



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 big hands opposite a weak two

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 30th October 2023

7		♠ AT3	Dlr: S
		♥ AKQ9763	Vul: All
		♦ A63	
♠ J984	♠ KQ62	17	
♥ AKT76	♥ 82	8	8
♦ T752	♦ T4		7
	♣ QJ984		
♠ 75	♠ NT		
♥ QJ9543	N - 7 1 - 4		
♦ J852	S - 7 1 - 4		
♣ K	E 3 - - 1 -		
	W 3 - - 1 -		

Very large hands opposite weak pre-empts can be hard to bid. A lot also depends on the style of pre-empt. Board 7 last week was an example.

South will most likely start with a weak 2♥ or perhaps a multi 2♦. Not perfect vulnerable since his suit quality isn't great and he does have a 2nd suit. But it's still a practical shot - if you always wait for the perfect hand to pre-empt on you won't end up being nearly enough of a nuisance to your opponents!

West won't have anything to say over 2♥ (and will no doubt have hopes his opponents are about to get into a horrible mess!). So now it's over to North. He

should at least be thinking of slam as he has an absolute monster of a hand (even opposite a pre-empt in his void suit)! He could start with 2NT which most people play as an enquiry - sometimes about the strength and suit quality of partner's hand, sometimes looking for shortage, sometimes looking for a "feature" (e.g. an honour holding in a side suit). What you play is subject to partnership agreement - see advanced section for more on the various options. The aim is usually to decide whether to bid game or not. Here North already knows he wants to bid to at least game (he has nearly enough for game in his own hand) so it's more about trying to find out if slam is viable.

However it's not always necessary to go through an enquiry. On this hand North has his own suit and isn't really interested in hearts. So the best thing to do is start with a simple 3♦ bid provided of course that is forcing and partner can't pass! See advanced section for more on that. 3♦ should be a pleasant surprise to South as partner isn't going to be expecting you to have a 4 card side suit. Therefore over 3♦ South should raise to 4♦. That gives partner a good picture of his hand. Besides, what else can he do? He doesn't want to repeat his relatively poor heart suit and he can't bid 3NT with no spade or club stop (hence why North might also consider just bidding 3NT directly himself – see below).

North will also be pleasantly surprised to hear 4♦. It massively increases the chances partner is short in a black suit (he will have at least 6 hearts and now at least 3 diamonds). So North is very close to slam as he knows most of his black suit losers can be trumped in the South hand. Some players might immediately launch into Blackwood and here that would certainly find out if partner has the ♥A (which would provide a discard for one of his losers). But in general Blackwood isn't very useful on hands with voids – you tend to want to know where partner's key cards are, not just how many he has. Another option is for North to cue bid 4♠ to see if partner can show him anything else. But I think I would simply jump to 6♦ over 4♦.

It's important to appreciate that when playing pairs, playing in 5 minor should be a last resort. That's because of the scoring where 5♦ scores +600 for 11 tricks and +620 for 12 tricks. Yet just 10 tricks in no-trumps scores +630 and beats both of those. So where it's viable you tend to want to play in 3NT or 6♦ but not 5♦. The North hand here could easily have 9 tricks on its own and for this reason 3NT directly over 2♥ is another option. But partner will pass that and his hand is so good here that the chances of missing a good 6♦ are quite high.

3NT in fact does have 10 tricks on this hand (+630) and no real chance for any more. The only way to outscore that playing in 5♦ is to make all 13 tricks for +640. That can in fact be done here (see advanced section). But it would be more satisfying to bid and make 6♦ which would have been a complete top as no-one bid any slam!

Far from reaching slam, quite a few pairs at both venues seem to have played in 3♦. Maybe in their auctions South didn't open so North South then bid 1♦-1♥-3♦-pass? The main problem with that auction is the North hand is FAR too strong for 3♦ which usually shows 15-17 and 6 diamonds. Here North not only has a 7th diamond he has a strong trump suit, a void and lots of aces. His hand is worth WAY more than the literal 17 high card points he has. 3NT is a better rebid (usually showing a long running diamond suit and outside stoppers rather than a big balanced hand which can be shown with a jump rebid of 2NT). Basically as soon as North receives a response to 1♦ he knows he wants to play game - the only question is which one? So he cannot make a bid like 3♦ which partner could pass. Even if North does only bid 3♦ there's a case for South to raise it – despite only 7 points, 3 of which might not be useful, he has plenty of shape and game could still be cold.

Key points to note

- Responding to weak two bids usually include 2NT as an enquiry to which there are plenty of possible replies (feature, shortage, suit quality, etc). It's worth agreeing what you prefer.
- Make sure you know if a simple change of suit over a weak two is forcing or not.
- The style of pre-empts you play is very important and how that varies by seat and by vulnerability.
- Big single suited hands with few losers don't need much for slam opposite.
- At pairs prefer to play 3NT or 6 minor but not 5minor unless it's a last resort.
- Blackwood is not often useful on hands with a void. Cue bidding is better

More advanced

As I said earlier there are lots of ways of playing responses to a 2NT enquiry and there will inevitably be hands that suit each method. Traditionally 2NT asked about partner's strength and the quality of his weak two suit. The responses were "Ogust" where the 4 next bids are used as steps: 3♣ = "weak hand, weak suit", 3♦ = "weak hand, good suit", 3♥ = "better hand, poor suit", 3♠ = "better hand, good suit". The problem with this is it focuses on the weak two suit but it might be the texture of the rest of the hand that partner wants to know about.

Another option is a "feature" ask which is typically asking partner to show an honour in a side suit (e.g. Kxx). That allows responder to judge if that will fit well with his hand. Shortage asks have the same idea – if responder has nothing in partner's short suit then he knows all the honours he does have are fitting well.

A variation on feature or shortage enquiries is to reserve a repeat of your own suit as the weakest action and only show a feature or shortage if you are non-minimum.

The style of your weak twos is very important in deciding what your responses look like. For example if you agree to open fairly traditional weak twos with a reasonable 6 card suit then there's little need to try and get out into another suit so a change of suit (like 3♦ in the hand here) can be forcing and used to explore with big hands. Conversely if you agree to open Jxxx and nothing else (yes, some do – especially youth players!) then it's more likely partner might have a better suit than you to play in. So then you may want to make changes of suit non-forcing and agree that all strong hands must go through the 2NT enquiry first. A lot of pairs these days also radically change their pre-empt style based on what seat they are in and what the vulnerability is. So that can (and should) also have a big influence on responding.

7♦ can be made by North South but that's pretty hard to diagnose here because South has a priceless card, the ♠K. Not only is that a trick but it allows North to discard South's spade loser on his own ♣A. He can then ruff his 3 other black losers in dummy. A little care is required though - on, say, a spade lead he wins ♠A, crosses to ♠K, then returns to hand with ♦A (this tells him diamonds are 2-0) to discard the spade loser on ♣A. But he mustn't draw the remaining trump at this stage because he still has 3 black suit losers so he needs all 3 remaining trumps in dummy to ruff them with. After he takes each of those ruffs in dummy he can ruff hearts back to hand (if East ruffs in, dummy just overruffs). Having ruffed his last loser with dummy's last trump he needs to get back to hand for the final time. Dummy only has hearts left and if he carelessly ruffs a 3rd heart low then the 5-2 heart break means East will overruff with his ♦10! That would be very poor play by

declarer though. He still has ♦KQ and there is only 1 trump missing so he can afford to ruff high and use the other top trump to finally draw East's ♦10. Only one pair scored +640 and they got a total top because no-one found 6♦.

How might 6♦ be bid? A possible auction if South opens 2♥ might be 2♥-3♦-4♦-4♠-5♣-6♦ (although jumping straight to 6♦ over 4♦ is fine too). 4♠ is a cue bid. So is 5♣ although that one can be a 2nd round control (a weak pre-empt hand shouldn't be restricted to only cue bidding first round controls). It's very hard for North to practically explore 7♦ without more extensive methods to find out the exact shape though (for example if South was 3640 or 3631 there would be nowhere for his 3rd spade to go). If South passes initially then starting from North you might bid 1♦-1♥-3NT-4♦-6♦. Once South discovers North has a long, good quality diamond suit he should show his diamond support as 6♦ is definitely possible. North should need no second chance after 4♦!

I mentioned at pairs you should try to play 3NT or 6 minor and not 5 minor. That's easy to say but of course if you go exploring for 6 minor and then decide against slam you can't then go back and bid 3NT! So more advanced pairs tend to have methods available where they can make a try for slam but if partner declines it, they can play in 4NT (noting that 4NT isn't much use as blackwood in minor suit auctions as the responses often get you to slam anyway!) That gives the best of both worlds (yes on a really bad day you might find yourself in 4NT 1 off but that's pretty unlikely if you had the values to be considering slam initially).

One final observation. 2NT is usually played as an enquiry over a 2♦ Multi opening (which typically includes a weak two in either major amongst its options) as well as over a natural weak two. But compare opener's response options for both. With the Multi you need half the responses to tell partner which suit you have. With the natural weak two you don't - hence you can use the extra bids to get more specific information about partner's hand (e.g. suit quality, feature, shortage, etc). It's one of several reasons why simple natural weak twos actually tend to be more effective than the Multi.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)