

The Belladonna Coup

Giorgio Belladonna 1923-1995.

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Unfortunately, I have never had the opportunity of playing against the late Giorgio Belladonna, much less play with him as my partner. As a matter of fact, I have never actually seen him, and yet, he has for some rather intangible reason been my bridge hero ever since the time I began to become aware of who is who in bridgedom, not long after I had started to play the game, around 1964. Those were the heydays of the famed Italian Blue Team which, starting in 1957, won the Bermuda Bowl ten times running, and several times thereafter, as well as the team Olympiad thrice, and each time with Belladonna in its ranks.


This month marks the second anniversary of Belladonna's passing at the age of nearly 72, on May 12th 1995, and I thought it high time that some play performed - if not invented, perhaps - by the maestro be named after him, as a fitting tribute to the memory of this remarkable bridge genius.

The play that comes to mind occurred in the following hand from, I believe, a European Community championship held at Ostend, Belgium, in the mid-eighties. (I've as yet not been able to unearth the exact layout, but the essentials are as given.)

E/NS	♠ 863		West	North	East	South Belladonna
	♥ K6		Pass	2 ♦	Pass	1 ♠
	♦ AK532		Pass	4 ♠	Pass	2 ♠
	♣ K64		Pass			Pass
♠ K72		♠ 104				
♥ Q1053		♥ A974				
♦ 106		♦ QJ87				
♣ 9832		♣ J105				
	♠ AQJ95					
	♥ J82					
	♦ 94					
	♣ AQ7					

West got the defence off to a good start by leading a small trump, to the 10 and declarer's jack of spades. Thus, the defenders put themselves a step ahead of declarer in the latter's effort to ruff his third-round heart loser in the event that gaining a trick in the suit by force should prove impossible. Belladonna didn't even attempt to play for ♥ A onside or, failing that, ♥ Q onside. Nor did he try to develop dummy's diamonds, as this would require an extra entry, unless that suit was breaking three-three. Instead, he crossed to dummy in clubs and led a small heart, away from his doubleton king. This move gave East the awkward choice of either winning his ace in order to play a second round of trumps, or to duck and let his partner take the trick with the queen. West would then be unable to continue trumps without sacrificing his trump trick. In the event, East ducked, and West was powerless. He returned a heart to East's ace, but on the spade return Belladonna rose with the ace, ruffed his last heart, and so made his contract.

Curiously, the theme of the above deal and its connection with Giorgio Belladonna, is not new. In the late Victor Mollo's *The Bridge Immortals* (Hart Publ. Cy., New York, 1968), an entertaining collection of stories about the bridge personalities of the era, we find the following gem.

E/NS	♠ J9 ♥ K4 ♦ J10876 ♣ A764		
♠ K4 ♥ Q1087 ♦ K95 ♣ KQ93		♠ 2 ♥ A965 ♦ Q432 ♣ J1082	
	<i>Belladonna</i> ♠ AQ1087653 ♥ J32 ♦ A ♣ 5		

West started a diamond against 4 ♠ Belladonna crossed to dummy's ♣ A, and led a low heart away from the king. East could not afford to play the ace in order to play a trump, and West, after winning his ♥ Q could not profitably lead a trump either. Thus, 4 ♠ was cold as long as the A wasn't ruffed, with the loss of a spade and two heart tricks. The peculiar thing about this hand is that Belladonna claimed he had never played it, even though it was attributed to him. Quite an honour indeed! The story goes that it was shown to him on a scrap of paper as a problem, and he solved it - the only one to do so, it appears. Afterwards, as legends tend to do, it was bandied about that he had made this great play at the table. But even if he hadn't played the hand then, its point certainly wasn't lost on him, as the first deal shown proved some twenty years later.

Incidentally, the second hand has also been published with North's clubs headed by AQJ, giving declarer the option of a club finesse, and an inferior line of play for the contract. It is thought that the hand was constructed by the late Paul Lukacs, reputedly the best player in the world - away from the bridge table.


When discussing the idea of baptizing this gambit the Belladonna coup, it was suggested to me that it is too difficult a play to be appreciated by the rank and file of bridge players, and consequently, that it might not gain the worldwide and timeless recognition that I am seeking. Be that as it may, the Belladonna coup is, in comparison with the widely known Merrimac and Deschappelles coups, considerably less obvious a play indeed - but that makes for an extra incentive to bring it to the attention of as broad an audience as

possible, while also researching other applications for its use, perhaps in some instances in a less recognizable form.

Technically, the Belladonna coup may be classified as a type of avoidance play. That is, a tactical maneuver by declarer in a given suit, designed to keep a particular defender from gaining the lead and possibly making a fatal return, either in terms of tricks, or tempo, or both. In the pure form - by definition, as in the above deal - the Belladonna coup contains both elements, with the special feature that the dangerous defender may not, perhaps, be kept off lead - hence, the 'type of' - but only in exchange for a vital trick or tempo for declarer. In this respect the Belladonna coup differs from the standard avoidance plays. Here, declarer deliberately played to incur, in principle at least, two or even three losers in the suit. But in effect he exchanged the best, but uncertain play for one trick in hearts for a sure third-round ruff or sacrifice of a defensive trump trick. The alternative would be non-optimal defence in the suit. The position of the honours in the key suit is irrelevant. It should be noted that this play has also been described as a safety play, but that classification strikes me as inappropriate, because declarer's objective is not to ensure a certain number of tricks in the suit.

Returning now to the first hand, with the opposing honours lying favorably for the defence - ace over the king and queen over the jack - the defenders may gain a tempo in cutting dummy's ruffing power, but only at the expense of their third trick in the suit. This occurs when East steps up with the ace in order to lead a second trump through declarer. Notice that with the position of ace and queen reversed, the coup still works: even if East were brave enough to insert the queen and continue a trump, he has solved declarer's third-round problem in the suit as his queen catches air. But if East ducks, the jack will dislodge the ace, and declarer will have a second-round winner as well as a third-round ruff.

It should be stressed that despite the appearance of the last scenario, the Belladonna coup does not inherently contain an element of deception, as may readily be seen in the next example. The deal also illustrates that the coup may work with Jx opposite Kxx, rather than Kx opposite Jxx, the point being that the first trick be lost to the harmless defender, or alternatively, that a trick may subsequently be scored by force.

<p>W/none</p> <p>♠ 864 ♥ J103 ♦ J4 ♣ AK542</p>		<p>♠ AQ975 ♥ 52 ♦ Q1082 ♣ 109</p>	<p>West North East South</p> <p>Pass Pass Pass 1 ♥</p> <p>Pass 2 ♣ Pass 2 ♥</p> <p>Pass 3 ♥ Pass Pass</p> <p>Pass</p>
<p>♠ 103 ♥ Q74 ♦ A953 ♣ QJ64</p>			
<p>♠ KJ2 ♥ AK986 ♦ K76 ♣ 87</p>			


North's 2 ♣ bid is Drury, and 2 ♥ usually shows the equivalent of a 5=3=3=2 hand with 13 or 14 points, but maybe a longer suit if the hand does not qualify for a stronger rebid. Two hearts is forcing, in case North wishes to show a genuine 2NT, or clubs. This being pairs, South felt no need to press on to game. Against South's 3 ♥ contract West led the ♠ 10, taken by East's ace. East continued with a small spade to

South's jack. Fearing the loss of two diamonds, one spade, a spade ruff, and possibly a trump promotion, declarer started by pulling one round of trumps rather than playing on diamonds right away. He then realized that the two diamond losers might become three if he were to pull another round. So he reverted his attention to diamonds after all, but by crossing to dummy in clubs and leading a small diamond away from the jack. East played the ten, and South's king was taken by West's ace. West could not afford to play trumps as this would sacrifice his trump trick. Besides, after winning the second round of diamonds, East wouldn't have a trump left to prevent the diamond ruff. And thus, the contract was duly made. Interchange North's jack and South's king, and the play of the small diamond from dummy would equally leave the defence powerless, irrespective of who held the ace or the queen.

As the cards lay declarer could, of course, have played the diamond king from hand with the same result, but that would have been unnecessarily giving up on the possibility of the ace onside, and would be quite wrong if East held the ace and returned a trump.

Afterwards, East realized he could have saved the day by letting declarer take the first spade. Then, after winning the ace of diamonds, West could still reach his partner in spades for a spade ruff, and next in diamonds for a trump promotion, and a one trick set. There's no better sight than hindsight.

In the final deal we see the application of the Belladonna coup in a notrump contract. It should be borne in mind, however, that by definition of the coup declarer lacks the wherewithal for a third-round winner in the suit. Therefore he will only in very rare instances adopt an inferior line for establishing a trick in that suit at notrump.

<p>E/NS</p> <p>♠ 643 ♥ 10542 ♦ KQ83 ♣ K8</p> <p>♠ K72 ♥ Q1053 ♦ 106 ♣ 9832</p> <p>♠ AQJ95 ♥ J82 ♦ 94 ♣ AQ7</p>		<p>♠ 104 ♥ A974 ♦ QJ87 ♣ J105</p>	<p>West North East South <i>Belladonna</i></p> <p>Pass 2♦ Pass 1♠</p> <p>Pass 4♠ Pass 2♠</p> <p>Pass Pass Pass Pass</p>
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The 2 ♠ lead went via East's jack to declarer's queen. South now led a diamond to the queen, and the defensive signals suggested the suit was breaking three-three. But fearing both major suit kings with West, South felt he could not afford to use up his scarce entries to hand for repeating the diamond finesse and later playing toward ♣ K in order to cash the high diamonds, as this might establish too many tricks for the defence. This analysis was perhaps not ironclad, but that's neither here nor there.

Much would be gained if the first club trick could be lost to West as this would leave that defender poorly placed. And so declarer called for dummy's ♣ 8, the Belladonna coup. East of course ducked, and South's jack was taken by West's queen. This move had the additional advantage of producing an immediate club trick and a dummy entry should East play the ace, or fail to play the queen if he held that card. In order to remove what he believed to be an entry to dummy, West continued clubs. East took his ace, and rather than embarking on an uncertain adventure in hearts (which wouldn't have helped anyway), he dutifully

returned a spade. South hopped up with the ace and played another diamond, ducked again by West, who was then put on lead with a third diamond. After taking his two spade tricks and - from South's point of view somewhat unexpectedly, perhaps - a high club, he was endplayed in hearts and had to concede the contract, as South took ace and queen of hearts, and the seven of clubs.