ made.

7 S/all - screens

	♠ J 8 ♥ A K J 9 8 4 ♦ Q ♣ A 10 4 3	
♠ K 7 5 4 2 ♥ 10 6 2 ♦ J 5 3 ♣ Q 5	♠ A Q 6 ♥ Q 7 ♦ K 10 9 8 7 ♣ K J 6	♠ 10 9 3 ♥ 5 3 ♦ A 6 4 2 ♣ 9 8 7 2

S	N	
1NT	2♦	2♦: game-forcing Stayman
3♦	3♥	
3NT	4♣	4♣: N to E: natural; S to W: cue bid
4♦	4NT	
5♦	6♥	

Lead: ♠10 to ♠6 and ♠K; West returned a club and the contract was made.

EW felt damaged: had West had the information given by East to North, he would have surely returned a diamond, he claims. NS cannot prove which agreement they have.

The Appeals Committee decided that not returning a diamond in trick 2 was a **serious error**.

Here is another consideration. If a player who has a choice can justify his action and this is a real possibility, it cannot be a serious error.

Given his explanation, why can't North have: ♠J83 ♥AKJ984 ♦AQ4 ♣4?

This is certainly not a serious error; it was the Appeals Committee that made a serious error, without consequences or subsequent damage to itself.

8 W/none - Teams

	♠ A 7		
	♥ J 9		
	♦ A K Q 10 5 2		
	♣ 9 4 3		
♠ K 5 2		♠ Q J 6 4 3	
♥ K Q 10 6 4		♥ 7 5 3 2	
♦ 7 6		♦ 4	
♣ A 10 6		♣ K Q 5	
	♠ 10 9 8		
	♥ A 8		
	♦ J 9 8 3		
	♣ J 8 7 2		
<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
1♥	2♦	3♦	5♦
x	All Pass		

5♦x goes for -500.

West explained 3♦ as strong with heart support. South told the TD East's hand is not what he would call 'strong'. If he knew that East could have such a hand, he would not have bid 5♦. East said that 3♦ shows trump support and is an invitation to game.

Is South's 5♦ bid a serious error (wild, gambling, whatever)?

The TD decided that the answer is 'yes'.

Well, 5♦ looks like gambling, but some calls are. There is no much difference between -420/-450 or -500. If North has ♠Ax ♥xx ♦AKxxx ♣Q9x it is possible to play for -300. And if East is strong it might be a good strategy to cut off the bidding space. Though no bow for 5♦, it is **not a serious error**. Had NS been vulnerable the description 'wild' for 5♦ would be close and could be applied.

9

	♠ K J 10 5 3 ♥ K 3 ♦ A Q 10 5 ♣ A 2	
♠ A 4 ♥ Q J 9 4 ♦ K J 4 3 ♣ 8 5 4	♠ Q ♥ 10 8 2 ♦ 8 6 2 ♣ K Q J 7 3	♠ 8 7 6 2 ♥ A 7 6 5 ♦ 9 7 ♣ 10 9 6

<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>
1♠	1NT
3♦	3♥
3♠	3NT
All Pass	

West leads ♣8 (with honors, fourth best), won in dummy. A Small spade follows to ♠Q and ♠A. West continues with ♥Q, to ♥K and ♥A, and East returns a club: 3NT+1.

After the end of play EW asked about the meaning of 3♥. North assumed it to be natural (he did not alert), but South had meant it as conventional (asking partner to stop).

Is East's not returning a heart at trick 4 a serious error?

The TD and the Appeals Committee decided 'yes', it was a serious error.

This is another example of conflicting information. South showed hearts and West seems to have ♥QJx? But even with ♥QJ9 the contract is not doomed. Can't West have ♠Ax ♥QJx ♦xxxxx ♣KJ8? In that case the only way to beat 3NT might be to return a club. Returning a heart gives declarer his contract if he holds ♥1098x

This is in no way a **serious error**.

	♠ J 6	
	♥ Q 3	
	♦ K Q J 9	
	♣ Q 10 7 5 4	
♠ A 10		♠ K Q 4 2
♥ A 8 7 5 2		♥ K 10 9 4
♦ A 10 8 4 3 2		♦ 7 6
♣ -		♣ 983
	♠ 9 8 7 6 3	
	♥ J 6	
	♦ 5	
	♣ A K J 8 2	

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
	1NT	Pass	2♥
x	Pass	Pass	3♣
3♦	x	3♥	Pass
Pass	4♣	All Pass	

1NT showed 11–14 HCP; x after 2♥ promised opening values with hearts; North's first pass denied 3 card spade support. 3♣ was explained as forcing by North and as non-forcing by South.

After the end of play, EW called the TD and said they might have reached 4♥ had East be given the explanation that 3♣ was non-forcing. The TD established that the meaning of 3♣ was not clear in the NS-partnership, so he decided that East had received wrong information.

Is not bidding 4♥ by East a serious error?

The TD and later the Appeals Committee decided that East should have bid 4♥ anyway (the Appeals Committee told East that he should have bid 4♥ in his second, third and fourth turn to call); not bidding 4♥ was considered a serious error as it had nothing to do with the wrong information he had received.

In this situation there will be many players who will not bid 4♥ with East's hand. Why should one believe North and not give West somewhat less? If West holds:

♠x ♥AJxxxx ♦AQxx ♣xx, 4♥ cannot be made.

Accordingly, East's failure to bid 4♥ was not a serious error.

11 N/NS

♠ A J 7 3
♥ K 5
♦ K 10 9 6
♣ K 7 5

♠ Q 6 4 ♥ A Q 10 8 4 ♦ J 2 ♣ 10 6 4	♠ K 10 8 5 ♥ J 3 2 ♦ Q 7 4 3 ♣ 9 3
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♠ 9 2
♥ 9 7 6
♦ A 8 5
♣ A Q J 8 2

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
Pass	1♦	Pass	1NT
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♦
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

1♦: Precision; 1NT: 10+, balanced, 2♣: Stayman.

West led ♥8 and South enquired about the agreements for the first lead. The answer was: 'top of nothing'. South ducked and lost the first 5 tricks.

West explained that he had led fourth best.

Assuming that wrong information was given, was declarer's failure to play ♥K a serious error?

The TD decided that not playing ♥K at the first trick was a serious error.

This is an interesting question. With all top heart honors in East's hand, the play of ♥K is useless. But then not playing ♥K is senseless anyway, as the only chance of making the contract is not to lose the first 5 tricks (at least). One could even say that asking about the meaning of the ♥8 opening lead does not make sense, because declarer has no option. Should this argument have been dominant for declarer? My answer is 'yes'; this is a **serious error**. We also could ask what is the expected result after the lead of ♥8? Or to make it more realistic: imagine that you are watching this board on Vugraph and imagine the reaction the moment declarer calls for a small heart from dummy. United screams of unbelief I assume?

♠ A 10 7 3	♠ J 6	♠ K 2
♥ A 6 5 3	♥ J 10	♥ K Q 9 7 2
♦ 3 2	♦ A K Q 8 4	♦ J 10 7
♣ 9 6 3	♣ K J 7 4	♣ A Q 8
	♠ Q 9 8 5 4	
	♥ 8 4	
	♦ 9 6 5	
	♣ 10 6 2	

<i>W</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
Pass	1NT	2♥	2♠
3♥	3♠	Pass	Pass
4♥	x	All Pass	

Result: 4♥x was made.

Because East hesitated before his first pass; the TD disallowed the 4♥ bid.

Is the double by North a serious error (wild, gambling)?

The TD did not think so (3♠-3 for both sides); the Appeals Committee upheld the decision for EW but considered the double by North a serious error. (In their appeal, EW did not ask that 3♠ be doubled, but 4♥ to be allowed).

Another case which raises some interesting questions. Would you allow West to double 3♠ after the hesitation, or is 'pass' a logical alternative (a TD who allows the double would decide that NS are not damaged by the UI- 4♥ bid) ? Is partner promising 2 defensive tricks? Probably not (give him ♠xx ♥KQxxxx ♦xx ♣Axx), so yes 'pass' is a logical alternative.

What about North's double? Does South promise anything but 5+ spades? No, and listening to the auction he doesn't have to have anything but 5+ spades. If we consider the double acceptable it becomes a free shot, to be removed by the TD in the likely case that 4♥ is disallowed. It is gambling unrelated to the irregularity. On the contrary, East sounds stronger than without the hesitation. Decide to call the double a **serious error**. Normal result 3♠-3, expected result 4♥ made and compensation for the difference. The actual result is 4♥x made and there is no compensation for the difference with 4♥ made.

Conclusion

TDs and Appeals Committees tend to have a strict judgment on actions by the non-offending side. They do not succeed in imagining the problem the innocent side is confronted with.

The laws allow the non-offending side to make errors – even big ones - without affecting the adjusted score to be awarded.

One possibility is to accept that a serious error has been committed if it is not considered to be an option even by a few players of comparable strength.

An erroneous consideration that a serious error has been committed would create damage which is not compensated by an adjusted score (subsequent damage: the difference between the expected result after the infraction and the actual result).

We might adopt another principle, especially for the non-offending side in defence: if it is possible to compose a realistic opponent's or partner's hand, using the information available at that moment, with which actual play could be justified, the case should not be considered to constitute a serious error.

