



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.

Big fits!

City (Open / Rookie) – Monday Morning 18th December 2023

26	♠ 94	Dir: E
	♥ AQJ86	Vul: All
	♣ QT9763	
♠ J2	♠ KQ65	9
♥ AK7432	♥ QJT9865	15 8
♦ 75	♦ 2	8
♣ AK8	♣ 2	
	♠ AT873	
	♥ KT943	
	♣ J54	

This will be my last column for 2023. There's no bridge on 25th December or 1st January. So I'll return for Mon 8th January. Thanks to all those who have read it this year and to those of you who have asked questions. I hope it's been of interest.

There aren't many hands where one side has all 13 cards in a suit and it usually makes for an exciting hand when it does happen. Board 26 last week was one such hand with East West having a 13 card heart fit. North

South also had large fits in both minors. The auction is likely to be quite lively!

East obviously has a very powerful hand in terms of shape. Quite a few probably opened a heart pre-empt (much to West's amazement no doubt!) Personally I think I would actually start with a pass! Primarily because I have a 4 card spade suit on the side. Suppose partner has something like Axxxx x Axx xxxx. What will he do over, say, a 3♥ opening? He'll surely pass. But we easily make game in spades. With a 74 shape like this, the odds of the hand being passed out are almost negligible – and because East has the majors he can outbid the opponents likely minor suits later. So, even though many might disagree, I'd wait and come in later.

If South is playing a method where 2♠ shows spades and a minor, he would naturally open that. Otherwise he will probably pass. If we assume he passes then West has a normal 1♥ opening (this time to East's amazement!). North can now get involved with a 2NT overcall – the "unusual no-trump" showing at least 55 in the minors (a far better use of the bid than big and natural which can be shown by starting with a double and then bidding no-trumps). Exactly what sort of strength 2NT shows is down to partnership agreement – there are two schools of thought. See advanced section for more discussion.

East will of course raise hearts over 2NT. On this hand with so much shape he might just jump to 4♥ but there are ways to show good and weak raises – see advanced section for some ideas. After 2NT South knows there is a big fit in diamonds and a secondary fit in clubs so should bid 5♦. West might pass or double that (it's a bit unilateral to bid 5♥ himself since he doesn't really know the nature of partner's raise). But East will surely bid onto 5♥. He has negligible defence to a diamond contract and enormous playing strength in hearts.

Let's return to if South opens 2♠ showing spades and a minor. West will overcall 3♥ and North now knows his side has a large minor suit fit even if he doesn't yet know which suit. He should immediately jump to 5♣ which is "correctable" – i.e. partner passes or bids 5♦. On this hand East will bid 5♥ and then it's debatable who, if anyone, should bid more.

After 5♥ North may well be tempted to go on still further. It looks like his side will usually only have a few losers so 6♦ could easily be scoring -500 which is better than conceding a vulnerable heart game. On the other hand, North might also be nervous about pushing East West into bidding a making heart slam that

they currently haven't reached! These hands are often quite psychological – there's no particular rule that can be used. High level decisions are really hard! What's also hard is defending against them. All tables seem to have played in hearts at some level. Two tables played 6♥ and both made it despite there being two aces to lose! That's because with a lot of shape around, losers can disappear quickly.

With lots of shape it is almost always better to declare than defend. That's partly because you may have far less defence than you think but also because it's easy to slip up and not cash your tricks which could lead to a large negative score! Playing the hand yourself with a lot of shape isn't usually going to go for a large penalty. It's a bit like an insurance policy. Yes you MIGHT be able to score +100 but if you go wrong you might score something like -1660 (6♥X making!). Maybe scoring -500 in your contract is a safer bet?!

As is often the case with really distributional hands there isn't much to the play. The only question here is whether North South cash their 2 tricks against hearts. They have to be careful. If they don't cash their diamond trick, declarer can discard East's diamond loser on the ♣K. The diamond is the key one to cash – after that the spade loser isn't going anywhere (declarer can only discard one of East's long spades on the ♣K). If they start with a spade to the ♠A they also need to then immediately cash the ♦A or it will run away. Although it's not relevant on this hand, it's often useful to play count signals against high level contracts. That allows the defence to identify how many tricks they can cash in one suit. It may be fatal to just continue a suit and allow declarer to ruff since other losers may then run away. Something that is overlooked a lot in defence is working out which losers can run away and which can't. See advanced section for more on this.

What about if North South did play in diamonds? That can be held to 9 tricks if West plays ♣AK and gives East a club ruff. They should then also score a spade trick. That would mean 6♦x was 3 off and -800 which is too expensive for North South considering East West can't make more than 650 in hearts. But East West also have to be careful. If West decided to start with the ♥A that would be disastrous as he would find he had given declarer a ruff and discard at trick 1! Declarer could ruff in the South hand and discard a spade from North. Now he draws trumps and just loses 2 top clubs for only one off and -200! If North were playing it, East might well prefer a spade lead (see advanced section for why). That will preserve the defence's spade trick but it will lose the club ruff. So declarer will end up losing 1 spade and 2 top clubs for -500, still worthwhile.

Key points to note

- With very distributional hands it is much better in general to declare than defend. You don't want to risk conceding a large contract (sometimes doubled) if you lead the wrong thing.
- The unusual 2NT bid is a useful pre-emptive weapon – it's also worth discussing how you bid over it if your opponents use it against you! The most important thing is to know what bid shows a good raise in partner's suit.
- Count signals can be essential at high levels to know which tricks are cashing. Losers can quickly run away if the defence slip up!
- When defending it's a good habit to try and work out which of declarer's losers might be discarded and which can't be. That is often the clue to what suit you need to play.

More advanced

The unusual NT from North over West's 1♥ opening shows at least 55 in the minors. I have seen players do it on 54 but I think that's just wrong – for a start it may not be safe to get to the 3 level with less shape, secondly by limiting it to at least 55 you tell your partner so much more information. The two schools of thought I mentioned are:

- a) Bid it with any strength.
- b) Bid it with weak hands OR strong hands but not intermediate ones (these overcall one suit and aim to bid the other suit later).

Those who prefer (a) think getting the shape across is more important and gets their side into the bidding. They then have the chance to bid further with stronger hands later.

The logic behind (b) is that it may be good to find a sacrifice with a weak hand, or a slam with a good hand but intermediate hands may have defence so it's easier for partner to respond to. They basically assume you have the weak hand until you bid again with the strong hand.

Personally I subscribe to (b). I think it's impossible to respond sensibly if partner could have anything from 2 to 25 points! How can I know if it's right for us to bid, pass or double? But, like any bidding method, there's pluses and minuses. The big minus of (b) is you might never get to show your 2nd suit. When you have an intermediate hand and overcall one suit, it's possible the bidding will come back to you at too high a level to safely bid the other suit. So you could find yourself missing a big fit there.

What about after 1♥ 2NT? You want to be able to show different types of raises but also be able to show the 4th suit and express interest in penalising the opponents if you have lots of minor cards. Double is usually played as penalty interest and makes subsequent doubles from your side penalty (again that's subject to agreement). An immediate raise of hearts is weak (so a 3♥ bid is like a normal raise to 2♥ and 4♥ is pre-emptive in nature). In a situation like this where the opponents have shown two specific suits you basically have two cue bids available (3♣ and 3♦) so the question is what they should mean. There are various methods in use. Traditionally one cue (perhaps the higher suit) was used to show a strong raise and the other to show a good hand with the 4th suit (a bid of the 4th suit itself – 3♠ here – then becomes non-forcing). But a method I quite like here is to simply link the two minor bids to the majors – by that I mean 3♣ shows hearts and 3♦ shows spades. So here after a 1♥ opening 3♣ shows a good raise of hearts and 3♦ shows a good hand with spades. But over a 1♠ opening 3♣ shows a good hand with hearts and 3♦ shows a good raise of spades.

Why might East prefer to lead a spade against diamonds? Even though it works on this hand it's not usually a good idea to lead a singleton when you also hold a singleton trump. You are basically gambling that partner has the ace in the suit you lead. If he doesn't then as soon as declarer plays a trump you have lost your chance for a ruff. What's more, if partner DOES get in (suppose he has the ace of trumps) then he will now try and give you a ruff which will look pretty embarrassing(!) and may give declarer a cheap trick and a tempo.

There's a great art in bridge to being able to work out which losers might run away and which might not. That in turn can often determine which suit you should lead. The thought process should be to consider which suit could have losers discarded (and on what other suit). Something like this: "If partner has the ace of suit X we need to cash it now – otherwise all the losers in suit X will get discarded on suit Y; but if partner has the ace of suit Y there is no rush – declarer won't then have winners in another suit that can provide any discards. So we need to play suit X first".

That process is harder with really shapely hands and which hand is visible in dummy is also critical. If East is dummy, the two minor singletons are visible. So the risk of one being discarded on the other is very clear. Given the defence have probably bid to 5♦ it's far more likely they have the ♦A than the ♣A and hence they should play that suit. They can also see that any spade trick isn't going anywhere (there is no way any spade in the West hand could ever be discarded!) But they might go wrong another way. Suppose North was on lead against hearts. He may not want to risk a diamond away from the ♦AQ and might try the ♠9. But South might think that is a singleton and try to give North a ruff (signalling his ♦K as an entry for a potential 2nd ruff). That would be disastrous. Declarer can then either pitch East's diamond on the ♣K or pitch both of West's diamonds on his ♠KQ. South shouldn't get this wrong – when he sees so many hearts in dummy he knows partner can have at most 1 so there's no need to signal a re-entry for a 2nd ruff. Hence he should lead ♦K at trick 2. If North DOES happen to have a singleton spade, he can allow the ♦K to win and signal for his ruff.

If West is dummy it's a lot harder for the defence – they don't know the East hand's shape. Although if they have had an unusual NT bidding sequence they will have some good clues. For example South will know North has at least 5 diamonds and hence East can only have 1.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)