



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.

A 24 point 3NT and how to finesse properly!

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 6th November 2023

| | | |
|-----------|---------|-------------|
| 25 | ♠ 73 | Dir: N |
| | ♥ 82 | Vul: E-W |
| | ♦ AKJ63 | |
| | ♣ Q962 | |
| ♠ Q42 | ♠ JT96 | 10 |
| ♥ A643 | ♥ KJ75 | 8 8 |
| ♦ Q9874 | ♦ 5 | 14 |
| ♣ 3 | ♣ K854 | |
| | ♠ AK85 | ♠ NT |
| | ♥ QT9 | N 4 3 1 2 3 |
| | ♦ T2 | S 4 3 1 2 3 |
| | ♣ AJT7 | E - - - - |
| | | W - - - - |

board 25 last week North South could make 3NT. Holding 24 combined points, not many pairs reached it but that didn't really matter if you made all the tricks available.

One way to ensure the partnership reaches game is for North to open 1♦. South with 14 points will clearly then force to game (probably via the auction 1♦ - 2♣ - 3♣ - 3NT). However, with a 2254 shape and only 10 points North doesn't really have enough for an opening bid so it's more likely to start with South opening 1♣. Some Wests might consider overcalling but there's little to be said for it vulnerable with a poor quality diamond suit. So more likely is North responding 1♦. South's rebid will then depend on partnership style. Many will rebid 1♠. Others will rebid 1NT, having agreed that all balanced hands open or rebid NT, and rely on checkback methods to find a spade fit if one exists (see advanced section for more on this).

Over 1♠ North could now jump to 3♣ which is invitational showing clubs. Over 3♣ South should probably now try 3NT as he has a good 14 points and a heart stopper – a lot more than he might have.

A couple of pairs played in 2♣ which might have arisen from North only bidding 2♣ on the 2nd round – however his hand is a lot too good for that with 10 points, 4 card club support and a decent 5 card side suit. After all he could have had a 5 count and only 4 diamonds for his 1♦ response.

After a 1NT rebid from South (11-14), on this hand North has no interest in trying to find a major suit fit. So he might pass or choose to invite (which again South should accept). A close decision.

A final possible auction would be for South to upgrade his hand to 15 points and open 1NT. He certainly has a very nice 14 points with an AJ10 holding as well. Very tempting! If he does that then North will most likely just bid 3NT.

The most common contract was some number of no-trumps and the question then is how many tricks can be made. The best lead for the defence is actually a spade as it gives nothing away. Declarer can then take finesses in both minors and, with both working, that leads to 2 spades, 3 diamonds and 4 clubs – i.e. 9 tricks in all. However, West is highly unlikely to lead a spade from Qxx (it could easily give away a trick or solve a guess for declarer). East is more likely to do so (it's much safer from J109x) but if North South have bid the suit during their auction then it's also unlikely.

More likely is the defence will lead hearts, the unbid suit. If they do this they will set up a heart trick as a winner but will give declarer a heart trick in the meantime. He still has the same 9 tricks in the other suits so should then end up with 10 tricks. Several pairs who didn't reach 3NT made these 10 tricks for +180 which still gave them a very good score. In fact a couple of pairs managed 11 tricks for +210 and an even better score. There was only pair who actually bid and made 3NT for +430 and a top. All of which shows that when playing matchpoint pairs you don't need to stretch to bid tight games – the +210 and +180 scored very well simply by making more tricks than other declarers who only scored +150 or who played in clubs.

During the play declarer is going to have to take finesses in both minors. In diamonds assuming he leads ♦10 from his hand, he should only make 3 tricks because West will cover to promote his ♦987. Note that if he doesn't cover declarer can

finesse again and make 4 diamond tricks. In clubs holding all the cards down to the ♣9 he just needs to finesse against the ♣K to make 4 club tricks. However, there is a correct way to play the club suit – see advanced section for more.

Finally, as a defender suppose you are East and partner leads the ♥3 to your ♥K. What do you now know about the heart suit? See advanced section for the answer.

Key points to note

- It's not necessary at pairs to bid light games. Making more tricks than other pairs will still usually lead to a good score.
- Playing a suit rebid as showing an unbalanced hand (and always rebidding NT with balanced shapes) has a lot of advantages – provided you are comfortable playing a checkback method over 1NT to still be able to find major suit fits.
- When taking what looks like a simple finesse consider the entry position – you might need to stay in a hand to repeat a finesse. That can influence what card you should lead.
- As a defender you can often work out the full distribution of the suit led at trick 1 – it's a good habit to get into to try and do that.

More advanced

The style of rebid where you always bid NT with a balanced hand, even holding a biddable 4 card major, is quite popular these days. Pairs doing this then play some form of checkback where partner bids 2♣ (and sometimes 2 way checkback where 2♦ is also artificial) to ask more about opener's hand. He then shows 3 card support for responder, or an unbid 4 card major if he has one. This enables the pair to still find major suit fits. Why go to the trouble of doing this instead of simply rebidding your major? Because it gives a very useful inference when opener DOES rebid a 2nd suit. It means partner knows opener does NOT have a balanced hand – hence he is at least 4441, and frequently at least 54 between his two suits. That knowledge is often very useful to responder. When after an uncontested sequence 1♣ - 1♥ - 1♠ opener could have either a balanced 4333 hand or a shapely 4126 hand then it's much harder for responder to judge how to bid on.

Where you are playing two way checkback methods where all invites generally start with 2♣ there are additional considerations when responder wants to invite over the 1NT rebid. For example he could just raise to 2NT but he could also start with 2♣ and then bid 2NT over partner's forced 2♦ response. What's the difference? Again up to the partnership to decide. One method I have played is to have one sequence say you only started with 4 of your own suit, the other shows 5 of your suit. But that's not really necessary since you are finding out about partner's hand anyway. Another method is to use a direct 2NT for something completely different – a common usage is a relay to 3♣ in order to sign off there. For example responder might have a weak hand with 4 of a major and 6 clubs – he starts with his major but after hearing the 1NT rebid he now just wants to get out in clubs. He can't bid 2♣ to do that as it's checkback so he could use 2NT to force partner to bid 3♣ and then pass. There are of course numerous schemes and other possible meanings you could use for the various bids. The point is playing checkback gives you access to a lot of extra bidding sequences and inferences. How many of them you use is limited only by your imagination, your willingness to discuss them as a partnership, and the likelihood of you both remembering them!

Returning to the play of this hand, the correct technical play in the club suit is to run the ♣9 on the first round. Why? Because if it wins, you remain in dummy and can next lead the ♣Q. When, as here, East has ♣Kxxx that can make a difference. The 4-1 break means you will have to take 3 finesses against that ♣K.

Suppose South led the ♣Q first and played the ♣7 under it. East doesn't cover (from his perspective declarer might only have 3 clubs) so the ♣Q will hold but now South has ♣AJ10 remaining and will be forced to win the 2nd finesse in his own hand. That means he will need an extra entry back to dummy to finesse a 3rd time. That entry either might not exist or it might be needed to do something else later. Leading the ♣9 first means that's no longer necessary (after the ♣9 holds, you lead the ♣Q on the 2nd round and when that holds, declarer is already in dummy to take the 3rd finesse). You might think that declarer could lead ♣Q and deliberately "unblock" the ♣10 under it on the first round. But that's no good – when he

next leads ♣9 this time East covers so he is left with ♣8x and declarer has ♣J7. So again declarer needs another entry to dummy to finesse against that! The only way to play the suit for 4 tricks without needing another entry to North is to start with the ♣9.

I also mentioned the heart suit. Against strong players declarer could have a guess there as well. Suppose trick one goes ♥3 to the ♥K and the ♥5 is returned. As declarer do you play the ♥10 or ♥Q? Most East players will cash the ♥A at trick 2 if they have it so it's almost always right to assume West has ♥A and therefore try ♥10 which works on this hand as it forces ♥A and gives declarer a heart stop (and a trick) with ♥Q. But a strong player might well return a low heart at trick 2 from ♥AKxx! Now you could look pretty silly if the ♥10 loses to the ♥J and then West returns a heart to East's ♥A!

But if East did hold ♥AKxx can he actually do this? He would look pretty stupid if declarer was holding ♥Qx to start with! Here, however, he can work out that isn't the case. His partner led the ♥3 (4th highest) and he can see the ♥2 in dummy so he knows partner only has 4 hearts and therefore they must be 4243 round the table. Hence it is actually quite safe for him to return a low heart and give declarer a nasty guess! He might even be devious enough to win trick 1 with the ♥A instead of the usual ♥K to try and make it look even more likely to declarer that West holds ♥K! That does of course run the risk of misleading his own partner though. This is the sort of thing a strong defender will be considering as soon as he sees partner's lead before declarer plays from dummy at trick 2. Noting the ♥2 in dummy tells him the full distribution of the heart suit. If your leading methods are low from an honour but high from poor suits he also knows West definitely has a heart honour although he doesn't know if it's the ♥A or the ♥Q.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)