



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.

Bidding over pre-empts

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 13th November 2023

On board 21 last week East is likely to open with a pre-empt (most likely 2♥ but possibly also a 2♦ multi or maybe an

21	♠ J943	Dir: N
	♥ J82	Vul: N-S
	♦ Q3	
	♣ JT73	
♠ T87652	♠ Q	5
♥ AT7	♥ KQ9653	7 9
♦ 9	♦ T75	19
♣ K84	♣ Q62	
	♠ AK	♠ ♣ ♥ ♦ NT
	♥ 4	N 2 4 - 1 1
	♦ AKJ8642	S 2 4 - 1 1
	♣ A95	E - - 2 - -
		W - - 2 - -

aggressive 3♥). Like all pre-empts, any of these will make life quite difficult for South who has a very big hand.

His hand is too good to simply overcall 3♦. That risks missing an easy game. Imagine partner holding 5 points (♦Q and ♠K) – now you make 5♦ easily. But he’s not going to bid over 3♦ with that. In fact even if he has no points at all but 3 low diamonds and 2 low clubs then you will be very likely to make 5♦ as well (you can ruff your 3rd club in his hand)!

South could consider 4♦ instead. Jumps over pre-empts are normally played as strong. There is no point pre-empting over the opponent’s pre-empt – they are trying to get in your way, you don’t therefore need to get in theirs!

The big downside of 4♦ on this hand is that it bypasses 3NT. If partner has a heart stopper that is likely to be the best contract (good chances of 7 diamond tricks plus 3 black tricks).

South’s other option is to start with a double intending to later bid diamonds. This is the same principle that applies over a 1 level opening – his hand is too good for a simple overcall. North will of course assume it’s a takeout double of hearts to start with. After 2♥ Double West should raise to 3♥. North doesn’t have enough to voluntarily bid 3♠ so 3♥ will come back to South who now completes the description of his hand with 4♦. Even though North has one useful card (♦Q) he still has so many losers in the other suits that he should pass (if South had had 10 tricks in his own hand he would surely have tried 5♦ himself).

There are, however, alternative ways to play bids over weak two pre-empts.

- 4♦ can be used as “Leaping Michaels” showing 5 spades and 5 diamonds
- 3♥ can be an ask for a heart stopper (not Michaels) usually showing tricks in a running suit and stoppers outside.

See advanced section for more.

Let’s now consider the play in a diamond contract. West may well start with ♥A and another which South will ruff. There are 10 easy tricks so the contract depends on the club suit. In isolation there are good chances of only losing one trick in the suit – you lead towards the ♣9 and later finesse again. This is a 75% chance as it only loses if ♣K and ♣Q are offside. However, that line isn’t possible on this hand because it requires 2 entries to dummy and there is only one here (♦Q). Declarer should still lead clubs from dummy once, however, as there are still several genuine chances:

- East has both ♣K and ♣Q (not so likely after a 2♥ pre-empt though)
- East has singleton ♣K or ♣Q
- East has doubleton ♣K or ♣Q (the first round finesse will lose to West but on the 2nd round declarer’s ♣A will drop the other honour in East’s hand setting up the rest of the suit).

Today none of those scenarios arise so declarer should end up losing 2 clubs and a heart. But East having a singleton or doubleton club honour is a pretty reasonable chance considering he pre-empted in hearts AND has 3 trumps. It's pretty unlucky for declarer that he happens to only have 1 spade and hence 3 clubs.

Declarer should start by leading the ♠J from dummy because if East mistakenly covers then declarer will only lose 1 club.

You might think that the ♠Q dropping will help because it sets up dummy's ♠J. That's true but the problem again is entries. Declarer can't draw trumps ending in dummy to be able to cash it.

A couple of tables were allowed to make 5♦ but most were either in 5♦ 1 off or 4♦ making.

Key points to note

- When bidding over pre-empts, jumps should be strong not weak (don't pre-empt over a pre-empt).
- Starting with a double and then bidding a suit shows a hand too good to overcall that suit initially.
- There are different bidding schemes available over weak twos that are worth exploring with your regular partner.
- What line you can play as declarer depends heavily on entries.
- Don't cover touching honours in dummy, wait and cover the 2nd one.

More advanced

Although traditionally a bid of the opponents' suit (e.g. 3♥ over 2♥) is played as Michaels showing 55 in the other major and a minor (same as over a 1 level opening) there are better options available. Because the pre-empt has taken a lot of space you want to prioritise bids that give you the most flexibility to get to the most likely contracts. A common problem is a hand like South's here where 3NT is likely to be the best contract provided partner has a heart stopper so you want to be able to ask about that.

Therefore some pairs choose to use a bid of the opponents' suit as asking for a heart stopper – typically showing a hand like this that can run lots of tricks elsewhere. Related to this is a method known as “Leaping Michaels” – where a jump to 4 minor over a weak 2 in a major shows a strong hand with at least 55 in that minor and the other major. That replaces Michaels. It's also superior because, unlike traditional Michaels, it tells partner exactly which two suits you have. That knowledge can be critical in deciding whether to bid on later if the opponents increase their pre-empt - imagine the bidding going 2♥ 3♥ 4♥ (3♥ being Michaels) and North is sitting with a good holding in one of the minors – if that was partner's minor he'd want to bid 5m, otherwise he'd want to pass or double.

These days some Easts, at favourable vulnerability, might be even more aggressive and open 3♥. That makes it even tougher for South. Again he might start with double hoping partner can bid 3NT and, when he can't, probably resorts to 5♦. Some pairs take the Leaping Michaels concept even further and play “Non-leaping Michaels” here. They use a simple overcall of 4 minor as showing the Michaels hand (55 in that minor and the other major). The logic is that a natural overcall of 4 minor is trying to land on a pinhead. A single suited hand that is strong enough to overcall 4 minor on its own might as well gamble 5 minor anyway and use the 4 minor bid for something else. On this hand that method would lose because South cannot overcall 4♦ – he would have to either start with double (and would probably then hear the auction 4♥ P P back to him and have to bid 5♦) or he would have to bid 5♦ immediately.

Even though 5♦ doesn't make on this hand, I would still be quite happy to be in it – there are plenty of legitimate chances. There are also a couple of ways the defence might go wrong too:

1. West chooses not to lead his ♥A (concerned declarer has the ♥K) and instead tries a club!
2. East mistakenly covers the ♠J when declarer leads it from dummy. This hand is a good example of why it's wrong to cover the 1st of touching honours in dummy; you should instead wait and cover the 2nd. Once the ♠J has lost to West's ♠K there is no entry to dummy to finesse against East's ♠Q. But if East covers on the 1st round declarer doesn't need an entry to dummy to finesse again, his ♣109 are just good for another trick on their own.

I mentioned the spade position doesn't help declarer on this particular occasion. But he should certainly consider it first as it could provide an extra chance. I would initially propose to cash ♠AK in case the ♠Q drops doubleton. Now play ♦A and a diamond to dummy. If trumps are 2-2, the ♠J could then be used to discard a club. When they are not, declarer resorts to running ♣J. Of course when the ♠Q appears on the 1st round things change. Now cashing the ♠K isn't possible without East ruffing. In fact now declarer is in more trouble because when diamonds don't break, running the ♣J to the ♣K means West can give East a spade ruff – and East will still score his ♣Q for 2 off! So declarer basically now needs East to have both club honours (or a singleton honour but that's now very unlikely once he also has a singleton spade).

This is like a hand from the "Unlucky Expert" (a character from a famous old bridge book by S J Simon called "Why you lose at bridge" – well worth a read) – by taking a legitimate extra chance in spades that weaker players might not even see, on this even unluckier distribution, he ends up potentially doing worse!

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)