



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.

Trial bids, declarer play and a “backwards finesse”

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 3rd April 2023

Board 10 last week was played in hearts by EW at every table. But of course the level of the contract and the number of tricks varied quite a bit.

10	♠ AJ74 ♥ Q8 ♦ 8742 ♣ Q73	Dir: E Vul: All
♠ 9632 ♥ 532 ♦ A5 ♣ AJ84	♠ 5 ♥ AKJ94 ♦ QT63 ♣ K96	9 9 13 9
♠ KQT8 ♥ T76 ♦ KJ9 ♣ T52		
		♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ NT
		N - - - -
		S - - - -
		E 4 2 5 1 3
		W 4 2 5 1 3

The normal start to the auction is 1♥ P and West has the first major decision. Does he raise to 2♥ or does he do more? He’s got a hand that’s in between two actions.

2♥ is traditionally about 5-9. He’s very maximum for that considering he has:

- 9 points
- 2 aces (usually worth more than 4 points in practice)
- A potential diamond ruffing value.

The other option for West is to show a 3 card limit raise (usually a hand worth about 10-12). A common method to do that is a jump in the other major (so 1♥-2♠ on this hand or 1♠-3♥ in spades). He’s obviously completely minimum for that.

So which to bid? It’s a close call but I think I’d show the 3 card limit raise for 3 reasons:

5-9 is quite a wide range so partner might well view to pass with 16 given I am not that likely to be maximum – and I would be nervous we’d miss game if he does that.

When faced with an aggressive or a conservative action, it’s often better to make the more aggressive choice earlier in the auction - now you don’t feel you have to “catch up” later on.

It may put the opponents off from competing which they may have been able to do more comfortably over a weaker initial action.

What does East do over these actions? After 2♥ he can’t really move further. It’s not at all clear for North or South to bid so 2♥ may well end the auction (as it did at many tables). After a 2♠ limit raise East will probably now make a try for game. There are assorted methods for “trial bids” in use (basically a bid below 3M asking partner if he is min or max and, if he’s not sure, to evaluate his holding in the trial bid suit) - see advanced section for more details. Here he might try 3♦. Given West is now completely minimum for his original raise he should probably decline the invite and bid 3♥.

So it’s hard to see East West reaching game. Hardly surprising considering they only have a combined 22 points. It can, however, make here - primarily because all their points are working together - they have no points in spades which are “wasted”.

What about the play and defence? South has a pretty easy spade lead and will almost certainly play a 2nd round which declarer ruffs. Now what? Declarer is hoping for 5 hearts and he has 3 more top cards in the minors. He might have more clubs if the finesse works. But that can wait. Whatever happens in clubs he will still need to do something with his diamonds. So he should start with ♦A and another aiming to trump some diamond losers in dummy. Note he should do this before touching trumps since he will need trumps in the west hand to ruff with. Which diamond should he play from his hand when North plays low on the 2nd round? It makes no difference on this hand but the normal play would be the ♦10 (North

would surely have won ♦K if he had it so assume that card is with South. Hence playing ♦Q can't gain so you might as well try the ♦10 hoping North has ♦J. No good today. South wins and probably plays another spade (it's now too late for the defence to try and stop a diamond ruff in dummy so his better bet is to keep forcing declarer to ruff). Declarer is now down to 3 trumps and hasn't drawn any rounds yet. So he's already in big trouble if they break 4-1. But at this point he should cash one top one and then ruff a diamond in dummy. Now he gets his first piece of good news when South's ♦K pops up turning declarer's ♦Q into a winner. Having taken the ruff in dummy, declarer now can now get on with drawing trumps. That brings more good news when North's ♥Q pops up. At this point declarer can draw the last trump (which is also his own last trump). He now has 10 tricks - 5 hearts, ♦A, ♦ ruff in dummy, ♦Q and ♣AK. But it's now risky to try the club finesse because if it loses the defence will be able to cash at least one more spade (declarer having run out of trumps).

Even though the club finesse doesn't work Deep Finesse says 11 tricks can still be made. How? The answer is an unusual manoeuvre in the club suit called a "backwards finesse" - see advanced section for details.

On the hand making 10 tricks in 2♥ or 3♥ for +170 would have scored very close to a top since many pairs were only making +140 or less, and some went off in 4♥. (I suspect those pairs made the mistake of drawing all the trumps first and only then wondering what to do with their diamonds.) So not bidding 4♥ didn't matter in the slightest. This is common when playing pairs - you don't need to push to bid aggressive games because just playing the hand well and making more tricks than other pairs will still get you a good score. That's not the case when playing teams (imps). In teams not only do you have much more to gain for bidding and making 4♥ (+620 v +170) but the difference in score between 140 and 170 is negligible. Pairs and teams are VERY different games!

Key points to note

- It's often better to choose a more aggressive action than a weaker action earlier in the auction - now you don't need to feel guilty you have underbid and worry about trying to "catch up" later. Instead you can backpeddle!
- Trial bids after major suit raises are invites to game and usually ask partner to evaluate their holding in the suit bid to help decide whether to accept or decline the invite.
- Don't always rush to draw trumps - you may need to do other things first (most commonly try to ruff losers in dummy).
- A "backwards finesse" can sometimes be a way of playing a suit where, for some reason (usually the point count) you know a normal finesse can't work.

More advanced

Trial bids arise after 1M-2M or, as here, after 1♥-2♠ when there's still room below 3M. Note it's different after 1♠-3♥ as there's no room left in that sequence. Opener just has to decide whether to bid 3♠ or 4♠. After 1♥-2♠, however, opener has 3 bids available below 3♥.

It's important to agree with your partner what sort of trial bids you play. There's typically 3 types in use - long suit, short suit and help suit. Long and short suit are pretty self explanatory - you either have length (at least 4) or shortage (at most 1). Help suit are more typically Hxx and are looking for partner to have some honours in that suit to help you.

It's worth remembering that a trial bid is primarily an invite to game. If you are minimum you generally decline, if maximum you generally accept. If you are in between that's when you look at your holding in the suit partner makes the trial bid in. Opposite long or help suit trials you want honours in that suit. Opposite short suit trials you want nothing. Those are what makes hands fit together well.

Here, East is worth a try over 1♥-2♠ and could bid 3♦ as a long or help suit try. Even though West has good help for him in diamonds it's still marginal to bid game because he's so minimum for his 2♠ bid the first time.

What makes 4♥ reasonable on these two hands is having no wasted values in spades so all 22 of East West's points are working. About the only way I can see them reaching game is if West chooses the conservative 2♥ bid, the pair are playing short suit trials and East then makes one with 2♠. Now the West hand is enormous. It's completely maximum for its 2♥ raise AND it has nothing in spades opposite partner's announced shortage. It would have a clear 4♥ bid at that point. But

it's largely academic since when West only raises to 2♥, East isn't strong enough to make any sort of game try in the first place!

So what does declarer have to do in clubs to make 11 tricks? It can be done with what's known as a "backwards finesse". You have to run the ♣J from dummy on the first round! North has to cover, otherwise declarer will just run the ♣J. Now on the 2nd round declarer runs the ♣9 and finesses against South's ♣10. This will mean he loses no club tricks and just loses a spade and a diamond. Why should declarer do this? On this hand there is no reason at all - in fact he'd look very silly if South had ♣Qx the whole time! So the Deep Finesse analysis is entirely theoretical. But there are sometimes hands where declarer can work out the regular finesse will fail and then a backwards finesse may become the best chance. For example, suppose South had passed as dealer and already shown up with 10 points. He can't possibly have another Queen now or he would have opened the bidding. Hence the normal club finesse cannot work. So declarer can either try to drop Qx offside or try the backward finesse - effectively playing South for the 10 instead. The latter is basically another 50% finesse so is better odds than trying to drop Qx.

Two things are worth noting though before rushing to try backwards finesses(!):

- a) You need intermediate cards in the suit. Without the ♣9 there would be no point here as North would cover ♣J and there's no longer any finesse position.
- b) You must watch the entries. For the backwards finesse to work the ♣J needs to be played on the 1st round so you are left with a finesse position against the ♣10 later. So on this hand you'd have to do that early on. It would be too late after ruffing a diamond and drawing trumps as you are not then in the West hand.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)