

# 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 <u>send questions</u> about hands that you have played.

## Cover an honour or not?

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 16th October 2023



Board 6 last week was all about whether to cover an honour or not. It doesn't look like anyone got it right at either venue.

But first the auction. East will start with 1♥ and the question for South is then how many spades to pre-empt with. I would bid 3♠ - it takes up lots of space and, at the favourable vulnerability, doesn't carry too much risk. Most pairs these days play weak jump overcalls (not all - see advanced section for more) so 2♠ is also a possibility but that's more usually done on a 6 card suit. Having 7 spades means it's worth bidding 3♠. Another factor here is you probably want partner to bid 4♠ when he has 2 (unless he has a big hand with lots of defence to, say, a heart contract). He's far more likely to do that if you bid 3♠.

West of course has an enormous hand and, despite the spade bid on his right, he shouldn't rule out the chance of  $6^{\text{+}}$ . Over  $3^{\text{+}}$  he has a few choices:

- 4. Forcing at this level and leaving room in case partner can cooperate towards slam. But it loses the chance of playing 3NT. On this hand East will probably repeat his hearts and then give up when West bids 5.
- 5. Practical but partner will almost never raise this so it gives up on 6. as well as 3NT.
- Double. Initially takeout but with the intention of bidding 5♠ next if partner doesn't bid 3NT. Keeps the chance of 3NT alive but does risk a misunderstanding would be a nightmare if partner thought 5♠ was just the better of both minors and "corrected" to 5♦!

Most tables ended in 5. The key then is the play. North will surely lead the . Now what?

We are usually taught to "cover an honour with an honour" so I suspect that's what a lot of declarers did. Leading to a quick 1 down when South cashes A, J and plays another for North to score a ruff with the 10. Unlucky? No, not at all! Declarer has misplayed the hand. We need to look more closely at WHY you cover an honour with an honour. There is usually only one reason - to promote lower cards into winners either in our own hand or in partner's.

So let's now look again at this hand. The first thing declarer knows from the lead (and probably the auction too) is that South must hold A. After all, what lunatic sitting North would lead the Q from AQ?

The next thing to consider is what possible card in declarer or dummy can be promoted by covering the  $\mathbf{\Phi}Q$  with the  $\mathbf{\Phi}K$ ? None of course. So it cannot gain to cover! And it might cost.

If North has a 2nd spade then it makes no difference what we do. But what if, like on this hand, he doesn't? Now covering is fatal. If declarer doesn't cover South will almost certainly let the  $\mathbf{\Phi}Q$  win but North can't play another one and this gives declarer time to discard a spade on  $\mathbf{\Psi}A$  (he'll end up losing just 2 spades).

Even if South miraculously worked out to overtake the  $\mathbf{\Phi}Q$  with the  $\mathbf{\Phi}A$  to give his partner a ruff, that is still only 2 tricks for the defence. In the real world that just isn't going to happen though - after all doing that would make South look completely ridiculous if North and West both had 2 spades!

So the way to make  $5^{\text{e}}$  is to let the  $\mathbf{\Phi}Q$  hold at trick 1. There is, however, one layout where it would be right to cover. Can you work out which it is? See advanced section for the answer.

Returning to the general theme of covering, like everything in bridge there is no universal rule. It's GENERALLY right to cover honours but there are plenty of cases where it's very wrong - this hand being one of them! Mostly whether you should cover or not revolves around promoting lower ranked cards. It can be tough for the defenders to make that decision as they can't see each other's hands - they may need to hope their partner has a card worth promoting. See advanced section for some more considerations.

#### Key points to note

- At favourable vulnerability it's well worth pre-emoting the bidding to make life hard for the opponents. Weak jump overcalls are a useful method to help do that.
- Hands with long single suits are very powerful and can often make slam if partner has controls in the right places.
- Covering an honour with an honour is a general rule but there are many exceptions. Think about whether it can gain. If it can't, then don't!

#### More advanced

While weak jump overcalls are very common these days, traditionally jump overcalls were played as strong. What is still quite common is "intermediate" jumps - especially when vulnerable where a 6 card weak jump overcall can sometimes backfire. Some pairs might even play weak jumps and some vulnerabilities and intermediate at others. The downside with that is simply memory strain. The other big thing with intermediate jumps is to agree with your partner what you actually mean by "intermediate"! It's usually about 11-15 with a reasonable suit. But I have seen some quite divergent views here so it's important to both have an idea what sort of hands you will and won't bid it on and the extent to which that might vary according to vulnerability.

Returning to the hand here. First the auction. If West does start with 4 voer 3 then if East has reasonable support (remember West doesn't have to have 8 clubs when he bids the suit - he is more likely to have 6) he may be able to make a 4 cue bid. That's very good news for West but it's still not usually a good idea to cue bid a void in partner's suit - first he might think you are suggesting it as a place to play and pass(!), second you tend to want honours in partner's suit to help set it up, not shortage. So West will probably next bid 5 which pinpoints a concern for spades and East can't help with that knowing his A is going to be led through.

The one layout where it is right to cover on this hand is when North has exactly  $\mathbf{\Phi}$ QJ. Now he is forced to win the 2nd round of spades and can't get South in again to get a ruff. But how likely is that holding? It's very specific so it's far less common than any other Qx holding. But the auction also plays a big part here - if South has jumped to  $3\mathbf{\Phi}$  he is very likely to have 7. Which makes it FAR more likely North's  $\mathbf{\Phi}$ Q is singleton. Hence why it's clearly right to not cover.

There are quite a few holdings like this where, if one side ducks, the other side cannot afford to overtake to be on lead without setting up a trick. It's a type of blockage really although not quite as inflexible as having singleton A opposite KQJxxx for example!

I said earlier there's more to consider about covering. I'll mention two things here:

a) you should consider whether it's actually going to be possible to promote a card in partner's hand. For that you should consider the distribution. For example suppose you hold A (XXXX) defending A and dummy, with A (QXX), leads the A (through you. Should you cover? No! Assuming the opponents are sane(!) they will have at least an 8 card trump fit. So declarer will have at least 5 and that only leaves at most 1 for partner. Hence covering cannot promote anything in his hand and it could be very embarrassing to cover if partner's singleton happens to be the ace!!

b) when there are touching honours, it's usually right to cover the 2nd but not the first. For example suppose declarer has a suit of QJ9 opposite Axxx. You hold Kxx sitting over the QJ9. If declarer leads the Q and you cover he wins the A and can now lead low to the 9 finessing against partner's 10xx. He loses no trick in the suit. If, however, you duck the Q it holds the trick. But that leave the position as J9 opposite Axx with Kx over the J9. Now whatever declarer does he will lose a trick - you will cover the J to promote partner's 10 or you will play low if he tries the 9.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)