



## Weekly Wisdom

### The Sydney Bridge Centre mini lesson

The Sydney Bridge Centre runs a morning session on Monday in both venues in City and Canada Bay. They play the same hands and we run inter-venue competitions from time to time. Julian Foster (many times NSW representative) will be analysing an interesting hand from each Monday morning session. 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.

## Cross Ruffing

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 13<sup>th</sup> February 2023

Board 1 last week saw most East West pairs playing in a fairly normal 4♥ contract. Most made 10 tricks. The hand is best played by ruffing in both hands and there are some special considerations to note when doing that. Let’s have a look.

<b>1</b>		♠ K982	Dir: N
		♥ 6	Vul: Nil
		♦ QJ52	
		♣ AJ96	
♠ AQ984	♠ AJ653		11
♥ K963	♥ J753		12 10
♦ KT53	♦ AT8		7
	♣ 8		
♠ QT74			
♥ KT2			
♦ 74			
♣ Q742			

First the auction. North might well choose to open 1 minor. Even though East wouldn’t open his hand, he should overcall 1♠. There are lots of reasons to do so:

- It takes up a fair bit of space from the opponents
- It pinpoints a decent lead for partner
- It may lead to your side finding a good contract
- No-one vulnerable is the best time to be competing at pairs (this is due to the way the scoring works - see the column on 11th November 2020 for a more in-depth look)

If North has opened 1♣ East might consider doubling instead of overcalling 1♠. There’s often debate about whether it’s better to double or overcall on hands like this. As usual there are pluses and minuses to each approach. See Advanced section for more on that.

South might bid 1NT over 1m 1♠ which usually shows about 7-10 and a spade stop. It also tends to deny 4 hearts (with that South would make a negative double).

Although West certainly won’t be encouraged by a 1♠ overcall from his partner he is still strong enough to bid 2♥ himself as his hand will be powerful if a fit is found. East of course is very happy to hear that and should definitely jump to game. Yes even though he only has 10 points. His hand is worth a lot more now he knows about at least a 9 card heart fit and he has ruffing values with his short club.

Had East started with a double then it’s West who should be forcing to game. He has good support for hearts and diamonds plus a void.

Another variant in the auction might be North passing to start with. Now it will probably be three passes to West who will open 1♥. North might double that but East is as maximum as it’s possible for a passed hand to be so again the pair should have no trouble getting to 4♥.

Turning now to the play in 4♥, North doesn’t have an attractive lead but, whatever he does, West should be looking to play the hand by trumping his club losers in dummy. To do that will require him to return to hand several times and, apart from ♦K, he will need to do that with spade ruffs. This means he is embarking on a “cross ruff” line of play where he is ruffing in both hands. This can be a very effective way to play but you do have to be careful.

A key technique when playing a cross ruff is to cash your side suit winners first. In this hand that’s the ♦AK. One of the major points of a cross ruff is that you are, unusually, NOT trying to draw the opponents’ trumps (you can’t afford to because you want to score your own trumps separately).

Therefore, if you don't cash your side suit tricks early on the opponents may be able to discard from that suit while you are ruffing and later be able to trump your winners. It's actually alright on this hand because both clubs and spades break evenly so the opponents will have to follow suit. But had South had fewer spades or North fewer clubs they may have been able to discard diamonds.

Another point to be careful about is getting over-ruffed. If you are ruffing in both hands you are shortening your own trumps. If an opponent can overruff and return another trump you could find the hand falling apart very quickly! To prevent this you may need to deliberately ruff high at some point simply to be able to continue the cross ruff.

On this hand declarer can make 11 tricks which will often be ♠A, ♦AK, 3 club ruffs in East and all 5 trumps in his own hand. He loses a diamond and a trump. In fact South may well end up being forced to trump his partner's diamond winner at the end!

What about defending against a cross-ruff? Very simple - lead trumps whenever you can! Each round of trumps the defenders play could be worth 2 tricks to declarer (a ruff in each hand). There are sometimes ways you can predict as a defender that a cross ruff is going to happen - see advanced section.

Frequently declarer has to lose a trick before he can start a cross ruff (like here where he needs to lose a club before he can ruff any in dummy). So if the defence start with trumps and then continue them when they get in that's stopping 2 ruffs in each hand. If they can get 2 rounds of trumps played on this hand that would leave declarer with 3 club losers but only 2 trumps in dummy to ruff them with. It's for that reason that if North did happen to lead a trump then declarer shouldn't just duck a club from his hand, he should lead towards his ♣K from dummy. That stops South being able to get in to play a 2nd trump. See advanced section for a bit more on this.

### Key points to note

- When faced with a choice of doubling or overcalling a 5 card suit (typically with a 5431 type shape), it's usually better to overcall and hope to make a takeout double to show the other suit later. You could easily miss a 5-3 fit if you double first.
- Cross ruffing (ruffing losers in both hands) can be a good declarer play technique.
- Before starting a cross ruff, cash your side suit winners.
- When defending, if you suspect a cross-ruff lead trumps whenever you can.
- If, as declarer, you can limit which defender can win a trick that can sometimes be to your advantage (only one of them may be able to lead a suit you don't want led!).

### More advanced

What about overcalling or doubling with East?

The obvious advantage of double is it offers 3 possible suits for partner which increases the chance of finding a fit. Overcalling 1♠ might miss the heart fit altogether (imagine West being a bit weaker and unable to bid 2♥ himself).

On the other hand the big downside of double is missing a 5-3 spade fit. Would you respond to a takeout double by bidding a 3 card major? No, neither would I! If partner is, say, 3352 he will respond in diamonds and you'll probably miss your spade fit. The best chance of finding a spade fit if one exists is to overcall.

The modern style therefore tends very much to be to overcall the 5 card suit and then hope to come back into the auction later with a takeout double to show the other suit. Say it starts 1♣ 1♠ and South raises to 2♣ or bids 1NT. East can make a takeout double now which means the heart fit doesn't get lost. Such a double tends not to show extra values, just a normal overcalling hand with a suitable shape.

The principle here is it's possible to recover from the downside of overcalling first (by doubling back in to find a fit somewhere else). It's much harder to recover from the downside of doubling first (bidding spades yourself after doubling tends to show a very different hand type - one that was too strong to overcall 1♠ the first time).

How might you tell as a defender that a cross ruff is imminent? One way is from the auction. If the opponents each bid a suit but then end up playing in a third suit it's usually because they each have a shortage in the other's suit. Another way to tell is when you have length in their suits. On these occasions a trump lead can be very effective.

I mentioned that on this hand if North did lead a heart and declarer wins in hand then he should not just lead his own low club. That would let South win who could play a 2nd round of trumps. Here declarer has plenty of entries so he should cross to ♦A and lead towards his ♣K (from his perspective the ♣A might be onside anyway). North has to win the club and he has no more trumps. But sometimes there are hands where you don't have the luxury of those entries and you have to play the suit from your own hand (imagine if the ♦A wasn't in dummy). Rather than just lead a low club from hand a better technique is to lead the ♣K itself. You weren't planning on scoring a trick with ♣K anyway so you haven't lost anything. What you have done is ensure that only the defender with the ♣A can win the trick. If that defender doesn't have another trump then you've gained. In general it's in declarer's interest not to give the defence a choice of which one of them wins the trick.

Another small point as a defender. If you suspect a cross ruff you want to hang onto larger trumps in case you can overruff later. As South for example on this hand you would not want to put the ♥K up at trick 1 if partner led the suit. Often a cross-ruff will fall apart if the defence can overruff and return another trump. Declarer has usually weakened his trumps in both hands by that stage so the defence may well end up with more trumps than declarer and that in turn gives them the chance to cash their side suit winners..

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)