



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.

How weak jumps make it hard for your opponents. Law of total tricks.

City (Open and Rookie) and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 24th July 2023

17	♠ J5	Dlr: N
	♥ KJ	Vul: Nil
	♦ K9432	
	♣ A943	
♠ KQT983	♠ A762	12
♥ 4	♥ Q863	9 12
♦ Q865	♦ AJ7	7
♣ Q5	♣ JT	
	♠ 4	
	♥ AT9752	
	♦ T	
	♣ K8762	

On board 17 last week both sides could make game but East West can make it very hard for North South to find their contract.

The auction will usually start 1♦ P 1♥ to West. At this point he will clearly want to bid spades. But how many? If he bids 1♠ this allows North to rebid 2♣, the same as he would have done had West passed. East will surely now strongly raise spades but it's too late. Once South knows partner has clubs, with his extensive shape he should definitely bid to 5♣. The fact he only has 7 points is almost irrelevant - the shape is worth far more. This is seen when 5♣ makes losing just ♠A and ♦A.

Now suppose West bids 2♠, a weak jump overcall, instead. This shows a weak pre-emptive type hand with at least 6 spades. That makes a huge difference. North has a very average opening bid and bidding 3♣ now is very risky (partner could have a poor 5 point hand for his 1♥ response with no fit for diamonds or clubs and 3♣ will be getting his side into all sorts of trouble). He should pass. East should now make it harder still by jumping to 4♠! He knows they have a 10 card spade fit and the “law of total tricks” suggests bidding to the 4 level (see advanced section for more). 4♠ puts South in a tough spot - yes he has a lot of shape but he has no idea whether his side has a fit. If they don't then bidding to the 5 level on his own could be a bloodbath! He too will probably pass. By bidding quickly and aggressively, East West have won the contract. Going slower gives North South space to find their club fit. Weak jump overcalls are a very effective bidding weapon - especially when you hold spades as you can outbid the opponents at the same level.

What about the play? In clubs North South should make 11 tricks – the defence will most likely start with two rounds of spades. Ruff, draw trumps in 2 rounds, and trump hearts in the North hand to set up the long hearts as winners. Spades by West should make 10 tricks but is harder and many pairs only made 9. North will probably lead ♥K after his partner bid the suit. Seeing dummy he will probably continue with ♥J (he doesn't know partner has 6 hearts or the ♣K). West will ruff and draw trumps in two rounds. Now is the key play in diamonds. West needs to lead the ♦Q. Whatever North does the defence are helpless. If he covers, South's ♦10 falls under dummy's ♦A. Now West can lead a 2nd round of diamonds from his hand and put in the ♦7. If North doesn't cover the ♦Q it will win and West can then finesse the ♦J. Either way declarer should end up making 6 trumps, 3 diamonds and a diamond ruff in dummy, losing just the ♥K and 2 clubs.

Note the difference if West leads a low diamond to the ♦J. It wins and South's ♦10 drops. But this time North remains with ♦K943 and declarer has ♦Q86 opposite ♦A7. Whatever declarer does North will now score a diamond trick (he covers the ♦Q or inserts the ♦9 if declarer leads a low one).

The “usual” play with this diamond suit combination is low to the jack, however. See advanced section for why, and why there are reasons for West to play differently on this hand.

Key points to note

- Weak jump overcalls are a very effective weapon to make it hard (or at least very risky) for the other side to find their fit.

- Quickly raising to the “level of your fit” (2 level with 8 trumps, 3 level with 9, 4 level with 10) is a good strategy in competitive bidding.
- Hands with a lot of shape are incredibly powerful if a fit is known - the shape is far more important than how many high card points you have. But without a fit it can be disastrous to bid too high.
- How you should play a suit combination is not always the same - it will often depend on whether either opponent has bid the suit or implied it via a takeout double.

More advanced

The law of total tricks is a good guide to competitive bidding. But like any “rule” in bridge it’s not universal and there are plenty of situations where it won’t work. However, the basic premise is the total number of tricks is equal to the total number of trumps in each side’s best fit. What does that mean? North South have 9 trumps in their best fit (clubs) and East West have 10 in theirs (spades). So that is 19 total trumps. That suggests there will be 19 total tricks in the two contracts. In other words, if one side can make 8 tricks, the other will make 11, etc.

The “law” in fact fails quite badly on this hand because there are actually 21 total tricks! North South can make 11 in clubs and East West 10 in spades. That’s often the case with highly distributional hands or where at least one side has a double fit (here North South have an 8 card heart fit as well as a 9 card club fit). Other times the law tends to fail are where you have cards in the opponents suit (that tends to go in the other direction and reduce the total number of tricks). The more experienced you become, the more you tend to make adjustments for these factors (where you can diagnose them during the auction).

Where the “law” is at its most valuable is in typical 3 level competitive situations which come up all the time. Suppose one side has an 8 card heart fit and the other an 8 card spade fit. That suggests there will be 16 total tricks. So it’s worth bidding 2♠ over 2♥ (either both contracts are making or, if 2♠ goes off, it means the opponents were making 3♥). It also tends to be right in practice for the side holding hearts to bid 3♥ over 2♠ - if the opponents are making 2♠ (8 tricks) then your 3♥ is only one off. But now it’s NOT right for the other side to bid 3♠ - if they could make that (9 tricks) it suggests 3♥ would only be making 7 and they would be better off doubling that contract instead. Bidding onto 3♠ just tends to convert a small plus score (3♥ going 1 off) to a small minus score (3♠ going 1 off).

Now let’s suppose one side has 9 trumps. This time it is definitely right for them to bid to the 3 level (now there are expected to be 17 tricks so either they are making at the 3 level or the opponents are).

The practical effect of all this is you usually want to bid to the “level” of your fit. That means the 2 level if you have 8 trumps, the 3 level if you have 9 and the 4 level if you have 10. Either your contract is making or it’s a good sacrifice over theirs. Hence why East jumps to 4♠ on this hand.

It’s often right to bid on over the opponents to get them away from their “law” level – which we saw above when, with two 8 card fits, bidding 3♥ over 2♠ is usually right in practice. I say “usually” and “in practice” for two reasons:

The vulnerability is important in these decisions - when vulnerable you may not be able to afford to even go 1 off if the opponents double as that’s -200 which will outscore any contract the opponents could have made. In practice, however, the opponents often aren’t sure either and doubling is just too risky (3♥x or 3♠x making scores 530 or 730 which is usually a disaster for the side conceding it!).

In practice you don’t usually know how many trumps either side does have – so you might bid on in case one side has a 9 card fit anyway.

A classic book about the law of total tricks “To bid or not to bid” was written by Larry Cohen and is well worth reading to explore this area more. Note that the “law” is also the reason behind quite a few common bridge conventions which focus on identifying exactly how many trumps a pair has - to enable them to work out how to compete best. Bergen raises are a good example.

Let's return to the play of the diamond suit by East West here. Normally with this holding you should lead low towards the ♦AJ7 and not waste the ♦Q. That's because the ♦K might be singleton or doubleton with North. If it is, it will fall cheaply under the ♦A and you will not lose a trick in the suit. Had you started with the ♦Q, North would cover and that would promote a trick for South's ♦10.

So why is this hand different? Because North bid diamonds. Hence he cannot possibly have shortage and the above doesn't apply. Therefore, the only chance now to avoid losing a diamond trick is to play the ♦Q and hope for a layout like this where South is short and his singleton is big enough so that when it falls it sets up a new finesse position on the 2nd round. You might argue that South could have ♦109 doubleton so playing low to the ♦7 on the 2nd round will lose to that. Yes it will. But that's only one very specific holding. After the ♦10 falls on the first round there are FAR more holdings where low to the ♦7 will win.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)