



## 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.

### Checkback after 1NT and playing weak trump suits

City (Open / Rookie) – Monday Morning 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2023

|           |        |         |          |
|-----------|--------|---------|----------|
| <b>17</b> |        | ♠ KQ3   | Dlr: N   |
|           |        | ♥ 832   | Vul: Nil |
|           |        | ♦ K72   |          |
|           |        | ♣ KJ82  |          |
| ♠ JT854   | ♠ 972  | 12      |          |
| ♥ J9      | ♥ AKT  | 5       | 9        |
| ♦ J654    | ♦ QT98 | 14      |          |
| ♣ Q6      | ♣ 754  |         |          |
|           |        | ♠ A6    |          |
|           |        | ♥ Q7654 |          |
|           |        | ♦ A3    |          |
|           |        | ♣ AT93  |          |

Sometimes you land up in a contract where your trump suit is weaker than you hoped for. Board 17 last week was an example.

A normal auction for North South (likely to be uncontested) will start 1♣ 1♥ 1NT. South should then explore for a 5-3 heart fit and play either 4♥ or 3NT.

A useful way to do that is to play some form of "checkback" over the 1NT rebid. There are several approaches (see advanced section for more) but the simplest is to use a bid of 2♣ as artificial. Partner bids naturally over that - i.e. shows 3 card support if he has it, or an unbid major, or a 5 card minor, or reverts to NT with none of those. Here North

would show 3 hearts and South, with 3 aces should definitely elect to play 4♥ (aces tend to be good for suit play).

He may not be so happy when he sees, dummy, however! Unluckily the hands have excessive values in spades and not many in hearts! Frequently you see players panic in this situation and give up trying to draw trumps at all. But what you should remember is you still have many more trumps than the opponents even though you don't have the top ones. Assuming a normal 3-2 split (which, mathematically, happens 68% of the time) after 3 rounds the opponents trumps will be gone and you will still have 2 left. What's more, if you DON'T draw them they will simply be able to trump your other winners later.

You might be scared trumps will break badly. Yes that's a risk and you will probably go off if they do. But not attempting to draw trumps won't make it any better!

West is likely to lead ♠J against 4♥. So declarer should win in North and lead a heart towards the ♥Q. In fact on this hand that works well as East has both ♥AK so will almost certainly play one. Declarer later leads towards ♥Q again and eventually it will win the 3rd round to draw the last opposing trump. But even if the ♥Q loses initially declarer should still keep going with a 2nd round of trumps when he gets back in. That will then hopefully remove two more opposing trumps and just leave one top trump out. Usually it's not worth drawing that (since it will take 2 of yours). Declarer is better off playing other winners without the risk of them being taken with small trumps and just letting the defender with the top trump ruff in at some point. Incidentally, when returning to hand to lead a second heart declarer should do so with the ♦K and NOT the ♣K. See advanced section for why.

The lucky heart layout here means declarer just loses two hearts. If he can guess the ♣Q he will then make 11 tricks. If he doesn't he should still make 10.

What about if North played 3NT instead? This time East is likely to lead a diamond. Now playing on hearts would be a mistake because declarer is at risk of losing 3 hearts and he is a tempo behind so the defence will also get two diamond tricks going. So in practice declarer's better option to make the contract is to get 4 clubs tricks. But that's a lot worse than 4♥ where the 4th club trick is just for an overtrick. What's more even if he gets it right to score +400 that still scores less than 4♥ making (+420). So it's definitely far better to play this hand in 4♥ than 3NT.

Finally what about playing the club suit? In either contract it feels like a guess for who has ♣Q. There isn't much to go on. There are two ways strong declarers can try to find out more information to help with these sorts of guesses:

See who has what points and whether that influences what they did or didn't bid. But here the opponents don't have many points to start with so you can't really infer that one of them would have bid something different with ♣Q.

Play other suits to try and find out the shape to gauge who has room for more clubs. But that not much good here either since they largely both just follow suit.

Interestingly one pair who made 4♥ received the ♣Q lead! I'd have thought after that generous start they should have made 11 tricks. This hand is a good example of why honour doubleton leads like that are usually a very bad idea, especially on hands where you know you are heavily outgunned. You are gambling that partner has his values in that same suit. But why should he? All too often a lead like that just solves declarer's guess for him! Go for a safer passive lead usually - here the ♠J is a standout for me.

### Key points to note

- Just because your trumps are bad doesn't mean you should give up playing them. You still need to try and draw the opponents', otherwise they will just be able to use them to trump your other winners later.
- If there is just one big trump missing it's not usually worth spending two of your trumps to draw it - it will score a trick anyway so just leave it and let the defender trump in with it when they want to.
- Checkback after a 1NT rebid is a very useful bidding method to help find the best contract. A 5-3 or 4-4 major suit fit will usually play better than 3NT.
- Generally don't lead from Honour-doubleton - it gives away tricks or solves declarer's guess far too often.
- If you have a guess (eg for a Queen) in a suit try to leave the decision as late as you can. Play other suits to see if you can find out what points or shape the opponents have. That might help decide how to play the key suit.

### More advanced

We talked about simple checkback above. One variation on that is to use "new minor forcing". That's where a bid of partner's own minor can just be simple preference and a bid of the other minor (2♦ here) is checkback. The responses are much the same. There's not usually any need for opener to jump in response to show a maximum. Responder can always invite and that's when opener can show whether he is min or max. Jumping earlier in the auction just consumes too much space.

A more advanced checkback variation is "two way checkback". The normal way this is played is to start all invitational hands with 2♣. Over that partner MUST bid 2♦ and then any bid responder makes is descriptive and invitational. (Although note this also gives responder a way of getting out in 2♦. Suppose responder had a weak hand with 4♥ and 6♦. He could respond 1♥ to 1♣ to investigate a fit there but then bid 2♣ over 1NT and PASS the forced 2♦ reply!)

Responder's 2♦ bid over the 1NT rebid is then artificial and game forcing. Opener responds to that much as he would over simple checkback but the partnership knows they are in a game forcing auction so there is no need to jump in the bidding and consume more space.

Note for simplicity these meanings for 2♣ and 2♦ usually apply regardless of what minors have been bid by either partner (so even after 1♣-1♦-1NT). One of the very few costs of checkback is it nearly always loses the ability to play in 2 of opener's minor. But that's a small price to pay for having so many more ways to bid and explore for different games (and maybe slams).

Another area to explore with your partner is whether a 1NT rebid denies a missing 4 card major (so here if North has 4 spades would he rebid those or still rebid 1NT?). Many pairs these days rebid 1NT with any balanced hand and reply on checkback methods to find a major suit fit if one exists. There's a very useful extra inference if you do that as well - it means that when opener rebids a 2nd suit and does NOT rebid 1NT then his hand is unbalanced (at least 54 in the two suits or sometimes 4441). That knowledge can be very valuable.

The club guess is obviously important on this hand. So declarer should leave the decision as late as he can. That's why he should not use the ♣K to return to hand because that would commit him to finessing against East for ♣Q. By leaving the ♣K alone he still has the option of playing either defender for the ♣Q. He will be hoping to gather some more useful information later to help decide.

As we saw there isn't actually much useful information to be found on this hand. But it's still good technique to keep the option there as long as possible. One valid inference declarer might draw if he thinks West has 5 spades (quite likely based on his lead and the spade cards East plays) is that West will have a poor hand. Why? Because if he had anything half decent he would have overcalled 1♠ in the auction. Remember what the opponents DIDN'T do in an auction can sometimes be just as revealing as what they DID do! Here though it still doesn't really help since once East has shown up with ♥AK there isn't much left for West with or without the ♣Q!

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)