



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.

Why 4th highest leads at no-trumps?

City (Open and Rookie) and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 17th July 2023

6		♠ AK6	Dir: E
		♥ AT9	Vul: E-W
		♦ QJ76	
		♣ AKT	
♠ QJ32	♠ T4	21	
♥ QJ4	♥ 62	6	7
♦ T4	♦ AK952	6	
♣ 7654	♣ 9832		
♠ 9875	♠ NT		
♥ K8753	N 1 2 4 3 3		
♦ 83	S 1 2 4 3 3		
♣ QJ	E - - - -		
	W - - - -		

Board 6 last week saw most North South pairs playing in game – either 3NT or 4♥. 3NT could become very difficult for declarer but at many tables the contract was able to make easily. Let’s see why.

Unless South is playing a method where he can open to show a weak hand with both majors the auction is likely to start with three passes to North. He has a fairly standard 2NT opening (usually played as 20-22 balanced). South should then look for a major suit fit. There are many different ways of doing that. One could be to start with 3♦ (a transfer to hearts) and then follow up with 3♠. Another might be a variation of

stayman – see advanced section for more discussion. Whatever methods they use North South should diagnose that they have an 8 card heart fit and play in 4♥. However, at pairs North’s 4333 shape might tempt him to try 3NT instead in the hope it will make the same number of tricks and score 10 points more. This logic is frequently wrong though – see advanced section for why.

Against 4♥ played by North, East has an easy lead of ♦A and best defence is to follow that up with ♦K and another. Declarer might try ruffing but West will overruff. However, that’s the end of the defence because East cannot get in again to play another diamond. Although declarer will be nervous, he will find that West has ruffed from a 3 card trump holding so he can now draw trumps in 2 rounds. Two of South’s spades can then be discarded – one on the 3rd round of clubs, and one on the 4th diamond. That means 10 tricks in total.

Against 3NT played by North, a lot of players also seem to have led the ♦A. But this time that is fatal for the defence’s chances! No matter what they do, they cannot possibly now establish any long diamonds and declarer will probably knock out a heart and end up with 10 tricks (2 spades, 4 hearts, 1 diamond and 3 clubs).

A far better lead against 3NT is ♦5. Trick one may now go ♦5,3,10,J. But now declarer should go off! He cannot make 9 tricks without playing on hearts and he can’t avoid West getting on lead when he does that. West will return the ♦4 and East is now poised with ♦AK92 over declarer’s ♦Q76. So East can take another 4 diamond tricks to beat 3NT. The contract can, in fact, still be made after a low diamond lead but it’s not so obvious – see advanced section.

So why is the ♦5 a better lead in no-trumps? Because it keeps communication between the defenders’ hands. The East hand has basically no chance of winning a trick in any other suit so the only chance for him to establish and later cash his diamonds is in the diamond suit itself. Hence it is better to effectively duck a round early on and then hope to make the rest later. It means his partner still has a diamond if he gets on lead. If East starts with ♦A and then plays a 2nd round his partner won’t have any more diamonds when he gets in.

Note the lead philosophy is completely different in 3NT to 4♥. Against a suit contract, it would be crazy to underlead the ♦AK because you may never score them later (declarer will be able to trump them) and you might be able to give partner a ruff as well. There are no ruffing options in no-trumps so by far the best chance is to try to establish East’s long diamonds as winners.

Why specifically the ♦5, the 4th highest? It doesn't really matter but the point of leading a particular length card in a suit is to help partner work out how many declarer has. He can use the "Rule of 11" to work out how many higher cards than the ♦5 are in declarer's hand. The rule works by subtracting the value of the card led from 11 and that tells you how many higher cards than that are spread between dummy, your hand and declarer. On this hand all it tells you is there are 6 cards higher than the 5 in the other 3 hands. You can see two of them (the ♦8 in dummy and the ♦10 in your hand) so you know declarer has 4 diamonds that are all higher than the ♦5. Not much use. But there are some hands where it can be really useful – see advanced section.

On this hand North had 4 diamonds and South 2. But suppose they each had 3. Now a low diamond is again the winning lead. Whichever defender gets in first is in a position to lead another round of diamonds and cash 4 more tricks. In fact whenever partner holds a doubleton diamond leading low works better. West with ♦Qx to start with is another case. Leading the ♦A or ♦K would leave the suit blocked only enabling the defenders to take 2 tricks in the suit. Conversely, leading low to the queen and then low back to the AK would allow them to cash 3 rounds of the suit (and in fact 5 rounds if North South's diamonds were 3-3!).

Key points to note

- It's worth some discussion about what to play over a 2NT opening. There are variations of stayman that allow you to find 5-3 major suit fits.
- Generally you should play in an 8 card major suit if you have one – no-trumps only scores better if BOTH hands are 4333 or if the hands have extra values.
- Leading against no-trumps is very different to suits – you want to establish long cards in your suit and there is no risk of your top cards later being ruffed. Therefore 4th highest from a long suit (including underleading top honours) is fine. It maintains communication between the defenders (especially where one hand is short of entries elsewhere).
- After a 4th highest lead the Rule of 11 can be used to determine how many higher cards declarer has. Sometimes this is extremely useful for the defence.

More advanced

There are lots of bidding methods available over 2NT and more experienced partnerships should discuss them. Major suit transfers are common as are variations of simple stayman and 5 card (or Puppet) stayman. With the latter a bid of 3♣ asks for 5 card majors – the responses are usually 3M shows 5M, 3♦ denies a 5 card major but shows at least one 4 card major, and 3NT denies a 4 or 5 card majors. After 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦ it's common for a bid of 3 major to DENY that major and show the other (the reason being to try to always get the strong balanced hand to be declarer). But it's also then necessary to sort out how to bid hands with both majors and hands with 54 in the majors.

4522 shape hands like this one are not a problem because you can transfer to hearts and then bid spades. But 5422 hands are harder – you don't want to transfer to spades and then bid 4♥ as that takes you past 3NT. Traditionally this was solved by playing a 3♠ response to 2NT as showing that particular shape. These days, however, 3♠ is more commonly played as some form of minor suit stayman to look for a possible minor suit slam. 5422 shape hands start with 3♣ instead and there are various modifications to stayman that allow you to handle them. But of course that's only worthwhile if you and your partner research and discuss them!

Another quite popular convention is "Smolen". This is a method where you start with 3♣ as simple stayman and then, over a 3♦ response, a bid of 3 major shows 4 in that major and 5 in the other major. Here the South hand would start with 3♣ and then bid 3♠ over 3♦ to show 5 hearts and 4 spades. This enables North to play 4♥. Smolen can also be played over 1NT (where the 3M bid applies over a 2♦ response to stayman).

Like everything there are some hands that suit each method well and others that don't.

So how can 3NT still be made after a diamond lead to the ♦10? The answer is declarer needs to duck at trick 1! West will almost certainly play a 2nd round and this time declarer puts in the ♦Q or ♦J. East is powerless. Ducking again cuts his hand off totally. Winning means he can do no better than cash his other top diamond. But there is no way for him to

establish his small diamonds and still get back in to cash them. Can declarer get this right? He should even though it might not seem natural to duck. But if West had the ♦A or ♦K he would play it at trick 1. Therefore, when West plays the ♦10 declarer should work out the layout as it is and predict what will happen if he wins. He might attempt to lose a heart trick to East (who is now the safe hand) but West holding both ♥Q and ♥J makes that impossible on this hand.

Another way to think about the position in diamonds on this hand is to imagine you were declarer with the East West cards and you wanted 4 tricks from the suit. How could you do that? There are no other entries to the East hand so the only way is to duck the 1st round of the suit and then play from the top hoping they split 3-3. The defenders start exactly the same way.

I mentioned about North maybe preferring 3NT. Players often think that because they have a 4333 shape, it may be better to play no-trumps despite having an 8 card fit in a major. There are two reasons why that isn't always true:

- Just because your hand is 4333 doesn't mean partner is as well. If he has a doubleton somewhere the trump fit will often still be better.
- When the hands are close to game values (25/26 points) an 8 card major suit fit will often score an extra trick with a ruff in one hand. So it's quite common to find 4 major making 10 tricks but 3NT only making 9. And someone trying for the extra 10 points by playing no-trumps may well end up scoring 430 only to find 4 major was making 450!

The time it IS right to play no-trumps with an 8 card major suit fit is when the two hands have extra values (e.g. 28/29 points instead of 25/26). The extra points are likely to be queens or jacks and they can score tricks without needing to be ruffed. So now no-trumps may indeed score 460 instead of 450.

The "Rule of 11" wasn't much help on this hand but suppose the layout of a suit was something like this:

Leader: ♦Q1087 Dummy: ♦K65 Your hand: ♦AJ92 Declarer: ♦43

After the ♦7 lead on which dummy plays the ♦5 you can subtract 7 from 11 and determine there are 4 cards higher than the 7 between dummy, your hand and declarer. But you can already see them! Dummy has one (♦K) and you have three (♦AJ9). Hence, provided partner's lead is 4th highest, you can work out declarer cannot have any higher diamonds and can play the ♦2 at trick 1 to enable partner to stay on lead and play a 2nd diamond through dummy's king.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)