



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.

Competitive bidding and managing trumps

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 11th December 2023

16		♠ AK9642	Dlr: W
		♥ Q987	Vul: E-W
		♦ A8	
		♣ 3	
♠ 5	♠ J873	13	
♥ A65	♥ J	15	5
♦ KQT42	♦ 765	7	
♣ AQ54	♣ KT986		
		♠ QT	♠ NT
		♥ KT432	N - - 3 3 -
		♦ J93	S - - 3 3 -
		♣ J72	E 5 4 - -
			W 5 4 - -

On board 16 last week the auction may well start slowly and then come to life for both sides. It showed how fits can still be found later on provided both sides compete.

West will start with 1♦ and North probably overcalls 1♠ (his hand is good but not good enough to double first and then bid a suit). East doesn't really have a bid over that. He only has 5 points and a poor spade stop so 1NT isn't an option. Nor can he double with only 1 heart. Partner's 1♦ almost certainly doesn't have to be more than 4 diamonds so raising to 2♦ is unwise as well. South doesn't have a bid either - he's not strong enough to introduce another suit, he can't directly raise spades

with only 2 and he has no diamond stop so can't bid 1NT.

But West should now come back in with a takeout double. The main reason for doing that is to compete further in the auction but it's also important in case his partner wanted to penalise 1♠! Partner's double of 1♠ would have been takeout (typically showing hearts) so he would have to pass holding a penalty double. That's why West should re-open with a double most of the time when he has short spades in case that is the situation. See advanced section for more guidance here.

North might bid again now although I personally wouldn't. It's quite dangerous at this stage. Although he has a 2nd suit and 6 spades they aren't very solid and he doesn't yet know if his left hand opponent is sitting over him with a penalty! I'd pass and see what happens - I'll get another chance to bid whenever East does bid something (which is almost all the time - penalty passes are quite rare in practice).

On this hand East will bid 2♣ in response to his partner's takeout double. That now tells North and South that he didn't have a big hand to start with. Now South can come to life as well. He can make what is known as a "competitive double". This basically shows a few values, tolerance for partner's suit (usually a doubleton), and length in unbid suits (hearts here). It's a very useful bid to show partner you have some values but no obvious bid you can make yourself.

At this point both sides have now found a fit but not in the suit either of them first opened. West can raise to 3♣ and North will be happy to hear his partner has hearts and will probably bid to at least 3♥, quite possibly even 4♥. After all he only has 5 losers in his hand and give his partner just ♥KJxxx and nothing else and he will have good play for game (expecting to lose just a heart, a diamond and a club).

On the hand East West can actually make 5♣. It's hard to see them getting that high in practice though but it shows the power of shape. They only have 20 points between them and both major suit jacks are useless. But the two major suit singletons and the secondary diamond fit make everything work for them.

The play and defence of this hand is generally about managing trumps.

Against clubs North will no doubt lead a top spade. He then needs to continue with a low spade at trick 2 - either partner will ruff or he will play the ♠Q which declarer will ruff (playing the ♠K is too risky as it might crash partner's ♠Q and set up dummy's ♠J). Now declarer needs to be careful. Should he draw all the trumps? No - think what will happen if he does. It

will take 3 rounds so none will be left in the West hand. Now when North wins the ♦A he will be able to cash ♠K. So declarer needs to leave a trump with West when he knocks out ♦A. But there's a bit more he also needs to be careful about! See advanced section for the rest of the play.

Against hearts East will probably lead a diamond, his partner's suit. After winning ♦A, declarer will probably now start to draw trumps. Once West wins ♥A, he needs to either play two more rounds of diamonds or two rounds of clubs to force a trump out of the North hand. This leaves both North and West with two trumps. Should declarer draw both of these? Again no! Think what doing that will mean. The North hand will only have spades left. So he will have to hope spades break evenly because when they don't, even though he can trump one in the South hand to make them all winners, he won't be able to get back to them (remember the ♦A has been knocked out at trick 1).

So once again declarer needs to leave a trump out - but this time for a different reason, to use as a later entry to reach his spades. As it turns out this will allow West to score a ruff so only 3♥ can be made. Declarer could try another line although that shouldn't work on this hand either. See advanced section for the rest of the play this time.

Even though 4♥ doesn't make today I'd still be happy to be in it - after all it would make if either hearts or spades had split evenly. What's more scoring -50 in 4♥ may still be OK since East West can make game in clubs.

Very few pairs seem to have found hearts though, several played in spades. Perhaps North rebid his own suit, perhaps South didn't know about competitive doubles and decided to raise spades instead.

A spade contract can be held to 9 tricks quite easily with a singleton heart lead, heart ruff, club to the ace and a 2nd heart ruff. A diamond lead will also limit it to 9 tricks. Most likely declarer will play a spade to the ♠Q and then the ♠10 back to hand hoping they will split 3-2. This will create a trick for the ♠J so the defence will win a trick in each suit. Even if declarer happens to take the correct view in spades and plays low to the ♠10 it still doesn't help him as after ♠Q he can't quickly get back to his hand to draw the remaining trumps. Provided West is sharp he can win ♥A, score a diamond and club and give his partner a heart ruff. East should help him with the defence here though - see advanced section for how.

Key points to note

- Just because you don't find a fit immediately doesn't mean you should give up. Don't be afraid to compete - your side could easily still have a fit in another suit. Sometimes you can even make game or slam in it!
- Competitive doubles tend to show a hand with a few values but no clear bid (this normally means tolerance but not direct support for partner, length in an unbid suit, etc).
- Don't automatically draw all the trumps as declarer. Especially if it removes all the trumps from one of your hands. Think about whether you may need to keep at least one in one hand - either for a later entry or to prevent the defence being able to cash a winner.
- When defending don't automatically encourage just because you like that suit - you may like another suit better!

More advanced

After an overcall is passed back to the opening bidder, when should he re-open with a double?

My general rule of thumb here is to re-open with a double if I would have passed a penalty double had partner been able to make one. On this hand I'd be very happy to do that as I have quite a few defensive tricks. Had I held a more shapely hand without top honours in suits I might have been less keen. In that case I'd reopen by bidding a suit. Even though this might prove very disappointing to partner if he is sitting with a huge penalty double(!) it also tells him a lot about your hand - i.e. that you have a shapely hand that doesn't have much defence.

In clubs, having worked out he can't draw 3 rounds of trumps declarer still needs to be careful. He must leave a trump with West before he knocks out ♦A but it must be either the ♣A or ♣Q. It's no good leaving a small trump with West as North could then lead another spade which South could ruff with the ♣J! Having done that the best North can do when he wins ♦A is knock out the ♥A. But now declarer can draw the last trump and reach East with a heart ruff. Then he needs to play a diamond to the ♦10 to score the rest of the diamonds. This is the odds play in the suit.

In hearts, we saw declarer has a similar problem as he also needs to leave a trump out before he plays on spades. This time the concern is not allowing the defence to cash a trick, it's entries. He should test spades by playing ♠Q and ♠10. If they split then of course he then just draws the last trump and runs the rest of the spades. When spades don't split it means West will be able to get a ruff to beat 4♥. But this means 4♥ couldn't ever have been made. Had he drawn the trump and played ♠Q, ♠K, ♠A he'd be limited to 3 spades, 1 minor suit ruff in North, 4 trumps in South and ♦A - i.e. still 9 tricks.

However what about if declarer decides not to aim to set his spades up but to take 2 ruffs in dummy instead? If he can score 3 top spades, 4 trumps in South, ♦A and 2 ruffs in North that's 10 tricks. So maybe after winning ♦A he should play a club himself at trick 2? No that's no good either. West can counter that by leading a LOW heart. Declarer can win that in hand, ruff a club, cross to ♠Q and take a 2nd ruff but when he now plays a trump it's dummy's last so West can win and cash 2 diamonds. And of course if he plays a 2nd spade then West immediately gets his ruff. The low heart return away from the Ace enables the defenders to keep control of the trump suit.

Overall 4♥ needs either hearts to break 2-2 or spades to break 3-2 (although 4-1 with a singleton J would also be OK). So it's well worth being in.

When defending spades after a diamond lead and a spade to the ♠10 then ♠Q, followed by a heart West needs to hop up immediately with ♥A. I said East needed to help with the defence here. West will cash ♦K but East should have led MUD so West knows no more diamonds are cashing. West will no doubt next try ♣A. Here, even though East holds the ♣K, he should not just blindly encourage them. That's because he KNOWS a heart ruff will work. A 2nd club trick might not stand up (in fact if West has bid clubs in the auction then, holding 5 clubs himself and looking at 3 in dummy, East KNOWS a 2nd club won't stand up). So he should DISCOURAGE clubs. If West trusts his partner he should then return to hearts.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)