



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.

Big balanced hands

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 29th January 2024

4		♠ A87	Dlr: W
		♥ 54	Vul: All
		♦ J752	
		♣ QT62	
♠ K5	♠ J942		7
♥ T732	♥ AKJ		4 23
♦ T93	♦ AK84		6
♣ J843	♣ AK		
	♠ QT63	♠ ♠ ♥ ♠ NT	
	♥ Q986	N - - - -	
	♦ Q6	S - - - -	
	♣ 975	E 2 3 3 2 2	
		W 2 2 3 2 2	

Bidding and playing a very big hand opposite a very weak hand can be difficult. The first thing to say is such hands often play surprisingly badly as declarer! That's because you tend to have to keep leading away from honours in the big hand because you can't reach the other hand to lead towards them.

Board 4 last week was like this. The East West hands have 27 points between them but can't make game in anything. That's because they are divided 23-4. It is much harder to play the hand like that than it would be with the points split 14-13 because, in the latter scenario, there will be entries to get

between the two hands and lead up to honours.

Anyway let's consider the likely auction. After two passes to East with his 23 points most players will open 2♣ which is some sort of really strong hand (to be clarified later). When holding a balanced hand a 2NT opening is usually 20-22 so this is stronger than that. Exactly how strong it can be and how far forcing it is is subject to partnership discussion though.

West has a normal 2♦ negative and now East rebids 2NT to show his balanced shape. Some pairs play this as 23-24 (only) and allow West to pass with absolutely nothing. A better idea is to just play the original 2♣ as always game forcing and hence now 2NT is just 23+ balanced. Yes, this means West has to bid on with nothing and you will occasionally play game with 23 opposite 0 (and no doubt go off!). That's the cost of making 2♣ game forcing. But the big advantage is it keeps more room for West to explore major suit fits. Imagine if East had 25-26 points or even more and had to jump rebid 3NT to show that. Now you are already a whole level higher and, while you can still play 4♣ as some form of stayman to look for a major fit, if you don't find one you will be at 4NT not 3NT. That also makes slam exploration harder too. If East can rebid 2NT then there's still room to play stayman, transfers, etc. Note that for simplicity it is much easier to play the same bidding methods over 2♣-2♦-2NT as over an opening 2NT (and other places where 2NT is bid naturally too). There are other schemes of bidding available too - see advanced section for more on both these areas.

Here, after 2NT, West will probably bid 3♣ in case there is heart fit but when there isn't the pair should settle in 3NT. Neither has anything extra. That's also important to appreciate. Holding such a lovely 23 point hand, it's easy to get a bit carried away and keep bidding. Forgetting that you have already shown that when you bid 2NT so it's up to your partner to judge whether to go on. Here of course West has no such interest!

What about the play and defence? When leading round to a very big hand it's usually a good idea to be passive and not lead away from an honour as that often gives a trick away. So I would lead a club from South. Most pairs didn't

take my advice here though(!) and led a spade. That could easily have been leading into honours with declarer but today it actually works nicely as partner wins ♠A and no doubt then returns one to dummy's ♠K. Now what? At this point declarer has 7 tricks (♠K and 3 AK's). Both red suits have chances for more tricks but South looks poised over declarer's spades. The problem, as so often, is entries. Declarer may be in the West hand now for the last time. So maybe he should try the heart finesse since he won't have another chance? Or should he try diamonds? He really needs to do both to make 3NT since he needs 2 more tricks. So I probably would take the heart finesse hoping for 3 tricks there and the being able to also establish a 3rd trick in diamonds. Today, however, that doesn't work. After the heart finesse loses, declarer should get stuck in his hand.

If instead declarer plays diamonds (say he plays ♦AK and another) then North wins and puts a spade through. That gives the defence 2 more spades (so 4 tricks in all) and provided South, after taking his spades, does not then lead a heart then declarer will end up losing ♥Q as well.

A few pairs did make 3NT, however – presumably because the defence did end up leading round to the strong hand. One quiz question - in isolation what is the best way to play diamonds for 3 tricks?

If South did choose to lead passively then a club is his only real option. Normally you'd lead the middle card from 3 small (♣7 here). Declarer might cover with dummy's ♣8 and North will play ♣10. But now, suppose South gets on lead again. This time when he leads ♣9, that tells his partner he started with 3 clubs (974) not 2 (74). Hence North knows not to waste his ♣Q on the 2nd round as he can work out declarer's holding. That lets the defence set up some clubs provided of course South gets in.

Key points to note

- Big balanced hands are nice but can play surprisingly badly opposite very weak hands! Don't get carried away and bid too much!
- Hands with the points spread more evenly play better because you can move between the two hands more easily.
- It's usually better to play a 2♣ opening as game forcing (including 23+ balanced hands and accept you might occasionally reach game going off with 23 opposite 0).
- Tend to lead passively when leading round to a known big hand - leading away from an honour will often cost a trick.
- You can't often look at the best way to play a suit in isolation. Frequently you also need to worry about your own entries and which opponent you can afford to lose a trick to.

More advanced

Some pairs add a method called "Kokish" when bidding these sorts of hands. Basically after 2♣-2♦ a rebid by opener of 2♥ either shows hearts or a balanced hand of a set range (a 2NT rebid straight away showing a different range). Over 2♥ the normal way to play is to say responder MUST bid 2♠ as an artificial relay. At that point opener clarifies (2NT confirms he had a balanced hand, anything else is basically natural just says that 2♥ was natural on the last round). The advantage is it gives 3 ways to show large balanced ranges (2NT, 2♣-2♦-2NT and 2♣-2♦-2♥-2♠-2NT) all of which leave room to use stayman, transfers, etc. I have seen variations where the 2♣-2♦-2♥ sequence includes the weaker balanced range (say 20-21). Then with a really weak hand (0-2 points) and a long minor, responder can bid 3 of that minor instead of 2♠. That says he wants to play there opposite the balanced range (hence opener should pass with that hand and the pair might have managed to stop in a making spot). Of course if opener had the game force with hearts for his 2♥ bid all along then he just continues bidding.

I said it's easier to play the same methods over 2NT as 2♣-2♦-2NT. Usually the same is also true after 2♣-2♦-2♥-2♠-2NT. In fact most experienced pairs also play the same after they overcall 2NT naturally (e.g. over a multi 2♦ or weak 2M such as 2♥ 2NT P ? and also after 1X P P 2NT which should usually be played as big and balanced and NOT Michaels).

What about that diamond suit combination? I asked because many people misplay it (especially if it's something like A10xx opposite K9x). In isolation the right answer is AK and another. Crucially, this works because declarer has both the 10 and the 9. So any 3-3 break or any Hx in either hand will mean he only loses 1 trick (the 109 are then able to force out the other honour). Leading low towards a 10 or 9 risks losing to Hx and then you will have to lose another trick to the Hxx remaining in the other hand. AK and another only loses to QJxx.

Note, however, when I posed the question I said "In isolation" - i.e. with no concerns about entries or which opponent wins a trick. In the real world these are often important considerations that may take precedence. For example there's no point setting up the 4th card in the suit if there is no entry to that hand to later cash it! Also you may only be able to safely lose the lead to one player.

On this hand entries aren't the problem since the 4 card suit is part of the 23 count. But who you lose to is. After two rounds of spades, declarer would much rather lose a diamond trick to South (who can't play more spades without giving your ♠J a trick) than North who can lead a spade through and give South two more tricks. Sadly on this hand it's not really possible to keep North off lead and that's why Deep Finesse cannot make 3NT.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)