



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.

Counting losers to help evaluate your hand

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 9th October 2023

20		♠ K4	Dir: W
		♥ AJT43	Vul: All
		♦ JT2	
		♣ A75	
♠ JT62	♠ AQ973	13	
♥ 72	♥ KQ85	4	16
♦ K864	♦ 7		7
♣ 863	♣ KQ4		
♠ 85			
♥ 96			
♦ AQ953			
♣ JT92			
		♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ NT	
		N 1 2 1 - -	
		S - 1 - - -	
		E - - 4 1	
		W - - 4 1	

On board 20 last week, East West could make game but very few pairs even got close to bidding it.

The normal start to the auction will be P 1♥ 1♠. I was quite surprised how many pairs seem to have played in 1♠. There is no need for South to pass over 1♠ - he should double to imply both minors. It's no different to responding at the 1 level which he'd do if East hadn't bid. If anything double is more descriptive than his bid would be without an overcall from East (he'd have to bid 1NT then since he's not strong enough to bid at the 2 level but 1NT could be a larger variety of hands). Implying both minors at the 1 level could on some hands (not this one!) make it easy for North to find a fit in either minor.

Even if South does pass 1♠ then West shouldn't pass either. He should raise to 2♠ to show the fit, take up space and make it harder for the opponents to compete. This is why it's a good idea to play "cue raises" - i.e. use a bid of the opponents suit (2♥ here) to show a GOOD raise of partner's suit (typically about 9+ points) and immediate raises of partner's overcall are then just weaker and getting in the way. Now if partner has a good hand he knows when he should be exploring further or just sitting back and let the other side try to decide what to do!

After 1♥ 1♠ X P as North I'd probably rebid 1NT but I wouldn't be particularly happy about it with such a poor spade stop. If West raises to 2♠ North should pass and it's back to East. Whilst many passed, there's a good case for him to make a further try or even just to bid game despite just having 16 points. There are a few reasons for that:

- His hand has got stronger now there's a known spade fit
- His hand only has 4 losers
- His ♥KQ are very likely to be sitting over North's ace

The loser count is probably the biggest factor. This is arrived at by considering the AKQ of each suit and seeing which are missing from your hand – but also allowing for shortages where you can ruff. So the worst hand you can have will have 12 losers, 3 in each suit. Here East has just 4 losers, one in each suit, which is a great hand once a spade fit is known about. So think of it this way. If partner can cover just one of your 4 losers that will reduce them to 3 - enough for 10 tricks (game) in spades! When there's a fit, the loser count is a good way of evaluating hands.

What about the play against a spade contract? South is likely to lead ♥9, his partner's suit. North will win ♥A and probably return a heart since, from his point of view, the ♥9 could be singleton (with East being 55 in the majors). Declarer wins ♥K. His primary job then is to get to dummy to take the spade finesse. He can try to ruff his 4th heart (if South can ruff with ♠K in front of dummy that means the spade finesse was losing anyway). Then takes the spade finesse and draws trumps in two rounds. That's now 8 tricks (5 trumps, ♥KQ and a heart ruff in dummy). So he needs two more for game. Given North has ♣A he should be able to score the ♣KQ but he's short of entries to dummy to lead towards them twice. However, because trumps were 2-2 there's no need to do that. He can play ♥Q and discard one of dummy's clubs. Then lead ♠K to force out the ace. His 9th and 10th tricks are ♣Q and a club ruff in dummy.

Another thing declarer might try is to lead a diamond at trick 3 in case South has ♦A and carelessly ducks it! Not only would that be an entry to dummy but it would be an extra trick as well. There could be good reason for an observant declarer to think the ♦A is with South too - see advanced section for why and for more on the play to the first few tricks.

Key points to note

- A takeout double by responder at the 1 shows no more than a simple response (ie 6+ points).
- Raise partner's overcall with a fit to make it harder for the opponents to compete. Use a cue bid of the opponents' suit to show a good raise.
- Looking at the losers in your hand is often a better way of evaluating it rather than just points.
- As declarer look at what the defenders do - sometimes you can decode their signals and use them to your own advantage!

More advanced

As you get more experienced in bridge you start to see and judge hands better and are better able to visualise what cards partner might hold to fit with your hand well. You also learn that points are only one evaluation method for bridge hands and frequently not a very good one! The loser count is one good way of evaluating a hand once a fit is known about. It's helpful here as East can picture several cards with West that would be very useful (♠K, ♦A, ♣A, etc). On this hand West doesn't have any of those and yet game STILL makes. That shows how good East's hand is once a fit has been found.

Let's look more closely at the likely play to the first 3 tricks. Trick 1 is ♥9 to ♥A. Now consider from North's perspective - he will almost certainly want to return a heart because he might be giving his partner a ruff. Therefore, he wants to give a signal to get back in to play another heart because if partner holds any spade higher than the 10 he'll be able to score a 2nd ruff which will defeat 4♠. So he should lead a suit preference heart back at trick 2 - perhaps the ♥2 to indicate he has ♣A as a re-entry. Declarer will still win ♥K - it would be very risky to put in ♥8 - he'd look incredibly stupid if South had tried a deceptive lead from ♥109! As a quick aside - declarer should of course win trick 2 with the ♥K not the ♥Q. That way the defenders don't both know where the ♥Q is. From South's perspective North might have AQxxx. Additionally South already knows declarer holds ♥K when his partner wins ♥A at trick 1. Declarers this too so he should follow the general principle of playing the card he is already known to hold.

Returning to the play at trick 3 - an observant declarer should ALSO read this attempted signal from North (and in general the defenders signals, especially early in the hand, will be honest - they can't see each other's cards so they need to help each other). If declarer thinks North is showing the ♣A then that heavily increases the chance of South holding ♦A. That's because, assuming South did double in the auction, he has to have a few points somewhere. Declarer knows they aren't in hearts, he needs them not to be in spades, so that only leaves one of the minors.

Hence it's well worth him trying a low diamond at trick 3. It shouldn't work here because South is looking at ♦AQ so playing low looks pointless. But if South held ♦A and not ♦Q he might well duck for fear of declarer holding ♦Q when taking ♦A would give declarer 2 diamond tricks that he's not entitled to. Even if the ♦A is taken declarer is no worse off - no matter who wins it. South can't lead another heart so he would have to lead something that helps declarer anyway. Even if North wins ♦A and plays another for declarer to ruff there's still time for him to continue his basic plan (reach dummy with a heart ruff to take the spade finesse).

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)