



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.

The difference between matchpoints and IMPs; inferences from the opening lead

City (Open / Rookie) and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 7th August 2023

2	♠ QT64		Dir: E
	♥ J9873		Vul: N-S
	♦ J976		
	♣		
♠ AJ75	♠ 98	4	
♥ KT6	♥ A52	11	13
♦ Q4	♦ AKT853	12	
♣ J875	♣ Q3		
	♠ K32		
	♥ Q4		
	♦ 2		
	♣ AKT9642		

Last Monday at Canada Bay was a championship pairs session scored by imps whereas the city sessions were matchpoints as usual. The scoring for the two formats is very different and that frequently should influence how you bid. In general there is much more to gain at teams by bidding pushy games than there is at pairs.

Board 2 had game available to East West but surprisingly few pairs bid it. East will open 1♦ and South may overcall 2♣ or perhaps 3♣. Over 2♣ I would make a takeout double as West. Yes ideally we would have both majors for that. But it's OK here because we can cope with anything partner does. If he responds 2♠ we are obviously happy. But what if he bids 2♥? Over that we can next bid 2NT. Had we not had a club stopper it

might have been more dangerous to double the first time. It's always important to think ahead to what you will do if partner makes the most awkward response to your bids (which they have an annoying habit of doing!). On this hand East will just rebid 2♦ but that's also fine - West can again bid 2NT showing an invitational hand with a club stopper, happy that he has explored the possibility of a spade fit first.

What should East do over 2NT? He has a clear raise to 3NT in my opinion for several reasons:

- he has 13 points when he might have had only 11;
- he has a good source of tricks with a 6 card diamond suit when he might have only had 5;
- he has ♥A which is a definite outside entry to get back to the diamonds after setting them up;
- he has ♣Qx which will often be a nice bolster to whatever club stop partner must have;
- when playing imps there is more to gain than lose by bidding 3NT.

Now let's suppose South took up more space the first time with 3♣. This is a bit tougher but I think West should still double to look for a major fit and resort to 3NT if he doesn't find one. His ♦Q is a nice card which could easily help run the diamond suit. The downside of course is his club stopper is pretty poor. He might propel his side to 3NT going off some of the time. But he might miss a cold game if he doesn't act. That's why people jump in the bidding – it forces opponents to make decisions at a higher level and sometimes they will get them wrong!

Generally at imps it pays to take the optimistic view because there is more to gain than lose by bidding game. That is especially true when vulnerable and still true, but to a lesser extent, here where East West are not vulnerable. In fact, counter-intuitive though it may seem, when vulnerable at imps it is actually a winning strategy in the long run to bid game even if it only makes 37.5% of the time! See advanced section for why this is the case.

The whole situation is totally different when playing pairs though – you don't gain nearly as much by bidding and making a pushy game and you risk losing more when you bid a pushy game and go off. Again, see advanced section for more details.

Let's consider the play to 3NT by West. North will probably lead a heart to the ♥Q and ♥K. One thing declarer should always do is take a look at the opening lead and see what he can deduce from it. Here he should immediately be suspicious - why has North led from a poor heart suit and not the suit his partner overcalled vulnerable? There's a pretty good inference that North is void in clubs (even more so if South had bid 3♣ in the auction). Declarer will obviously now start on

diamonds with ♦Q and another. Should he finesse the ♦10 on the 2nd round? Quite possibly - if he believes clubs are 7-0 that heavily swings the odds in favour of diamonds being 4-1. Basically, South only has 5 remaining cards that could be diamonds whereas North has 11.

On the other hand declarer doesn't really want to lose a trick to South who can not only cash a club but can also return a heart through declarer's remaining ♥10x to set North's suit up, or a spade through declarer's ♠AJ. All in all, declarer would much prefer to have North on lead! That's why I think I would still play diamonds from the top. If they are 3-2 all along I have 6 easy tricks. If they are 4-1, I just knock out North's diamond to set up 2 more. It's a little harder now but 3NT can still be made - see advanced section for the details. As a clue - think about what North has left when he's in with ♦J. And then again later!

One pair in the city did bid and make 3NT – well done. They nearly got a top – the only other score better their way was a very unusual 700 when NORTH played 3NT going 7 off!

Some Souths were left to play in clubs, a couple doubled. This should be extremely unpleasant! Best defence starts with 2 rounds of diamonds. Declarer ruffs and plays ♣AK10 which West wins. East signals hearts on this trick so West can play ♠A, ♥K, ♥ to A and now East just plays winning diamonds through. Now West will score his ♣8 (declarer only has ♣9 at this point and if he ruffs with that, West's ♣8 is the highest one left; if he ruffs low West scores the ♣8 as an overruff – this is called a “trump promotion”). This defence holds declarer to just 7 tricks.

Key points to note

- Imps and matchpoints are very different forms of scoring. It pays to bid game a lot more aggressively at imps (especially when vulnerable). Tend to overbid at imps, underbid at matchpoints.
- If you can look for a major fit safely in the auction, do so. But think ahead and check there is something sensible you can do over anything partner bids.
- When deciding whether to accept an invite always consider what you might have had to have bid the same way in the auction so far.
- In no-trumps if an opponent doesn't lead a suit their partner has bid or overcalled when vulnerable there's a good chance they are void (or at best singleton).

More advanced

I said 3NT could still be made by West even if declarer plays diamonds from the top and has to lose a trick in the suit to North. At this point declarer has 8 tricks (♠A, ♥AK, and 5 diamonds). But after winning ♦J North only has major suit cards left. He cannot play another heart as declarer can run it to his ♥ (the low heart lead and ♥Q from South at trick 1 means North almost certainly has ♥J). So his only safe option at that point is to lead a spade to the ♠K and ♠A. But now declarer can just play another spade himself. This time North is stuck - the best he can do is take ♠Q10 but then he either has to give declarer a spade trick with ♠J (leading to 2 spades, 2 hearts and 5 diamonds) or lead away from his ♥J (leading to 1 spade, 3 hearts and 5 diamonds).

Why does it pay to bid games more aggressively at imps? It comes down to comparing the score you get when you are right versus when you are wrong.

First suppose 9 tricks are available on this hand and you bid 3NT making. That scores +400. 2NT+1 would have scored +150. So if everyone else played 2NT you would gain 250 which is 6 imps. Now suppose only 8 tricks are available. This time by bidding 3NT you score -50 and everyone else scores +120. That's a loss of 170 points which is 5 imps. So by bidding 3NT you gain more when you are right than you lose when you are wrong.

When not vulnerable the difference isn't much. But it's a different story when vulnerable.

- With 9 tricks available you score +600 v +150, a difference of +450 or +10 imps.
- With 8 tricks available you score -100 v +120, a difference of -220 or -6 imps.

So by bidding 3NT instead of 2NT you gain 10 when it makes and lose 6 imps when it doesn't.

Suppose for the sake of argument that 3NT makes 50% of the time. That means in the long run by choosing to bid 3NT you would score 50% of +10 and 50% of -6 = +2 imps.

So how often should you try 3NT and still come out ahead in the long run? This is effectively a maths equation and the answer turns out to be when 3NT makes 37.5% of the time (because 37.5% of +10 + 62.5% of -6 = 0). That's why, when you are vulnerable if you bid game you only need to be right 37.5% of the time and still come out ahead!

Of course it's not quite as simple as this. There are several other factors:

- a) We have assumed the only possible scores are 8 or 9 tricks and that no one doubles. In practice if you stretch too far you may go 2 off for -200 or get doubled for -500.
- b) We have assumed you can judge how likely it is that 3NT will make. In the real world of course you can't (at least not that accurately) – you have to take a view.
- c) Even if you shouldn't theoretically make 9 tricks, in practice you may be allowed to because defence is difficult.

All this means it is definitely a sound principle to be very aggressive looking for game when playing imps, especially when vulnerable.

Playing matchpoint pairs it's all completely different. This time all that matters is how many other pairs score you beat, it's irrelevant by how much you beat them. So the +6 v -5 or +10 v -6 imp comparisons above just don't arise. If you bid 3NT making when others are in 2NT you get a top; if you bid 3NT going off when others are in 2NT making you get a bottom. This time the gain when right is equal to the loss when wrong.

In fact at pairs you don't want to push onto risky games. Suppose you are in 2NT but play a trick better than everyone else and score +150 when everyone else is scoring +120. You will get a total top. If you bid 3NT and score +400 you still get the same top. The game bonus doesn't get you anything more at pairs. However, had you only made 8 tricks like the other pairs you'd score a total bottom when you bid 3NT and average when you bid 2NT.

Hence at pairs you actually have more to lose by bidding game going off than you have to gain when you bid game making. This is why a good general maxim is to overbid at imps and underbid at pairs!

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)