

Merrimac Coup



The second USS Merrimac was a 3362-ton collier (coal carrying vessel), built as the merchant ship Solveig at New Castle, England, in 1894. Purchased by the American Navy in April 1898, the ship was named in honor of the Merrimac River (supposedly an accidental spelling of the Merrimack River, a river formed by the junction of Pemigewasset and Winnepesaukee Rivers at Franklin, New Hampshire.) The Merrimac was soon supplying coal to U.S. warships operating off Cuba during the Spanish-American War. On June 3, 1898, in a daring attempt to bottle up Admiral Cervera's Spanish cruiser squadron, the Merrimac was scuttled inside the entrance of Santiago Harbor.

The above mission was a failure. The Merrimac's steering gear was damaged by enemy fire and though the vessel sunk, it did not block the channel. But it did provide us bridge players with a name for a maneuver that is best described as the deliberate sacrifice of an honor in an attempt to knock out a valuable entry. It's only a coincidence that one of the officers involved in this affair was named Hobson and while not the origin of the term Hobson's Choice, it is an additional name for the coup that we now call the MERRIMAC COUP.

In the following example South is the declarer at 3NT. West leads the ♦ Jack which East wins with the ace. East at this point sees that the ♠ Ace is dummy's only entry to the clubs after the ♣ Ace has been knocked out. In order to destroy this entry, East leads his ♠ King at trick 2, sacrificing a sure trick and giving South an extra spade trick, but ensuring the defeat of the contract. East can then hold up two rounds on the club suit ensuring that dummy is then useless. East has, in effect, torpedoed the chance of South of fulfilling the contract.

	North	
	♠ A3	Contract 3NT
	♥ 543	
	♦ 43	
	♣ KQJ1093	
West		East
♠ 10984		♠ K72
♥ K106		♥ Q987
♦ J10987		♦ A52
♣ 6		♣ A54
	South	
	♠ QJ65	
	♥ AJ2	
	♦ KQ6	
	♣ 872	

Another example even though the bidding may not suit your style.

	North	
	♠ AQ8	
	♥ 3	
	♦ A3	
	♣ Q987542	
West		East
♠ K		♠ J1092
♥ Q9765		♥ AJ42
♦ J876		♦ K1054
♣ J63		♣ 10
	South	
	♠ 76543	
	♥ K108	
	♦ Q92	
	♣ AK	

Bidding:			
South	West	North	East
1♠	P	2♣	P
2NT	P	3♦	P
3NT	P	4♠	All pass

If you are East and your partner, West, leads the ♥ 6 (4th best), you win the ♥ Ace but you should do some analyzing before deciding what to do at trick 2. It seems that Dummy has bid quite aggressively and was looking for a slam. But they did get stopped at game and it appears, in spite of their bad trump break, they are in the right spot. Is there anything you can do to kill that long club suit in the dummy?

It seems that declarer has only five trumps and 3 hearts so his most likely distribution (since he never would support clubs) is 5-3-3-2. He likely has either the ♥ King or the ♥ QJ, the ♦ Q, and the ♣ A, plus one of the black Kings, but not both. Or he might be missing the ♣ Ace and have the ♦ Jack as well as both black Kings.

It seems right to remove the ♦ Ace from dummy so shifting to the ♦ King at trick two will do that. This will give away a trick but hopefully it will come back with interest. If declarer lets the ♦ King hold, you can continue the suit and knock out the Ace anyway. The Merrimac Coup in action. While it is possible to make 4♠ after the ♦ King play at trick two, it is much more likely that declarer will fail.