

## 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 <u>send questions</u> about hands that you have played.

# Fourth Suit Forcing and No-Trump play

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 26th June 2023



Board 8 last week showed how useful fourth suit forcing can be in an auction. It is likely to be uncontested by East West and will normally start 1 - 1 - 1. The question is what East does next. With 13 points opposite an opening bid he definitely wants to play in game – but which one? At this stage 3NT, 4, 4, 4, and 5, are all still possibilities. He can't bid no-trumps himself as he doesn't have a stopper in clubs. If partner has 3 hearts he would like to play there. East needs to find out more.

The solution is fourth suit forcing. After 3 suits have been bid naturally it is very unlikely the partnership will want to play in the last suit so it is much better to play a bid of that suit (2 - 4) here) as an artificial enquiry asking partner to describe his hand further. These

days the most common treatment is to agree that the bid is game forcing – although it is certainly possible to play it nongame forcing.

Opener responds as naturally as possible usually showing bids in the following order of priority:

- Show some delayed support for responder's suit (here 2♥ would show 3 hearts).
- Bid no-trumps with a stopper in the 4th suit.
- Show extra length in his 2nd suit (rare but in this sequence 2♠ would show 5 spades and hence, given West opened 1♦ it would mean he must be at least 65 shape).
- Raise the 4th suit if he does happen to hold that suit as well (e.g. is 4441 or 5440 shape).
- Repeat his 1st suit with nothing more to say (2 here).

On this hand, West's choices are 2♦ or 2NT. He does have a club stopper so he probably should bid no-trumps but Ax is a bad holding to do so. Firstly, with only 2 clubs he can only hold the ace up once, secondly it's only a single stopper and it's the suit the defence will almost certainly lead. So declarer may need to be able to run 9 tricks straight away to make 3NT. If West does bid 2NT, then East has an easy raise to 3NT.

There's a good case, however, for West to just bid 2 and see what East does next. That's not so easy for East – he now knows there is no major suit fit but he still can't bid no-trumps himself so he will probably resort to 3. Now West can try 3NT which shows he has something in clubs but it wasn't enough to bid NT himself on the previous round. East might well now gamble that that will be good enough as 5. looks a long way off. He will no doubt hope his A will be enough to help run the whole diamond suit in 3NT.

See advanced section for some more discussion on fourth suit forcing.

Assuming the pair does arrive in 3NT North has a pretty easy  $\clubsuit$  lead. It's now a declarer play problem! West first needs to duck but is then, reluctantly, forced to win the 2nd club. This is why Axx is a FAR better holding than Ax for no-trumps – it allows declarer to hold up the ace to the 3rd round which significantly increases the chances of being able to cut off the hand with the long suit winners.

He now needs to consider how many tricks he has. On this hand that's not so easy! 1 in clubs, 3 in spades (or 4 if they break 3-3), 1 in hearts (or 2 if North has  $\clubsuit$ K), potentially as many as 6 in diamonds (if someone has  $\diamondsuit$ QJ doubleton) but most likely 2 or 3 if North has a singleton honour so South can be finessed.

Declarer's other big problem is he will think he cannot afford to lose the lead (he's already ducked one club and if he loses another trick whenever clubs are 5-3, the defence will be in a position to win 3 more clubs).

The best start is surely a diamond to the A seeing the Q from North. If declarer plays another diamond back now, should he play A (hoping for North to have Q) or finesse (playing for North to have Q singleton)? Looking at diamonds in isolation the answer is finesse (due to a principle called "restricted choice" - see advanced section for details). However on this hand I would be very reluctant to do that early on as it's into the hand sitting with lots of club winners! I would first try for Q. When that fails declarer still has other chances. He should next take the heart finesse by running the Q.

As it happens the heart finesse loses and declarer will momentarily think he is doomed. But he will get a pleasant surprise when South cannot return a club! This time, holding up the A for just one round was enough to cut off the defence's long suit (usually it won't be!) At this point declarer will make 4 spades (when they do prove to be 3-3), 2 hearts (the AJ are now both winners), 2 diamonds and 1 club.

The hand is an example of testing various chances for the contract in sequence to give yourself the maximum opportunity to make it. But with the lucky 6-2 club split, declarer should make on pretty much any reasonable line. See advanced section for more discussion about combining some of these chances.

### Key points to note

- After 3 suits have been bid naturally by a pair, it is far more useful for the 4th suit to be played as an artificial enquiry to help find the best contract. Most pairs play it as game forcing although that's something to agree.
- Responses to 4th suit forcing should basically just try to describe your hand further.
- Axx is a far better holding than Ax in no-trumps because you can hold the Ace up until the 3rd round if the defence attack the suit.
- When counting tricks in no-trumps there may be several ways to reach 9. Consider if you can test some suits without risking the contract.
- When missing QJ of a suit and one honour falls on the 1st round, the odds in that suit in isolation favour playing for that honour to have been singleton (due to "restricted choice").

#### More advanced

There are additional uses for fourth suit forcing. Where it is game forcing, responder can use it as a stronger way of agreeing one of opener's suits – even stronger than just jumping straight to game in that suit. This paves the way for a possible cue bidding sequence and a slam. For example the sequences  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$  or  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$  or  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$  or  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$  or  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$  or  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$  or  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$  or  $1 \div - 1 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div - 2 \div$ 

There are also some further inferences in the bidding. If fourth suit is played as a game force then opener jumping straight to game would normally follow the principle of fast arrival and show a bad hand. So 1 - 1 - 1 - 1 - 2 - 3NT would be a total minimum hand without 3 hearts and with a good club stopper. 2NT would also deny 3 hearts and would also have a club stopper but would be non-minimum allowing responder room to continue towards slam if he has a really strong hand.

The play to this hand is quite annoying. There are several chances (spades 3-3, heart finesse, diamond finesse). You would like to be able to test spades early on since that's the only suit you can test without risking losing the lead. But the entries make that difficult. Once you have played the A and A from dummy you can no longer take the heart finesse because, even if it wins, you will not be able to reach the A. So you need to try the heart finesse earlier while there is at least one ace there. Swap the Q and J and that restriction wouldn't apply.

Had no honour appeared on the 1st round of diamonds declarer would know he only has 2 tricks in the suit and then his only chance is to make 4 spades, 2 hearts, 2 diamonds and 1 club. When the  $\blacklozenge$ Q appears there is now a slim possibility of 6 diamond tricks but quite a good possibility of 3 (i.e. for North's  $\blacklozenge$ Q to be singleton). That's because of the principle of "restricted choice". It often causes confusion amongst players but it basically says that in a scenario like this if a player has **S y d n e y B r i d g e C e n t r e . c o m W E E K L Y W I S D O M** 2 | 3 played one honour card, then he is less likely to have the other (the argument being when he does hold  $\mathbf{Q}$  exactly he has a choice of playing either card on the 1st round – when he has a singleton he obviously doesn't have any choice). Once one honour has appeared, the odds are actually heavily in favour of that honour being singleton – and hence, considering that suit in isolation, declarer should finesse on the 2nd round.

Here, declarer doesn't want to risk finessing into North's hand (which has all the club winners) unless it's his last resort. So rather than commit fully in diamonds early on, a reasonable order of play is A, then cross back to A to try the heart finesse. If that wins, declarer can then test spades by playing 3 rounds ending in dummy. This way he finds out if they are 3-3 and is now in the right hand at the right time. Had he ended in hand, he could no longer consider the diamond finesse. If spades are 3-3 there are now 9 tricks with no risk. Cash A, and cross back to the A to make 4 spades, 2 hearts, 2 diamonds and 1 club. If spades are not 3-3, then cash A and then finally resort to finessing in diamonds to end with 3 spades, 2 hearts, 3 diamonds and 1 club. That's definitely what you should do when playing imps where making your game contract is the paramount consideration and overtricks almost irrelevant. Playing matchpoint pairs is very different so, even with spades 3-3, you might well decide to take the odds-on diamond finesse to aim for 10 tricks anyway!

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)