



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.

What a difference the lead makes!

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 22nd January 2024

7		♠ 52	Dir: S
		♥ 63	Vul: All
		♦ AQT984	
		♣ J83	
♠ J83	♠ AKQ4	7	
♥ AJ752	♥ 984	6	9
♦ 52	♦ 763		18
♣ 964	♣ T72		
♠ T976	♠ NT	♠	NT
♥ KQT	N	4	4
♦ KJ	S	4	4
♣ AKQ5	E	-	1
	W	-	1

On board 7 last week the lead could make a huge difference to the result. But let's start with the auction. Most North South pairs ended up playing in 3NT. The normal start to the auction would be 1♣ - 1♦ - 2NT. South is too strong for a 15-17 1NT opening so he shows the hand with a jump re-bid of 2NT showing 18-19 points. 2NT is a much better rebid than 1♠. It describes his overall hand much better and there is still room to find a spade fit anyway. What's more, it also means that when South DOES rebid 1♠ it will show he has an unbalanced hand – that knowledge is often very useful to partner.

Over 2NT North should simply bid 3NT. One of the key reasons is he has a decent long suit which could easily score a lot of tricks. Frequently I find hands with long suits opposite large balanced hands tend to play very well. Had North held a major suit as well, he could have used some form of checkback bid (usually 3♣) to enquire further about South's hand. See advanced section for some other possible bidding methods here. Some pairs only reached 2NT and a few played in 3♦. There might be times when 3♦ works best – e.g. when the diamond suit doesn't run and the defenders can cut off the North hand. But that is being pretty pessimistic!

So what should West lead? The normal lead, even though it doesn't work today, is ♥5. 4th highest from a long suit headed by an honour. On a good day it will find partner with some heart honours and put the defence ahead in the race to set up tricks in their long suit. Today unfortunately is not a good day! Even though it is the defence's longest suit, the best partner can do is the ♥8 which gives declarer an immediate trick with ♥10. After that declarer should score 11 tricks in total – 6 more diamonds and 4 more clubs. One or two seem to have made 12 tricks – presumably one defender mis-discarded on the run of 10 minor suit tricks.

After the auction 1♣ - 1♦ - 2NT - 3NT West should definitely favour a major suit lead. North has not bid a major or looked for a fit in one so he is unlikely to hold a major. While South certainly could, there is no guarantee. If West can find the suit neither of them have 4 in that will usually be the best start for the defence. It's the same logic that suggests a major suit lead is best after an auction like 1NT – 3NT where dummy has gone straight to 3NT without first looking for a major suit fit with stayman.

Quite a few declarers scored 660 after a heart lead. What surprised me is that quite a few declarers ALSO scored at least 10 tricks on the occasions where West did find a spade lead. A spade lead should in fact beat 3NT – the defenders can take 4 spades and the ♥A. One thing that might have gone wrong is East, so happy after the spade lead, just quickly bashes down the ♠AKQ, crashes his partner's ♠J and then plays a 4th round (which declarer now wins with ♠10) so the defence never get their ♥A. This shouldn't happen though – see advanced section for how the defenders should get it right.

Key points to note

- The opening lead against no-trumps can often swing a lot of tricks depending on whether it hits the right suit for the defence.
- 4th highest from a long suit headed by an honour (especially a 5 card suit) will still usually work out best (even though not on this particular hand!)
- If the opponents land up in 3NT without having investigated a major suit fit first, it usually means dummy doesn't have a major and therefore leading a major may well be best for the defence.
- If partner does find a good lead to a suit you have winners in, look carefully whether he has led low or not. If he has then he probably has an honour in the suit as well.
- Hands with long suits opposite large balanced hands usually play well – be more aggressive in the bidding.
- With balanced hands it is generally better to rebid no-trumps and describe the broad nature of your hand in favour of rebidding a 2nd suit. Rebidding a 2nd suit then shows an unbalanced hand – very useful knowledge for partner.

More advanced

There are quite a few bidding methods in use after a 2NT rebid. The simplest is probably just to play 3♣ as checkback which looks for declarer's holdings in the major suits. Had North responded 1♥ originally then South could show 3 card support for hearts, or he could show an unbid 4 card major. Here he would show an unbid 4 card major first or perhaps 3 card diamond support.

Another method increasing in popularity after a 2NT rebid is transfers. Responder transfers to a 2nd suit or to his original suit to show 5+ there. This creates more bidding space and allows more hand types to be shown. So for example 1♣-1♠-2NT-3♦ shows responder has 5 spades and 4 hearts. 1♣-1♥-2NT-3♦-3♥-3♠ would show 5 hearts and 4 spades (1♣-1♥-2NT-3♠ would show 4 hearts and 4 spades). Those interested can read up on more continuations and inferences.

These days it's also by no means certain the auction will have started 1♣ - 1♦. Many pairs now play transfer responses to 1♣. For these pairs North might well be responding 1♠ which usually shows either a hand that wants to transfer to no-trumps, or diamonds. If a brave East decided to double that, he might score very well as that will pinpoint the right lead against a later no-trump contract! Why do I say brave? Because doubling with the East hand could also backfire very badly! North-South have such strength that they can actually make 4♠ despite only having 6 of them. So they might redouble and now East West could be in big trouble faced with a choice of conceding 1♠ redoubled (with overtricks) or bidding something and going for a large penalty! Today it's not so bad as they could escape to 2♥ which is only 1 off - but it's by no means clear for West to do that.

If West does miraculously find a spade lead, how can the defence cash their tricks? After East gets over his initial delight(!) he needs to stop and look at the small spade pips he can see. Partner should have led the ♠3 and he can see the ♠2 in dummy which tells him partner has led his lowest. If the pair is playing a method where they lead low from honours and 2nd highest from poor suits then there is a very good chance West has led from the ♠J. Can East be certain it's from a 4 card suit? No – which is why a safer bet is to return a low spade at trick 2. Otherwise he risks crashing partner's ♠J on the 3rd round. When West wins the ♠J he has no reason to play anything else so the defence can then cash their spades. On the 4th spade, West discards an encouraging heart which then makes it easy to take their 5th trick.

One thing it is important to agree with your partner though is whether you count the 10 as an honour for leading purposes or not against no-trumps (opinions vary here but personally I don't). If you don't then East can be sure West must have led from the ♠J. If you do then it's not so clear – he might only have the 10 and declarer the J. So it's now not safe for East to return a low spade in case he gives South a silly cheap trick!

I did notice on this hand that one West led the ♥A against 3NT. The ace from this holding is usually a very bad lead – more often than not it will set up trick(s) for declarer and it could also mean his hand will later get cut off. However, on this occasion it could actually have led to a complete top had he switched to a spade at trick 2! But when he continued a heart he had set up 2 hearts to go with 6 diamonds and 4 clubs for declarer. Conceding 12 tricks scored a complete bottom. What a difference the lead can make! There is a good case for him to get it right at trick 2 though – partner should have discouraged strongly on the ♥A – so after looking at dummy West should see the risk of the diamond suit and might well then try a spade.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)