



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.

Declaring to maximise your tricks

City – Monday Morning 19th June 2023

1	♠ KJT974	Dlr: N
	♥ 93	Vul: Nil
	♣ AQT76	
♠ Q6	♠ A2	10
♥ AK753	♥ QJ6	17 8
♦ A75	♦ J8642	5
♣ KJ3	♣ 942	
	♠ 853	♠ ♣ ♥ ♦ NT
	♥ T9842	N 1 - - 5 1
	♦ KQT	S 1 - - 5 1
	♣ 85	E - 2 1 - -
		W - 2 1 - -

On board 1 last week most pairs ended up in 4♠ by North. The normal auction is likely to start 1♠ P 2♠. West has the best hand in terms of points but hasn't got an obvious bid. His ♠Q is likely to be worthless, overcalling 3♥ with a balanced hand, only 5 hearts and poor intermediates is courting disaster. The only bid I'd consider is double. West's bid doesn't really matter though because North's next bid should be 4♠. He only has 10 high card points but on this sort of hand points become almost irrelevant - the shape is far more important. Even if 4♠ isn't making it could be a good save over the opponents 4♥. Whether or not West doubled, East isn't going to come in at the 5 level. So 4♠ is likely to be the final contract and East's most likely lead is ♥Q.

So let's now consider the play. Declarer ruffs the ♥ lead of course. Now what? His first aim needs to be to reach dummy to take a black suit finesse. The only way to do that is in diamonds so we start with a diamond to the ♦K. West will probably win and continue hearts. After ruffing again and crossing to ♦Q, we are in dummy. Now which black suit to lead? Clubs is the answer even though spades are trumps. Why? Because if we play on spades first and things go wrong we may never get back to dummy. But if we play on clubs first, even if the finesse loses we have chances to return to dummy with a club ruff later. So we may well get a chance to try the 2nd finesse. The same isn't true the other way round. What's more we need to set up our club side suit anyway.

So trick 5 should be a club from dummy. On this hand playing the ♣10 works but I would play the ♣Q (especially if West has doubled in the auction) – you don't want to lose to ♣Jx offside. The ♣Q holds and we can now play ♣A and ruff a club in dummy (see advanced section for more on what West should do here). That all passes off successfully with clubs, fortunately, splitting 3-3 which means our remaining clubs are now winners.

NOW it is time to draw trumps. It seems like a guess whether to play West for the ♠A or the ♠Q. But there are reasons to get it right - see advanced section. If declarer does play ♠J that forces the ♠A and the ♠K later drops West's doubleton ♠Q. The only losers are the ♠A and the ♦A. Only one pair managed to score +450 – well done. Even +420 scored pretty well today though as quite a lot of pairs did not bid game. As discussed above though, with the shape of the North hand, as soon as I hear about any spade support in partner's hand I would immediately bid game.

Is there any risk to playing like this? Yes – if clubs split badly it might be possible for a defender to score a ruff they might not otherwise have got. But if clubs are splitting badly then we are in trouble anyway – there is no way to make 10 tricks without getting some club tricks. Playing pairs, it usually pays to just try for the maximum number of tricks you can.

Key points to note

- Shape is more powerful than points – with a large shapely hand like North's bid game as soon as you hear of a fit.
- If you have a choice of finesses and limited entries, take the one that will give you a chance to get back to the same hand later to try the other finesse as well.
- With shapely hands, it's almost always right to try and set up your side suit – often before drawing trumps if it requires ruffing losers in dummy.

- As a defender play the card you are known to hold unless it obviously costs a trick – it may give declarer a losing option that wouldn't be there otherwise.
- Try to keep your entries fluid – if you can avoid situations where you are forced to win the trick in one hand, do so.
- If you have an apparent guess to make in the play, see what you know about the points and the shape of each defender's hand. Then consider what they did or didn't do in the bidding – it might help indicate which card is more likely to be in each hand.

More advanced

Let's suppose declarer plays as suggested (♥Q ruffed, ♦ to ♦K and ♦A, ♥ ruffed, ♦ to ♦Q, ♣ to ♣Q, ♣A. What should West do? He should play the ♣K under the ♣A – i.e. the card he is already known to hold. Consider what happens if he doesn't – i.e. he plays the ♣J. Declarer knows he has the ♣K when the ♣Q holds so he can now quite safely ruff a club low in dummy knowing West can't overruff. Contrast that with when West plays the ♣K under the ♣A. Now declarer has to consider the possibility that clubs are 2-4. On this hand he will probably have little choice but to try ruffing another club anyway but suppose he had started with ♣AQ1096? Now he might consider running the ♣10 through what he thinks is East's remaining ♣J7 and discarding from dummy when it isn't covered. Now West would score his ♣J! Or he might try ruffing higher in dummy with the ♣8 which, as we'll see later, could make his entries less flexible later in the hand.

This is a general philosophy that can be adopted in many places (both by defenders and by declarer) – if it doesn't obviously cost a trick then play the card you are already known to hold. It might create a losing option for the other side which didn't exist before. Even if it doesn't work on this hand, your opponent might note it and not trust your cards the next time he plays against you!

I said that there may be reasons for declarer to get the spades right. Why? Because of the points.

It may depend whether West has bid or not during the auction. If he hasn't then you should consider what the West hand has shown up with by the time declarer leads a spade. The ♥Q opening lead (assuming the pair play overleading methods) marks ♥AK with West. He later also shows up with ♦A, ♣K and ♣J. That's 15 points. If he also had the ♠A that would give him 19 points – surely he would be more likely to bid with that? So the fact that he has NOT bid perhaps makes it more likely he has the ♠Q and not the ♠A? There is no point considering cases where he has neither spade honour since then you are going to lose two trumps regardless. It's not much to go on but it's better than nothing.

Another small point of general technique – when declarer ruffs the 2nd heart he should ruff with the ♠9 and not the ♠7. Why? So that, if he can ruff a club low in dummy, he will be left with ♠85 opposite ♠KJ107. He can now lead the ♠8 from dummy and put the ♠7 under it. That will gain if West has both spade honours because the lead is retained in dummy to then lead another spade. Of course if West held ♠AQ6 at that point he should recognise that dummy has no further entry so he should win ♠A and force declarer back in hand with another heart ruff – thus ensuring his ♠Q will take a trick. But defenders have been known to fall asleep! It would be a shame to be forced to overtake your own ♠8 with the ♠9 and get stuck in your own hand only to discover West did start with ♠AQ6!

This is another useful principle to consider – always try to keep your entry position as flexible as you can. Here the ♠9, ♠8 and ♠7 are all the same value – it is just better technique not to leave yourself forced to win a round of the suit in one hand.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)