



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.

Counting declarer's tricks in defence

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 24th April 2023

13	♠ 864	Dir: N
	♥ KQ942	Vul: All
	♦ QJT	
	♣ Q5	
♠ Q	♠ KT975	10
♥ J865	♥ A	7
♦ K9865	♦ A43	18
♣ JT4	♣ AK63	5
	♠ AJ32	
	♥ T73	
	♦ 72	
	♣ 9872	
		NT
		N - - - -
		S - - - -
		E 4 5 1 3 1
		W 4 5 1 3 1

Board 13 last week was an example of a hand where East West have a combined 25 points and are likely to bid to a game (probably 3NT). It should have no chance but, in practice, at least 9 tricks were made on many occasions. Let's see how the defence might have gone wrong.

North isn't quite worth an opening so it's likely East will open with 1♠. West will respond 1NT since he's not strong enough to bid at the 2 level. Holding 18 points opposite a response, East probably now wants to bid some sort of game. He might simply decide to raise to 3NT. Another option is to rebid 3♣ to show his second suit.

That has some advantages as it allows West to describe his hand better (remember he doesn't have to be balanced when he responds 1NT, he could have a long suit). From East's point of view there are some hands West could hold where even 6♣ or 6♦ could make! Give West a pretty similar hand to the one he holds – e.g. ♠ Q J86 ♥ KQ9865 ♦ J104. That would still respond 1NT but now 6♦ is very reasonable (discard a club on the ♠K, trump 2 hearts in dummy or establish a long spade).

Over 3♣ today, however, with a fit for neither of his partner's suits and something in both red suits West will surely bid 3NT so that's likely to end up as the final contract. There were, however, quite a few tables who chose to play in a partscore.

For those interested, bidding naturally after a 1NT response isn't great and I discussed some other methods in the recent column on 10th April 2023.

What should North lead against 3NT? The ♥4 is normal (4th highest). One or two tables tried the ♥K and of course regretted it when they saw dummy! This layout is one time when leading the honour works out poorly but there are others too - see advanced section.

On the actual layout of the cards, declarer has almost no legitimate chance after a low heart lead. But that's no reason to give up! His best chance is to play on diamonds in the hope of setting up 4 tricks there and then also hoping for 4 club tricks (i.e. North holding ♣Qxx) to go with the ♥A. And in the meantime hoping the defence don't cash 3 hearts, ♠A and the diamond trick.

When the top heart honours are split, there's no real chance for the defence to go wrong. On the actual hand, however, it's not quite as easy for them. Declarer wants North on lead since he's the one who may not know if he can play the suit safely. So his best play is a low diamond from dummy straight away and then to duck this trick entirely to North. North now has to decide what to do. If he cashes ♥K and ♥Q that's the end of the defence – it means declarer now has 2 hearts, 4 diamonds and he will end up with 3 clubs with the aid of the finesse.

So to beat the contract North needs to put South in with the ♠A to lead a heart through declarer. Can he work this out? He should be able to by counting. There are 3 things we might need to count when we play bridge:

- Points
- Shape
- Tricks

Here it's number 3 that matters. Let's see how. South should give a count signal on the diamond lead from dummy so North should know declarer has 5 diamonds – which means he can assume there are 4 tricks coming there (even if there isn't a count signal, the very fact declarer has played on diamonds should tell North this too – why else would declarer play the suit?) ♥A and ♣AK in dummy are 3 more so that's 7. Therefore, if declarer had ♠A he would have 2 more spade tricks and 9 in all. Hence the only chance of beating the contract is if South has ♠A. Having worked that out, North could switch to the ♠8 (leading a high one to show no interest in the suit). When South wins ♠A, it's pretty easy for him to work out what North wants! He returns a heart and North's ♥KQ92 are now 4 more tricks. There's another way North should be able to tell too – see advanced section.

There is a potential catch though. The above argument works perfectly when playing teams where the objective is to try and beat the contract and everything else is a secondary consideration. Playing pairs, however, it's not always so simple! It might be right for North to cash his hearts while he can. See advanced section for more on this.

Key points to note

- Against no-trumps, it's usually best to lead low from 5 card suits with 2 top honours (even if it gives a cheap trick away) initially. An honour might block the suit or be wasted against a singleton ace.
- When declaring, if you have to duck a trick in a suit do so as soon as possible before the defence have been able to exchange signals.
- When defending try to keep a count of how many tricks declarer has. This may help decide whether you sit back and wait or whether you try to take the tricks to beat the contract immediately.
- When you switch to a suit in defence a high card normally means you are not interested in that suit.
- At pairs, you may have to decide whether you are actually trying to beat the contract or just limit overtricks. Which it is can influence the right play (see advanced section).

More advanced

Before discussing the defence, let's consider things from declarer's point of view. A small point worth noting is the fact declarer should immediately duck a diamond rather than playing ♦A and another. The main reason for this is it gives the defence less opportunity to exchange any signal (declarer needs diamonds 3-2 to have any hope so it doesn't matter if he loses the 1st or the 2nd round of the suit). Another reason could be to stop the defence playing a 3rd round back. If they did that, declarer has no more certain entries to his hand so he would need to cash the rest of the diamonds straight away. That may not be convenient for him.

Turning now to the defence, why should North lead ♥4 and not ♥K? The actual hand is one reason of course (given the auction the ♥A is much more likely to be in the stronger hand – East). But another more common one is when partner holds ♥Jx. Leading an honour then blocks the suit. But of course there are layouts where an honour may work better. For example one hand holding ♥J10 and the other ♥Axxx. There's no guarantees, only that the ♥4 will tend to work better on more hands overall. Even if you do give a cheap trick to the ♥J it could still be right to get a tempo ahead of declarer to start setting your own long suit up.

I didn't mention much about the defensive carding but there is scope for that to go wrong on this hand too. What should South do under the ♥A at trick 1? One thing he must definitely NOT do is encourage (then his partner will think he holds an honour and may underlead his own honours next time). I would probably play the ♥7 – the ♥10 might be too costly (South can't see who holds the 9,8,6 or 5). Looking at dummy South may also reasonably expect to get on lead first with the ♠A whereupon he can clear things up for his partner (although in fact this doesn't happen).

When North gets in in diamonds he should be able to read that South's card at trick 1 wasn't encouraging so he won't have the ♥J. Hence it won't be right to underlead again. So North's choices are to switch and wait for a heart through declarer or to cash a top heart. The latter might seem a good idea but has two downsides:

- It gives South a problem. What should he do? He needs to play the ♥10 to unblock the suit. If he fails to do that he will be left with singleton ♥10 with declarer holding ♥Jx and North ♥Q9. Now if he gets in and plays ♥10 declarer

simply doesn't cover and North is stuck. So North cashing a top heart gives his partner a chance to go wrong – never a good idea!

- South playing ♥10 may in turn cause North to be worried that South only started with ♥107 to start with (that would give declarer a 55 shape in the red suits but that's still perfectly possible for a 1NT response). So he might feel he may as well cash his ♥Q now as he won't get it otherwise.

Better is for North to count the tricks first and work out he can simply put South straight in without cashing a top heart at all (however see the matchpoint consideration below). Then after the ♥10 the defence can't go wrong.

It's all very well to talk about the defence's carding but declarer can get involved too! At trick one, whatever South plays declarer has a free choice of ♥8, 6 or 5. He wants North to either underlead or try to cash his top hearts when he gets in (remember declarer is already hoping North has both top hearts). Therefore he wants to give the impression South's ♥7 is encouraging. So, assuming reverse signals (low encourage), declarer should play the ♥5. Now it's possible from North's perspective that South has something like ♥J87. Conversely if declarer didn't want North to continue with hearts he should try and give the impression that South's ♥7 is discouraging. So then he should play the ♥8. It's not likely to help on this hand but there are some hands where concealing just one small pip can have a surprising impact at scrambling the defence's signals by creating different possible suit layouts in their minds.

Lastly I also mentioned there are matchpoint pairs considerations here. Could it be right for North to cash the top hearts anyway? He again needs to count declarer's possible tricks. Suppose declarer does have ♠A so 3NT is always cold. Now the hand is just a question of limiting overtricks. Declarer probably has 2 spade, 1 heart and 4 diamond tricks. So if there's a risk declarer has 4 club tricks then that would be 11 tricks and North's best action would be to cash the ♥K and ♥Q to limit him to 10 tricks. North needs to decide how likely that is. Here it's not likely – declarer would need ♣Jxxx but the carding in the red suits should have already suggested declarer is 45 in those. So that would give him a 0454 shape. But that's inconsistent with him also holding ♠A! Hence on this hand it looks safe for North to try to beat the contract with the spade switch and, if he's wrong, declarer will just make the 10 tricks he always had anyway. This sort of thinking is quite common for experts at matchpoints and shows how much harder a game it is – because you don't always know what your target is. Are you trying to beat the contract or purely to limit overtricks?

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)