



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 value of leading through Ax

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 23rd October 2023

15	♠ AK973	Dir: S
	♥ AT	Vul: N-S
	♦ T98	
	♣ 743	
♠ QJT6	♠ 8	11
♥ Q32	♥ K9854	10 13
♦ KQ3	♦ A54	6
♣ 986	♣ KQJ2	
	♠ 542	♦ NT
	♥ J76	N - - - -
	♦ J762	S - - - -
	♣ AT5	E 3 2 4 1 1
		W 3 2 4 1 3

On board 15 last week a surprising number of pairs reached 4♥ despite only having a combined 23 points and an 8 card fit.

Although you don't usually want to be in game with those sorts of hands it could in fact be made with careful play. But only one table across the two venues managed it.

The auction will start with two passes to North. Some Norths may have passed and that would allow East to open 1♥. After that West will probably show an invitational raise so East might be tempted to go onto game with his 5431 shape. Although I think at pairs East is only worth a trial for game which West should reject

(see advanced section for more on possible methods and how the bidding might go).

But this is a good example where North can open in 3rd seat a bit lighter than usual and make things much harder for East West. There are three good reasons to open 1♠:

- It is likely to be East West's hand after South's opening pass.
- 1♠ takes up a fair bit of bidding space.
- It indicates a good lead for partner should he end up on lead.

Over 1♠ it's much nastier for East. Overcalling 2♥ on a fairly poor 5 card suit could go very wrong. I think I would prefer to make a takeout double. South might make things harder still by raising to 2♠. However, on this hand that wasn't so successful! The best scores for East West actually came from those who simply passed that out. 2♠ will play utterly horribly for North and will probably go 3 off losing 2 trumps, 1 heart, 3 diamonds and 2 clubs for -300!

If South doesn't raise then West will need to respond to the double - 1NT feels the most descriptive bid here. It should show some values (see advanced section for why). He's maximum for it but the soft cards and 4333 shape should put him off. East should then pass (he has nothing more than a minimum takeout double) and 1NT might well be the final contract. This is one of the downsides of making a takeout double with a 5 card major though – you will almost never find your 5-3 fit since partner isn't going to bid a 3 card suit. Against that, you avoid going for a penalty of -1100 when South has lots of hearts sitting over you!

Those East West pairs who did bid on usually reached 4♥ and now the challenge is to make it. Assuming South leads a spade then North will win and probably return a club (if his partner did raise spades he knows a 2nd spade won't cash). South will most likely win ♣A and play another. Having already lost two tricks the problem becomes playing the trump suit for only one loser. I suspect many declarers played a heart to the Q and A at this point and ended up losing another trump.

But this is not the right play. When you are missing AJ10 in a suit you will always lose a 2nd trick if your K or Q loses to the A. So the key is to try and avoid that. There is a way of doing so - what you need to do is hope one defender holds Ax and lead through them. The defender can't play the A into thin air immediately (otherwise you will score your K and Q separately) so he ducks. But now you duck completely on the 2nd round and this time his ace is forced to hit thin air.

So on this hand you need to decide which defender is more likely to hold Ax in trumps. If North did open 1♠ then it's pretty clear it can only be him. For two reasons:

- a) he needs the ♥A to have the points even for a light 1♠ opening (especially if declarer has already seen ♣A in South).
- b) he opened 1♠ showing at least 5 of that suit so he is more likely to be short in hearts.

So the right play is to cross to ♦K and lead a low heart towards the ♥K, then duck completely on the 2nd round. When North is forced to win ♥A declarer is now well placed. He can win whatever is played and use the ♥Q to draw South's remaining ♥J. But he's still not home. He needs clubs to be 3-3 (or for ♣10 to have dropped doubleton). That allows declarer's 4th club to set up to become a winner. When that works as well a very fortunate 10 tricks can be made (4 hearts, 3 diamonds and 3 clubs).

Note if North had had ♥AJ10 then there's nothing that can be done - as long as he plays low when a low one is led to declarer's hand he will then have ♥AJ sitting over dummy's ♥Qx and will make 2 more tricks. So you need him to have ♥Ax exactly (although there is one other heart layout that would let declarer make 10 tricks too - see advanced section for details)..

Key points to note

- A slightly light opening in 3rd seat (especially of 1 major) can give the other side a big problem in the auction.
- If you have an 8 card fit holding only the K and Q the only chance of avoiding 2 losers in the suit is to lead through a hand with Ax and then duck completely on the next round.
- It's not worth pushing to light games at pairs (very different to teams!)
- When playing Bergen raises it's common to use a jump in the other major (1♥-2♠ or 1♠-3♥) as an invitational raise with exactly 3 card support (all the Bergen bids show at least 4 card support).

More advanced

If North did pass and East opens 1♥ I said West would show some sort of invitational raise. There are several ways he could do this depending on the bidding methods being used. One option might be to raise immediately to 3♥ but these days most pairs play that either as pre-emptive or at least guaranteeing 4 card support.

Another option is to initially respond 1♠ and then bid 3♥ on the 2nd round. Not that descriptive on this hand though as that normally shows a 5 card side suit.

If the pair is playing Bergen raises over 1M (where 3♣ shows a 4 card raise with about 6-9 and 3♦ shows a 4 card raise with about 10-12) then a common agreement is to play a jump in the other major (so 1♥-2♠ or 1♠-3♥) as a limit raise but with only 3 card support. That's the best option to describes the West hand here (i.e. 2♠ over 1♥).

While East might just choose to accept the game invite, he is not much better than minimum so he might take a more conservative route and just make a game try. This is especially true at pairs where there's less to gain by bidding game and more to lose by bidding it and going off.

There are plenty of "trial bid" methods available but the most common is probably long suit trial bids (i.e. you bid a suit you have length in and, where partner doesn't have a clear minimum or maximum, you ask him to evaluate his holding in that suit to help decide whether to bid game). So East might try 3♣. Whatever try he makes West should reject it on this hand though. He is a minimum 10 points for his invite with a bad 4333 shape and no aces.

I said if East does double 1♠ then West should bid 1NT. Although you might have to respond to a takeout double holding no points at all it's not a good idea to bid 1NT on a really weak hand - it's easier for the opponents to double you. Even if you don't have a suit to bid (e.g. suppose you have a nightmare hand like 4333 with 4 of the opponent's suit!), it's still usually better to bid a suit (even a 3 card one if you are desperate) and hope for the best! It's generally harder for the opponents to penalise a trump contract unless one of them happens to have 4 or more decent trumps. That also means a 1NT response can be played as constructive (about 8-10) which allows the doubler to move again if they have a better than minimum hand.

Switching to the play - the other heart holding that enables declarer to play hearts for only one loser is when one hand has exactly ♥J10. They will now fall on the first two rounds and declarer's ♥9 will be good enough to draw the last trump even if the ♥A has taken one of the ♥K or ♥Q. But that is one very specific holding. Any ♥Ax holding is much more likely. Note that a singleton ♥A holding is no good. Even if it were played into thin air on the first round it means the other defender started with ♥J10xx and will still score a 2nd trump trick.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)