



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 and play after a Strong 2NT opening

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 20th November 2023

11		♠ 963	Dir: S
		♥ T865	Vul: Nil
		♦ 943	
		♣ A32	
♠ AKT5	♠ 872		4
♥ AKJ3	♥ 974		21 6
♦ AQ6	♦ J7		9
♣ T7	♣ KQ864		
	♠ QJ4		
	♥ Q2		
	♦ KT852		
	♣ J95		

Board 11 last week looked like a fairly routine 3NT contract for East West but it still had some interesting points in the bidding and play which is mainly a battle between declarer and the defenders about entries.

After an initial pass from South, West will most likely open 2NT. This is most commonly played as 20-22 balanced (see advanced section for some more options). Opposite that East has enough to bid game but, given 2NT can usually contain a 5 card major, he would like to check for that. From his perspective the hand could play well in a 5-3 major fit because partner may be able to ruff a diamond loser with a small trump in the East hand.

As well as transfers to the majors, a common method played over 2NT is 5 card stayman, or “puppet” stayman. 3♣ is initially a request for partner to bid a 5 card major. If they don’t have a 5 card major but they do have at least one 4 card major they bid 3♦, if they have neither a 4 nor a 5 card major they respond 3NT. There are lots of possible variations after this (see advanced section for some) but the simplest is to just bid 4 card majors up the line over 3♦ to find a 4-4 fit if there is one. This allows 5-3 or 4-4 major suit fits to be found and if there isn’t one the pair usually ends up in 3NT unless of course responder is strong enough to head towards slam. Here West would respond 3♦ and East will then sign off in 3NT. If East West aren’t playing any form of 5 card stayman East will simply raise 2NT to 3NT.

North has little to guide him for a lead. Quite a few led a heart which is reasonable after 2NT-3NT. East probably won’t have hearts given he didn’t look for a major fit so if West doesn’t have them either a heart will probably be the best start for the defence. If East did use a form of stayman it becomes less appealing though. Generally at pairs you want to lead passively if you are leading around into a known big hand – underleading honours is likely to cost a trick.

On a heart to the ♥Q and ♥A, declarer should start with a club towards dummy. North must duck (otherwise there are 4 winning clubs in dummy) and South should give a count signal. Declarer most likely returns to hand with a spade to try a 2nd club. This time North, having seen his partner show an odd number of clubs, should take the ♣A (partner must have 3 - if he had 5 that would have meant declarer had a singleton and if he had 1 that would give declarer 4 so dummy can’t be cut off anyway). At this point North needs to exit a spade or a diamond. A heart would be disastrous as it would let the ♥9 win in dummy and give access to the clubs the defence have just cut off!

How can North tell? From the cards played at trick 1. When playing high in 3rd seat defenders should generally play the lowest card they can afford. So with ♥QJ they play the ♥J. That means when partner plays ♥Q he denies the ♥J. So North knows declarer has ♥J and hence started with either ♥AKJx or ♥AJxx. The former is more likely given how many points he has. Hence North should see the risk of underleading his ♥10 and look elsewhere. Of course if he plays a diamond South must be careful to not put up ♦K into thin air (which would allow ♦J to be an entry to the clubs). He needs to either cover the ♦J with the ♦K or play the ♦10 if declarer plays low.

This hand is all about the defenders denying declarer access to dummy’s long clubs. After the above plays, declarer’s next try might be the ♦Q from hand! If South errs and takes the ♦K that will again let ♦J be an entry to the clubs. South should therefore duck. But this is as good as the defence can manage. Having secured a 2nd diamond trick, declarer now has to

resort to spades and when they break 3-3 he ends up with 3 spades, 3 hearts, 2 diamonds and 1 club. Deep Finesse can, however, make 10 tricks. Can you see how? See advanced section for the answer.

Key points to note

- A 2NT opening is usually 20-22 balanced but, because it usually can contain a 5 card major, it's worth playing a form of stayman that allows you to find out about 4 and 5 card majors.
- Try and avoid underleading honours when leading round into a known big hand – it usually gives a trick away. Prefer to lead something passive.
- A lot of no-trump play involves entries. Denying declarer access to a long suit in dummy is often critical. That requires count signals to enable the defenders to win their Ace at the right time.
- When playing high in 3rd seat defenders should play the lowest card they can afford. So with QJ they play the J. That means if they play a Q they deny the J. That knowledge is often critical to partner in working out the layout of a suit around the table and whether the defence can safely lead it again or not

More advanced

2NT as 20-22 balanced is very common. However, some pairs like to limit it to a slightly narrower range – e.g. 20-21. This works if you then include other ranges in your strong opening (assume 2♣). There's a method known as "Kokish" where, over 2♣-2♦, opener bids 2♥ either with hearts or with a balanced hand of a defined range. Responder MUST bid 2♠ over that and now opener clarifies with 2NT if he had a balanced hand or anything else if 2♥ was natural. This means you have three bidding sequences available to show big balanced ranges at the 2NT level (it's up to the pair to decide which is used for what):

- 2NT opening (say 20-21)
- 2♣-2♦-2♥-2♠-2NT (say 22-23)
- 2♣-2♦-2NT (say 24+)

After all these sequences you play the same responses you do to an opening 2NT.

After 2NT-3♣-3♦ one problem with just bidding 4 card majors up the line is that the weak hand may end up being declarer. It's generally a big advantage to have the big hand as declarer so the defence have to lead up to it and also so they can see far fewer of declarer's combined assets. For that reason many pairs play a method where responder bids the major he does NOT have (3♥ shows spades and 3♠ shows hearts). That still leaves complications to resolve about what to do when you have both majors (traditionally a bid of 4♦ showed that but there are better methods available which allow 4 minor by responder to be natural - useful to help find 6 minor contracts).

Another problem hand for responder is a 54xx shape. You don't want to transfer to spades and then bid 4♥ (45xx is fine as you transfer to 3♥ and then bid 3♠ which is still below 3NT). A traditional method was to use a 3♠ response to 2NT to show that but again there are better methods available to avoid that. 3♠ is more usefully employed as minor suit stayman - usually a hand interested in playing 6 minor.

I won't go into all the variants but one simple one is to reverse the meaning of 3♥ and 3NT over 3♣ (so 3♥ denies a 5 or 4 card major and 3NT shows 5 hearts). It's sometimes called "Muppet stayman"! That enables responder to bid 3♠ over 3♥ if they do hold 54xx and opener can then play 4♠ if they have 3. Works fine provided of course you both remember it! Another more complex variant involves a 3♦ response also including hands with no 4 card major and 3 spades (with a 3NT response denying a major and showing 2 spades).

Finally how about making 10 tricks? Assume the play starts as described and then North exits a spade. Declarer wins, cashes two more hearts and simply plays more spades. South is forced to win and only has diamonds left so will have to lead away from his ♦K and give away 3 diamonds and access to the clubs. South can't unblock his ♠QJ either because that would give declarer 4 spade tricks. But what if North exits a diamond through the ♦Jx in dummy? That would hold declarer to 9.

To make 10 tricks on best defence involves some unlikely double dummy play. For example when declarer leads a spade from dummy South must insert an honour otherwise declarer could put the ♠10 in (but of course in the real world declarer doesn't know South has both spade honours!). Now when North wins ♣A he must play a diamond. Declarer DUCKS South's card and then wins the next one. Now he cashes another diamond (which removes North's last diamond) and throws North in with the 4th heart. At that point North has a club and 2 spades left. Declarer has ♠K10x and dummy a spade and 2 winning clubs. Whatever North exits gives away the rest of the tricks. All very unlikely in the real world but working through exercises like that are good training for serious players as they help being able to visualise these sort of plays in future!

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)