



## Weekly Wisdom

### The Sydney Bridge Centre mini lesson

Starting from October 2022, Julian Foster (many times NSW representative) will be analysing an interesting hand from each Monday morning session. The City and Canada Bay venues are planning to play the same hand on Monday morning. His column is updated weekly and published on the Sydney Bridge Centre website, under "Learn Bridge".

You are also welcome to [send questions](#) about hands that you have played. Please use "Weekly Wisdom" as email subject.

### The Michaels cue bid again, and how "Restricted choice" changes the odds in a suit.

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 5<sup>th</sup> December 2022

<b>11</b>		♠ 74	Dlr: S
		♥ Q	Vul: Nil
		♦ KJ9764	
		♣ K432	
♠ AKT965	♠ 2	9	
♥ AKT87	♥ 6543	14	5
♦ 3	♦ AT5	12	
♣ 6	♣ JT975		
		♠ QJ83	
		♥ J92	
		♦ Q82	
		♣ AQ8	
		♠ -	NT
		N - 3	- - -
		S - 3	- - -
		E - -	6 4 -
		W - -	6 4 -

On board 11 last week, East West can actually make slam in hearts but it's not necessarily clear they will even bid the suit!

South will usually start with 1♣ and the first key decision belongs to West. If he chooses to bid 2♣, a Michaels cue bid showing at least 5-5 in the majors, then East will know about the heart fit. However it's not clear to use Michaels on this hand. Some players will prefer to overcall 1♠ with the intention of bidding hearts later.

There are a couple of reasons for this:

- Reserving Michaels for weak or strong hands but not intermediate hands can make it easier for the responding hand. The idea is that a weak hand may help identify a sacrifice, a strong hand may help find a slam. Using Michaels with any strength of hand makes it very hard for partner to judge what to do. This hand is intermediate in terms of high card points and may well prefer to start with 1♠. When it later bids hearts, partner now knows that it has a lot of shape but, because it did not use Michaels, it is intermediate in terms of strength.
- You have 6 spades and 5 hearts. When partner is equal length in the majors, they are most likely going to bid 2♥ which means you could end up in an inferior spot. (There is a way around this if you agree to play that a 2♦ response from partner shows equal length in the majors and asks you to bid your better one).

Over either 2♣ or 1♠ North also has a problem. Although he has nice shape he is not really strong enough to bid 2♦ (that would normally be 10+ and forcing whereas here he only has 9 points with 2 of those potentially worthless). These days, partner's 1♣ usually doesn't show 4 so he can't really raise clubs either. He might stretch a bit to bid 2♦ anyway but pass is also quite reasonable unless he is playing a convention known as "negative free bids" where a bid of a new suit at the 2 level in competition is not forcing – see advanced section for more details.

Of course one of the downsides of not bidding Michaels on the West hand is the risk he never gets the chance to show his second suit. That could easily happen on this hand - if West overcalls 1♠ then it's perfectly possible that will be the end of the auction! East certainly can't introduce a new suit and if 1♠ comes back to South he should give up holding 4 trumps and having already described his hand pretty well. It looks like only one table played in a contract of 1♠ though so most pairs obviously had different auctions.

If West does bid Michaels then East is worth a jump to 4♥. Even though he only has 5 points his hand is going to be very useful for partner with a singleton spade, 4 trumps (so a known 9 card fit) and an outside ace known to be opposite one of partner's short suits.

What about the play in hearts? North will most likely lead a minor. Declarer will either win ♦A or ruff the 2nd club. With any two suited hand like this, success will depend on being able to set up the long side suit – i.e. spades here. So declarer should be looking to trump spades in dummy to make the rest of the spades into winners.

Best is to cash one top trump (noting the ♥Q from North), then play ♠A and a spade ruff in dummy (no need to play the ♠K, that will score later after trumps are drawn). Declarer can then return to hand with a trump and ruff another low spade in dummy to set the rest of the spades up. The key to whether he makes 11 or 12 tricks is whether he plays a heart to the ♥K on the 2nd round or whether he finesses the ♥10. This is a position known as “Restricted choice” which often causes confusion. The fact that North has played the ♥Q actually makes the finesse the better play. See advanced section for more discussion. Today even if declarer plays the ♥K he should still come to 11 tricks (losing just the ♣A and a trump) and a good score given some pairs won’t even find a heart contract.

Note that it is not a good idea to cash both top hearts first. That’s because after you take a spade ruff in dummy your only route back to hand is then a diamond ruff which is shortening your own trumps. If you duck a club (with the intention of later ruffing a club back to hand) after playing ♥AK that’s even worse! It allows South to get in and cash the ♥J. That’s the 3rd round of trumps so you will now only score one spade ruff in dummy which isn’t enough to set the suit up.

Some pairs played in spades which isn’t nearly as nice as hearts because now you only have one entry to the East hand. In practice declarer (who cannot see the bad split in trumps) could easily lose 2 spades, 1 heart and 1 club to only make 9 tricks.

### Key points to note

- Two suited hands are powerful when a fit is found. East West here can make slam and they have a combined total of 19 points, 1 of which (♣J) is useless!
- The Michaels cue bid showing at least 5-5 in two suits is a useful bidding tool but it can be hard for partner to judge what to do if you use it on any strength of hand. A common treatment is to use it with strong or weak hands, but not intermediate hands.
- When declaring with a two suited hand, it’s almost always necessary to try and set up the side suit – most commonly by ruffing in dummy.
- When a queen or jack drops on your left, it’s reasonable to presume that the defender in question had no choice – therefore his card is more likely to be singleton than a holding of exactly QJ doubleton and finessing on the next round is the better odds. This is known as “Restricted choice”.

### More advanced

After a start of 1♣ 1♠ North’s 2♦ bid is usually played as natural and forcing. However, some pairs agree to use a convention known as “negative free bids” where new suits at the 2 level are not forcing. That would be ideal on this hand as North can bid 2♦ and South can pass. Today West will almost certainly bid again and East West will then outbid North South in hearts. But on another day being able to pass 2♦ may be very useful. Like any convention, however, there are advantages and disadvantages. The big downside to negative free bids comes when North has a good hand because now he can’t just bid his suit naturally as partner will pass! Instead, all good hands have to start with a double. That means double has to be used on a huge variety of hands. If East were to then raise West’s overall pre-emptively that can make it very hard for North South to safely get back into the auction. It’s for this reason that negative free bids are not that popular in practice.

Let’s look again at the heart suit. With 9 cards in a suit missing the Queen, most experienced players know (in the absence of any other information about the distribution) that the odds favour cashing AK and for the suit to split 2-2. After the ♥A drops North’s ♥Q, though, the odds in the heart suit change and finessing the ♥10 on the 2nd round becomes better. Why? It’s down to a principle called “Restricted choice”.

Once the ♥Q has appeared, the only position where finessing the ♥10 loses is when North started with exactly ♥QJ. But when he started with that holding he could play either the ♥J or the ♥Q on the 1st round. Contrast that with him holding ♥Jx or ♥Qx. In those cases on the 1st round he would of course play the small one and keep the honour – he effectively has no choice. Looked at another way - whenever the ♥Q is singleton, North is forced to play it. When it’s with a low card, North is basically forced NOT to play it. When it’s with the ♥J, North has a choice whether to play it or not.

Therefore the fact that North played the ♥Q makes it less likely that he ALSO has the ♥J (because roughly half the time he would have played the ♥J instead). Exactly the same applies if North played the ♥J on the 1st round. Of course there are always going to be some hands where North DOES have exactly ♥QJ. There the “expert” will finesse into it and lose a trick more than someone who doesn’t know about restricted choice and just cashes ♥AK! But in the long run, the expert’s play of the finesse will win more often..

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)