



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.

The art of leading trumps!

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 27th November 2023

4		♠ 9643	Dlr: W
		♥ AT8	Vul: All
		♦ K982	
		♣ 42	
♠ AJ7	♠ 85		7
♥ 962	♥ K53		8 10
♦ JT76	♦ AQ43		15
♣ Q73	♣ J986		
	♠ KQT2	♠ NT	
	♥ QJ74	N - - 2 2 -	
	♦ 5	S - - 1 3 -	
	♣ AKT5	E 1 1 - - 1	
		W 1 1 - - 1	

Board 4 last week might have seemed like a boring part-score. But a lot can be learned from even those!

The auction is probably going to be three passes to South (although some East's these days might open 1♦ in third seat). South will start with 1♣ and North should respond 1♠ not 1♦. That's because he isn't strong enough to bid again unless forced so he wants to show his major first.

South quite likes his hand after 1♣ and will certainly raise to at least 2♠ - quite possibly more. A jump to 3♠ is pretty reasonable but another attractive option is

3♦ which is a splinter (showing shortage in that suit and support for partner – effectively a raise to at least 3♠ but with a shortage in diamonds). See advanced section for more on splinters and why they are such useful bids. Whatever South does here, North will try to sign off as he is completely minimum with only 4 poor trumps. So 3♠ is likely to be the final contract although some pairs do seem to have reached 4♠.

Technically 3♠ is already too high – although quite a few pairs did make it. East of course doesn't have an easy lead. I would never touch a suit headed by the AQ and clubs are dummy's first bid suit. So it's a choice between an “active” heart lead hoping to cash or set up tricks there, or a “passive” trump lead hoping not to give anything away.

If South has shown a shortage in diamonds it seems like declarer might want to trump some of his in dummy so a trump lead is appealing to try and stop that. What I suspect happened is when a trump was led, declarer played the ♠K and West won his ♠A. That is in fact the end of the defence to beat 3♠! West needs to DUCK at trick 1. Why? Because when East gets in again he can play a 2nd round and this time West can play 2 more rounds of trumps. That only leaves declarer with one trump in each hand. If a top spade wins in dummy at trick 1, declarer will most likely try a heart finesse but after that loses and two more rounds of trumps are played he is in trouble. He will only score 1 top trump, 1 ruff in each hand (with his remaining 2 trumps), 3 hearts and ♣AK – i.e. only 8 tricks. He can no longer get rid of all 4 of his diamonds (one is lost, one can be ruffed, one can be discarded on dummy's final heart but that still leave 1 more which will also be a loser).

Let's now return to trick 1 and look at the difference when West has won the ♠A. What can he do? A spade away from his remaining ♠Jx is no good. A heart or club are neutral. A diamond will get partner in to be able to play a 2nd trump but this time declarer can win in dummy and just leave West's winning ♠J out. West can't get in to cash it so will eventually have to use it to ruff in. This makes a big difference. Now declarer can deal with all 4 of his diamonds – this time there are 2 trumps left in dummy so he can trump 2 and discard 1 on the heart, just losing 1 diamond. Overall he will score 1 top trump, 3 ruffs (after 2 rounds are played he has 4 remaining trumps but 1 will eventually get over-ruffed with West's ♠J), 3 hearts and ♣AK.

The key difference is the fact the defence were able to play 3 rounds of trumps in the first situation but only 2 in the second.

How can West tell that he should duck at trick 1? It's often good practice in general with these sorts of holdings. It doesn't change the number of tricks you get and it may also mislead declarer! See advanced section for more.

Lastly, trump leads are often not attractive as they tend to give a tempo away and help declarer draw trumps (which is what he wants to do on a lot of hands). But there are definitely times when a trump lead is attractive. The following are some features that might point you towards leading a trump:

- Length in the non-trump suits dummy and declarer have bid (i.e. where you know things are breaking badly for declarer). If you could remove all the trumps then your long cards in these suits would win tricks. So leading trumps might help you do that and stop declarer ruffing all his losers.
- If each opponent has bid one suit and they end up playing in a 3rd suit. That is indicative they are each short in each other's first mentioned suit so the hand might be a cross-ruff. Hence lead trumps to reduce those ruffs.
- Where you think your side has a majority of the points and the opponents are sacrificing. When that's the case you basically want to reduce the hand to no-trumps as far as you can when your extra points will be worth more. So lead trumps to try and do that!
- As a passive lead. If you don't want to give anything away, a trump may be where you'll do the least damage. Playing pairs this is definitely quite a consideration. But note this is fraught with danger! YOU might have 2 small trumps, but partner might have Qxx and won't appreciate you helping declarer find the missing Queen! Leading singleton trumps is an especially bad idea – it's far more likely to pick up an honour in partner's hand. Recently my teammates had a nightmare when their opponents bid to 7♣. One of them led his singleton trump – only to find his partner had ♣Qxxx and the opponents had had a bidding accident! This lead now found the Queen and they scored -2140.

Key points to note

- With a weak hand, prefer to respond in a major to make sure you don't miss a fit there if you have one (even if you have 4 of the major and 5 diamonds over 1♣, say).
- Holding AJx(x) sitting over dummy with KQx(x) it is often right to duck the 1st round when declarer leads up to them and plays a top one. That keeps control and can mislead declarer.
- A jump in a suit which would have been forcing at a level below is generally artificial and a very useful thing to use it for is a splinter (showing support and a shortage in the bid suit).
- Trump leads are often not a good idea but there are hands where the auction suggests them.

More advanced

Splinters are great bids to use because they describe an important part of your hand and that helps partner judge whether his cards fit or not. Here after 1♣ 1♠, 3♦ is not what North wants to hear – his ♦K is pretty useless opposite a void or singleton so he should quickly slam the brakes on with 3♠. But conversely suppose he had 4 small diamonds and his King was in another suit. Now he knows the hands fit really well because there's no "wastage" (i.e. honours opposite shortage) in diamonds – hence all his honours are likely to be sitting opposite honours in partner's hand as well.

You might ask why 3♦ is a splinter in this auction? It's because a rebid of 2♦ after 1♣ P 1♠ would be a reverse (i.e. a bid which forces your partner to go back to your first suit at the 3 level) which shows a strong hand and is forcing. When a bid is forcing there is no need to jump higher in the same denomination to show an even better hand – you can just start with the reverse and then bid more later. Therefore, you might as well use the jump for something else and a splinter is a very common choice these days.

Note, however, that an auction like 1♦ 1♠ 3♣ is NOT a splinter (some pairs do play that by choice but it's not the norm). That's because a 2♣ rebid in that sequence is usually not played as forcing, hence if you have a strong hand this time you DO have to jump. It's worth clarifying these sorts of sequences with your regular partner to be sure you are both on the same wavelength about what's forcing and what isn't!

Ducking on this hand was necessary because you wanted partner to be able to lead a 2nd trump so you could also play a 3rd round. But ducking smoothly with a holding of AJx(x) sitting over dummy with KQx(x) can be very effective for other reasons as well. It may cause declarer to assume the Ace is onside. So he might return to hand (perhaps wasting an entry he could have used for something else) to try leading another one. This time he will be sadly disappointed!

The most devastating might be a situation where trumps are 4441 round the table. On the 1st round it goes low to the Q (which you duck) and it all looks fine to declarer. But then if he leads another one towards his other honour the hand could easily fall apart for him because now you can play 3 more rounds and remove ALL the trumps! Of course whether that is a good defence will depend whether declarer has other winners to cash.

So why can West work out on this hand that ducking is right? Several reasons:

- He knows if he wins that he can't continue the suit himself without giving up a trick.
- He doesn't know what he would want to switch to if he did win.
- He has very few points so it's far more likely his partner will get in before he does. So he wants to leave partner with another trump to lead.
- It might also mislead declarer about the position of the ace if he ducks smoothly (while an experienced East will almost never underlead a side suit ace, it's perfectly plausible to underlead the ace of trumps - that's a trick that can never run away!)
- He can see the diamond shortage in dummy so declarer is likely to want to ruff losers – hence it becomes very attractive for the defence to play 3 rounds of trumps if they can.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)