



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.

Bidding over 1NT. Positional stoppers.

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 30th January 2023

4	♠ K62	Dir: W	
	♥ Q43	Vul: All	
	♦ T942		
	♣ 653		
♠ T9543	♠ AJ	5	
♥ K972	♥ AT6	10 17	
♦ A3	♦ J76	8	
♣ K2	♣ AQJ98		
	♠ Q87		
	♥ J85		
	♦ KQ85		
	♣ T74		

	♣	♦	♥	NT
N	-	-	-	-
S	-	-	-	-
E	5	2	4	5
W	5	2	4	5

Board 4 last week saw most pairs reach the normal 3NT contract East West but there was some interest in the bidding and play. At pairs making overtricks is important so it's a question of how declarer can most safely look for overtricks. Let's have a look.

West is close to an opening bid but the hand isn't really good enough. It's only 10 points, relatively balanced and the spade suit that you'll surely open if you bid anything isn't one you want partner to lead. If you are playing a method where you can open a weak hand showing both majors I'd definitely do that but otherwise it's a pass.

North passes and East will probably then open a 15-17 1NT. With 10 points West now knows he wants to play in game - but which one? It's worth knowing what to do with various hand shapes over 1NT, especially with majors as they come up frequently and you want to be able to get to 4♥ or 4♠ when you have at least an 8 card fit, and usually 3NT if you don't.

There are assorted bidding methods available. One option for West is to start with 2♥ (transfer to spades) and then follow up with 3♥ (game forcing because it's a new suit at the 3 level). That shows both his suits and will allow him to find any major suit fit if it exists. Another option might be to start with stayman but that risks losing a 5-3 spade fit unless you have some more bidding methods available after a 2♦ response. See advanced section for some other options.

Here there is no major suit fit so East West will almost certainly end in 3NT. Having done so what about the play? 9 tricks are easy so it's a question of overtricks. Most Souths led ♦5 and a few tried the ♦K. Even though it doesn't work so well today the ♦5 is the more usual lead from this holding. It helps untangle the suit if partner has the A or the J, particularly if they are doubleton where leading the K would block the suit. When you have a longer suit you might lead a high one initially because the chances of declarer or dummy having the J in a short holding is then higher. Here the ♦5 unluckily runs round to declarer's J (declarer should definitely play low and run the lead round to his hand in case this is what's happened – he has nothing to lose by trying).

At this point declarer can actually make 11 tricks. He can set up an extra heart which will lead to 1 spade, 3 hearts, 2 diamonds and 5 clubs. It looks like a few tables did this to score +660 and a joint top. How should declarer play the heart suit to maximise his chances of 3 tricks? The answer is actually A, K and another which isn't necessarily that obvious. See advanced section for why.

BUT the answer is different if South has led ♦K. This time declarer should win ♦A and then play ♥K and a low heart to the 10. Why the difference? Because when trick 1 has run round to the ♦J, declarer has a certain 2nd diamond stopper. That's not the case after the ♦K lead. He now only has ♦Jx in his hand which is what's known as a “positional stopper” in diamonds. As long as South is on lead it means the defence can only take 1 more diamond trick so it's safe to lose the lead to South. But if North is on lead he could play the ♦10 through the Jx and the defence can then take 3 diamonds. Therefore declarer cannot afford to take the best line in hearts because it could mean North gaining the lead.

Key points to note

- 10 counts aren't usually worth a 1 level opening bid unless they have a fair bit of shape.
- When in a cold game, look for safe ways to make overtricks.
- It's worth discussing with your regular partner how to deal with various hand shapes over 1NT. Especially ones with majors.
- A positional stopper means the defenders cannot run a suit against you if your left hand opponent is on lead but may be able to if your right hand opponent is on lead.
- How you play a suit in isolation may change depending on whether you can afford to lose the lead to either defender or just one.

More advanced

Although West could transfer to spades and bid 3♥ he would also do this if he held 55 in the majors. So a convention used these days is "Smolen". Basically it means you start with stayman on a hand with 54 in the majors. If partner responds 2 of a major you have obviously found a fit and all is fine. If partner responds 2♦ a bid of 3 major now shows 4 of that major and 5 of the other major. So on this hand West would bid 3♥. There are several advantages to this:

- a) By bidding his 4 card suit, it allows partner to bid the 5 card majors if he has a fit. That means the stronger 15-17 hand will be declarer which is usually best.
- b) By bidding 54 hands this way it means that you can play the alternative sequence of transferring to 2♠ and bidding 3♥ as showing at least 55 shape which means you can find 53 fits in both majors not just spades.

I said the right play in isolation in the heart suit is A, K and another. The reason it's right to do this is because declarer holds both the ♥10 AND the ♥9. When hearts are 3-3 as here, it makes no difference. The benefit comes when hearts are 4-2. If you choose to lead low to the 9 or 10 and lose to a doubleton honour (Jx or Qx) you will only end up with 2 tricks in the suit. Cashing AK gains whenever there is any honour doubleton in either hand. It will leave you with ♥9x opposite ♥10 so you can force out the other top honour and make 3 tricks in the suit.

Note that it's the presence of the ♥9 that makes the difference. Not holding that, declarer's best bet is either to hope for 3-3 or try to guess which defender is more likely to have 4 hearts.

As we saw earlier, the ♦K lead changes things. Now there's another more important consideration which is not to lose the lead to North. So declarer tries losing to South. This still gives him the chance of hearts 3-3 but at the same time it protects his diamond holding.

It's frequently the case that the best way to play one suit in isolation is not what you actually do at the table. Here it's because you can't afford North to be on lead. Other times it might be because you know (from the bidding or perhaps the earlier play) that some distributions of the suit are not possible.

The importance of the position of the diamond holdings can also be seen from the Deep Finesse analysis. East can always make 10 tricks in NT but West can only make 9. The difference is North could lead the ♦10 at trick 1. Now whatever declarer does the defence can get 3 diamond tricks set up immediately and they will get in in either hearts or spades to cash them. Hence declarer (who doesn't know diamonds are 4-4) will have to just cash his 9 tricks. But with South on lead as we have seen the ♦K lead can't achieve the same thing as he can be put back on lead safely in hearts later. The best South can do after winning the heart is to exit the ♠Q – this sets up an entry to the North hand with ♠K to lead a diamond through. Declarer can't afford that to happen of course so he has to cash his 10 tricks.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)