

Weekly Wisdom

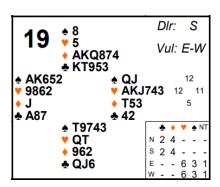
The Sydney Bridge Centre mini lesson

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.

What makes hands "fit" well?

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 3rd July 2023



Board 19 last week had slam available for East West even though they only had 23 points between them. No-one reached it and, even if they had, North South can actually sacrifice cheaply over it at the 7 level! Both sides can make lots of tricks – but why?

The auction will normally start P 1♠. North will clearly then bid something with his shapely hand. Some may prefer 2♦ intending to bid clubs later. Some may bid 2NT, the "unusual no-trump" to show both minors, at least 5-5 shape. Both have merit. 2NT takes away a 2 major bid which leaves East West a lot less space in the auction. That could be important on this hand. On the other hand it doesn't distinguish strength

which can make it harder for partner to judge what to do. See advanced section for more discussion.

If North bids $2 \blacklozenge$ then East can bid $2 \blacktriangledown$. South might raise to $3 \blacklozenge$ but, if he doesn't, it will give West the chance to make a very descriptive bid of $4 \spadesuit$. This is a splinter (heart support, diamond shortage and a hand worth at least $4 \blacktriangledown$) and is music to East's ears with 3 low diamonds. His \spadesuit QJ are also hugely valuable fillers in partner's first suit. He might even just use Blackwood there and then (despite having no club control – see advanced section). Of course it may not be as easy as that because over $4 \spadesuit$ North might well have another go with $5 \clubsuit$! Now East can't find out about key cards to be sure of slam but he should certainly be bidding onto at least $5 \blacktriangledown$.

If North overcalls 2NT East will have to bid 3^{\blacktriangledown} . Once again the West hand very much likes hearts and should do more than just 4^{\blacktriangledown} . Perhaps he can cue bid 4^{\clubsuit} or something. But the key information to reach slam on this hand is the diamond shortage. With no diamond control East can't do more than bid 4^{\blacktriangledown} over 4^{\clubsuit} . West might still go on though as he has so many controls but it's not as clear.

One thing is clear on this hand. It's not about counting points - it's about evaluating how well the two hands fit together. That's what makes slam possible. There are 3 really good features here that contribute:

- A big trump fit.
- Soft cards like queens and jacks in partner's suit.
- Nothing in a suit opposite shortage.

What about the play in hearts? The most likely defence is a diamond lead to North and then a club switch. It should be pretty straightforward. Draw trumps in two rounds, cash ♠QJ, then trump a diamond in dummy and discard your club loser and your last diamond on ♠AK. It's slightly harder if the defence happen to lead a club because you now have a club loser exposed and no immediate diamond ruff in dummy. But that shouldn't matter either. Same as before — draw trumps in 2 rounds, cash ♠QJ but now use a 3rd trump to cross to dummy's ♥9 to discard a club and a diamond on ♠AK. Now duck a diamond and you still have one trump left in the West hand to ruff East's 3rd diamond. Even though spades split 5-1 so you only have 4 spade tricks and not 5 it doesn't actually make any difference. 5 spade tricks would still only give declarer 3 discards — which could be all 3 diamonds or 2 diamonds and 1 club. Either way there is still one loser.

Should North South play in diamonds that will just lose 3 aces. The pairs who did best on the board were allowed to play in 5♦x for -100. But that means if East West do bid 6♥ it's worthwhile North South even bidding to 7♦ as it will go for a penalty of -500 which is still less East West can make just for playing game! See advanced section for more on this.

Key points to note

- Slam bidding requires an appreciation of how well hands "fit" together as well as a source of tricks (and of course not two top losers!)
- Queens and jacks in partner's suit are great assets when your side is playing the hand, so is nothing in a suit where partner has shortage as no honours are wasted.
- The unusual NT overcall showing both minors is a valuable competitive weapon that can make life hard for the opponents and help your side find a good save.
- With enough shape, it can still be effective to sacrifice even at the 7 level! The key is for your penalty to be less than the value of the opponent's game.

More advanced

North's bid over 1 is largely a question of style and partnership agreement. Some pairs prefer to bid to show the 55+ shape regardless of strength. That can certainly allow them to get into the auction and pre-empt high quickly to make it very hard for the other side. On the other hand it can also make it hard for partner to know what to do because he doesn't know how strong the 2NT bidder is. That is why some pairs prefer to reserve 2NT for weak or very strong hands but not intermediate ones like this one. That tends to help partner judge better what to do e.g. bid to your own contract or take an effective sacrifice. Intermediate hands tend to have more defence in them so you don't always want to push on over their contract as it might be going off. But of course that method also has some downsides. Firstly, as here, it leaves more room for the opponents. Secondly it runs the risk that the auction may be too high for North to safely introduce his 2nd suit by the time it comes back to him. That's less of a concern on this particular hand as North is so shapely so, with the favourable vulnerability, he is happy to bid himself a 2nd time at the 5 level.

After a 4 splinter from West, if East has the chance he should probably use blackwood. Usually blackwood is not a good move when you have a void or when you have no control at all in a suit. That's because, with a void, partner holding the ace of that suit might be useless and you don't always know where partner's key cards are. When you have 2 or 3 small in a suit the risk is that you might be off the AK of that suit. But here East can be fairly confident West must have a club control. He knows West can have at most AK, AK, and hardly anything in diamonds (it's not usually a good idea to splinter with a singleton honour as it misleads partner). That's only 9 points and yet West not only opened the bidding, he jumped to game. He has to have something good in clubs to be able to do that.

But it's not likely in practice East will get the chance because surely North, with his extreme shape, will come back in again. There is every chance of finding a good sacrifice in either minor and the vulnerability is very much in his favour to do that.

In fact even if East West do reach 6♥ it's actually in North South's interest to sacrifice in 7♦! They have 3 losers which is only -500. That is what we call the "par result" – basically the score that arises when both sides do as well as they theoretically can in the bidding. It certainly won't be obvious to do that on this hand – although if South knows North is at least 5-5 in the minors he will know they have almost no defence so it will become more tempting.

It's worth observing that the same features which make the East West hands fit well together also apply to the North South hands – they have no wastage in spades, a strong trump fit and South's soft cards in clubs fill that suit nicely. Only the ♥Q in the opponent's suit is potentially wasted.

In practice for a sacrifice to have a chance of scoring well at matchpoints it needs to be going for a penalty less than the value of the opponent's game (even if they can make slam for 1430 typically not many pairs will bid it so -800 will still score poorly because most pairs will be scoring 680 – this hand is a typical example of that).

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)