

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.

Inverted minors and the importance of matchpoint scoring on your contract

City (Open and Rookie) and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 31st July 2023



Board 23 last week showed an important principle of playing pairs - don't play 5 minor unless it's the last resort! Let's see why.

South will open - either with $1 \clubsuit$ or $1 \blacklozenge$ depending on agreement. It's common to open the lower of two four card suits but it would be quite tempting here to open $1 \blacklozenge$ as we would far rather partner leads a diamond if he later ends up on lead! What's more these days a $1 \clubsuit$ opening can frequently be made on 3 or sometimes even 2 clubs.

After $1 \blacklozenge$, North has an easy bid of $2 \clubsuit$ and South should then raise to $3 \clubsuit$. I'll come back to that.

After 1, North has a much more difficult bid playing natural methods. He doesn't have a suit of his own to bid and most raises of clubs are not normally forcing (2, would be 6-9, 3, about 10-12). He certainly doesn't want to jump the bidding too high either as he has a very nice hand that could be suitable for slam if partner has a good hand too. So he might actually choose to temporarily invent a 1, response simply to create something that partner cannot pass (if you are going to lie you are normally better to lie in a minor not a major). That might get quite messy here because South will raise to 2. Now North is probably best to try and close proceedings with 3NT. But with all the controls in the majors and good club support he could easily be missing a slam in clubs.

What North needs is a bid that is forcing with club support. This is where "inverted minors" are a vast improvement. In this method a jump to 3 minor is weaker (6-9) whereas a raise to 2 minor is forcing usually with 10+ points. Not only does this solve the problem of how to bid hands like these, it also leaves more room on the bigger hands which can be useful to explore reaching a slam.

Inverted minor bids always deny a 4 card major because you'd always bid that first if you could. Over clubs it may need to show 5 card support if the opening 1 could be short.

After 1 - 2 = it's usual to show where your values are - the idea being to initially look towards 3NT. So South should bid 2 <. At this point North, holding stoppers in both majors, might just bid 3NT. Alternatively he might think of proceeding further towards 6 =.

Returning to the auction that started 1 -2 -3 North has a similar decision about whether to bid 3NT or look for 6 .

The one thing North should NOT do is play in 5. Why not? Because of the scoring at matchpoint pairs. Minor suits score much worse than majors or no-trumps and the small difference can have a huge impact at pairs (where you only score points for how many pairs you beat, it doesn't matter how much you beat them by). 5. making will score +600, making 12 tricks will score +620. Even if 3NT makes 2 tricks fewer, 10 tricks will still beat that with +630! At matchpoint pairs those small score differences are critical. Generally at pairs if 3NT is a plausible option you should play in it – even if it's a risker contract than 5.

If you don't play 3NT you should try 6. At least if 6. makes you will score very well. Yes if you end up going off in 6. you will score badly of course but the point is even if you play in 5. making you will ALSO score badly (you will be getting 600 when everyone playing in 3NT will be getting at least 630). So when 6. doesn't make you don't lose much and when it does make you gain an awful lot!

Playing imps (teams or swiss pairs) none of this is relevant. The equation is completely different. The difference between 600 and 630 is 1 imp. But if 5 makes and 3NT goes off you have gained 12 imps! So it's not worth risking a dodgy 3NT in the hope of scoring 20 or 30 points more - you should just play whatever looks like the safest game.

So what about the play? A spade lead looks normal against clubs or no-trumps. It's then all about the club suit. Today there is no problem as they split 2-1 and you can set them up quickly. After that you have 2 spades, 2 hearts, 4 diamonds and 5 clubs which would be 13 tricks apart from the one you've just lost! So you end up with 12 tricks. But see advanced section for how you should play the club suit

Key points to note

- At pairs 5 minor does not score well. 3NT, even if not as good a contract, is far better. If 3NT is making then prefer to risk playing 6 minor instead of 5.
- Inverted minors (where a raise of 1m to 2m is stronger than 1m-3m) is a really useful bidding method. Without it you may have to invent a forcing bid over 1m from partner.
- When playing a suit, consider what can go badly and see if you can cater for at least some of those positions. Generally playing aces into thin air is a bad thing to do.

More advanced

After inverted minors there are a lot of different bidding schemes available. Simplest is just to bid naturally (primarily showing stoppers) looking first towards 3NT. If slam looks suitable then there are options like splinters, minorwood (a bid of 4⁺ over 2⁺ perhaps) or cue bidding. More advanced pairs may also play some methods where you can agree a minor but later invite in no-trumps and be able to stop in 4NT. That's very useful when playing pairs. Remember playing 4NT as blackwood in a minor tends not to be that useful – because the responses often force you to the 6 level anyway.

While "standard" inverted minors has the $2^{\text{+}}$ bid showing 10+ some pairs go further and actually make $2^{\text{+}}$ game forcing (12+). They usually then play a jump in the other minor ($1^{\text{-}}-3^{\text{+}}$ or $1^{\text{-}}-2^{\text{+}}$) as an invitational raise (about 9-11 points). These jumps aren't very useful as natural bids so this is quite a good option. Obviously they also deny a 4 card major.

Let's return to the play. We have seen that when clubs are 2-1, you can't go wrong. But what if clubs had been 3-0? Now cashing the A goes very wrong! Firstly, the defence now have 2 club tricks. Secondly, assuming they led a major, when they get in in clubs they can continue the same major to knock out your only remaining stop in that suit and you still don't have your clubs set up as winners. You will probably only make 9 tricks (2 spades, 2 hearts, 4 diamonds and 1 club).

So what can we do if clubs are 3-0? Nothing if East has A KQx - that's unlucky. But if West has A KQx they can be picked up in a couple of ways:

- a) Declarer can cross to dummy, lead a club towards hand and just cover whatever West plays. If it loses to East that means clubs must have been 2-1.
- b) Lead a low club from hand. Again if clubs are 2-1 it doesn't matter. However, if East shows out dummy's ♣J loses to West's ♣Q but declarer can then return to dummy and later has a marked finesse against West's remaining ♣Kx.

These plays in clubs are examples of a "safety play". Which is better? It may depend who is playing the hand. If North is declarer then I actually like the 2nd because it has one additional deception possibility. It may give East a nasty problem if he does have $\mathbf{\Phi}$ KQx. Remember he can't see the North hand so when declarer leads a low club he might be nervous about putting up the $\mathbf{\Phi}$ Q in front of dummy in case his partner has singleton $\mathbf{\Phi}$ A! If he elects to play low, you have now got away with playing clubs for only one loser after all!

Most pairs in 3NT made 12 tricks on a spade lead scoring +690. Everyone playing clubs also made 12 tricks but only scored +620. Had they bid to 6⁺ they'd have done much better! Well done to the couple of pairs who did manage that.

One or two pairs in 3NT seem to have scored 720 by making all 13 tricks. That's likely to have happened by declarer leading a sneaky \clubsuit J from South and West covering! So, while covering an honour with an honour is frequently right why is it wrong here? Why should West not cover? He needs to ask himself what can it gain? More specifically he should remember that the only purpose of covering is to promote lower value cards into winners in either your own, or in partner's, hand. Assuming both North and South have shown clubs in the auction then West knows East can't have many. Which means covering surely cannot promote a card in partner's hand. What's more, partner might only have 1 club in which case covering, as here, could be very embarrassing! \bigstar J is a good play from declarer – he has all the intermediate clubs so it costs nothing to try and tempt West into an error. Strong declarers are always looking for ways to give the defence problems because, sooner or later, they will get one wrong!

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)