

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire

Santa and the reindeer had just finished their annual Christmas Eve bridge game. Rudolph was scurrying around telling the other reindeer how Santa had executed a perfect endplay against Donner to win the match.

Jolly old St. Nick gently put a stop to Rudolph's merry making by saying, "Now, my dears, it's time for all that frivolity to stop. We have to plan our route for travelling around the world and we have a special problem to overcome this year."

"Everyone knows," Santa announced, "that there have been wildfires in California and there are lots of stops we have to make in that area. We don't know yet if the fires will still be raging when we're travelling through the area, but I do know that all of you might be a little afraid of the fire."

Comet was the first to speak. "You know, Santa, young and small animals are at risk in wildfires but older animals have an instinct for survival. People look at burned areas and think they're dead. But for us, it makes a whole new habitat"

"Yes," replied Santa. "Some species can release their spores only after a fire. And some plants can't reproduce without fire."

"And, Santa, I've heard," Vixen piped up, "that winter ranges that have been burned recently sometimes produce as much as 20 times more forage per acre than areas that haven't been burned."

"Yes, Vixen, I know that fire can be beneficial to habitat in many ways but I'm still worried that some of you might be spooked if we encounter those wildfires."

"Well, Santa," intoned the always dependable Blitzen, "we're not like those chimps who can predict how fire will move, but I think we'll be able to keep focused on our job to deliver toys to boys and girls throughout the world."

Rudolph was puzzled. "What chimps are you talking about, Blitzen?"

"An anthropologist, Jill Pruetz, watched chimps react to a wildfire burning around them. The male leader would emit a loud barking noise to let the other chimps know of the danger. He would begin to sway back and forth, directing his motion toward the fire. The chimps seemed perfectly capable of controlling the fire and could predict much better than the anthropologist how the fire would move."

"Well, everyone, it seems we have nothing to worry about, now if could just...".

"Santa," Rudolph interrupted, "could you please tell us why you played that last hand the way you did?" Santa looked as if he were about to launch into management mode when Rudolph begged, "Please, Santa. Please?"

"All right. We do have a minute or two." And Santa scribbled the deal on the workshop's white board.

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

♥ J 6 4 3
♦ Q 9 7 6 3
♣ Q 3

Rudolph couldn't wait to get started. "There were three passes to me, sitting North," he said. "I opened one spade and Santa responded one notrump. I raised him right to three notrump. Was that right, Santa?"

"Well, Rudolph, you had only 18 points and I might have had six points for my one notrump. Better would have been for you to raise to two notrump. If I had a maximum I could have bid three. And as you see, I would have had no trouble bidding game. We would have arrived in the same spot, but more comfortably, perhaps."

"I was so excited, Santa," cried Rudolph, "that I came around behind you to see how you would do. Donner led the six of clubs and when Blitzen played the ten and you won the queen I thought the contract would depend on finding the club suit divided 4-4 so that they could cash only three clubs and the ace of diamonds."

"That was the most likely possibility, Rudolph," Santa remarked. "But if the clubs were 4-4 they would still be 4-4 after I ran the spades. And by running the spade suit, I might gain some important information."

"When Santa ran the spade suit," exclaimed Donner, "I was in real trouble. I didn't think I could discard a heart, so I discarded two diamonds on the third and fourth spades. On the fifth spade I didn't want to discard a club..."

"You're right," Santa interjected. "That would have meant I could have knocked out the ace of diamonds."

"I knew that," Donner admitted, "so I discarded the ten of diamonds."

"When Blitzen had to make his first discard," Santa added, "he discarded the eight of diamonds. I had discarded one heart and two diamonds."

"Two things stood out in my mind," Santa continued. "I thought that Donner's unwillingness to discard a heart was significant. And I believed that Blitzen's signal was sincere and that he held the ace of diamonds."

Santa announced, "If both these presumptions were correct, I could lead a club, forcing Donner to take his club winners and lead a heart. And that's exactly what happened."

All the reindeer were impressed with Santa's achievement and clapped and chattered uproariously.

"All right now," Santa admonished. "Let's get a move on."

"Yep, time to fire up that sleigh," Rudolph shrieked.

A chorus of "Merry Christmas to all" rang out as the reindeer fastened their bells and harnesses and disappeared into the chill night air.