



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.

Not such a boring 3NT!

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 12th February 2024

23	♠ QJ42	<i>Dir: S</i>
	♥ T52	<i>Vul: All</i>
	♦ AQ9	
	♣ AQ3	
♠ KT5	♠ 983	15
♥ KJ73	♥ 84	11 3
♦ K6	♦ 87432	11
♣ J754	♣ K96	
	♠ A76	
	♥ AQ96	
	♦ JT5	
	♣ T82	

Board 23 last week looked like a fairly boring 3NT. But even hands like this have a lot of potential interest in them!

Some Souths might open the bidding but it's marginal with a 4333 shape and only 11 points so most will probably pass, especially when vulnerable. West is in a similar position with only 11 points and no aces so he too probably passes. That leaves North with a normal 1NT (15-17) opener. South will probably start with stayman to investigate a heart fit. Some people might argue that because South is so balanced he is better off just bidding 3NT. It's important to appreciate that even though he has a 4333 hand there's no

reason to assume partner does as well. Whenever partner has 4 hearts and a doubleton somewhere then the 4-4 heart fit is likely to play better than no-trumps. On this hand once South hears a 2♠ response he just bids 3NT (remember this implies 4 hearts – otherwise why would he have bothered with stayman to start with?)

East will most likely lead a diamond and trick 1 probably goes ♦JKA. Alternatively East could consider leading something else trying to hit his partner's suit (after all his hand is so weak there's little chance of actually getting his diamonds established and be able to cash them). If I did that I think I'd choose a heart. A spade lead is very unattractive given North has shown them. Leading away from a club honour round to a strong NT hand isn't nice either. Whilst South has implied hearts, North is known not to have them so that lead is at least through dummy's suit rather than round to declarer's. All in all though a diamond is still probably the safest – especially at pairs where you want to avoid giving a cheap trick away if you can.

After a diamond lead this is then one of those annoying hands for declarer where you only have a few certain tricks but lots of possible places to go for more and it's not clear which option is best! Hearts is a definite possibility for 3 tricks – he could finesse twice hoping that East has either ♥K or ♥J. Spades are also a possibility for 3 tricks if they sit favourably. Clubs might play for 2 tricks but that's not a suit declarer would typically want to play himself as it doesn't have the potential to set up anything else and might open up tricks for the defenders. It is far better to hope the defence eventually have to open that suit up.

Let's suppose he goes for hearts and starts by playing low to the ♥9 which will lose to the ♥J. West will no doubt return a diamond which declarer wins in hand and tries another heart finesse, being disappointed when it also loses. However, his disappointment is short lived when West doesn't have a 3rd diamond. From West's point of view leading away from ♠K looks very dangerous so he is likely to switch to a club. If declarer ducks, East wins ♣K and can now set his diamonds up – but he has no entry for them. By this stage declarer is up to 2 hearts, 3 diamonds and 2 clubs so he just needs 2 spade tricks. Hence it's now safe for him to run the ♠Q knowing that, even if it loses, West doesn't have

any more diamonds. When West wins ♠K that is the defence's 4th trick but that's all – declarer now has 2 spades, 2 hearts, 3 diamonds and 2 clubs.

There are lots of possible variations here though. Declarer might decide to play on spades first hoping for 3 tricks there. His reasoning might be if he has to resort to hearts later, he will at least be finessing into the safe hand (i.e. West who doesn't have the long diamonds). But what is the best way to play spades? Above I said declarer would run the ♠Q but he did that because, at the point we had reached, East had winning diamonds set up. So it was safe to finesse into West but declarer couldn't risk East getting on lead.

In isolation though running the ♠Q isn't the best play - ♠A and low towards hand is better. See advanced section for why. So if declarer decides to play on spades first that's what he should do. West probably jumps up with ♠K to play his 2nd diamond (if he ducks declarer just wins in hand and later leads again from dummy towards his other spade honour). Declarer is now up to 3 spades and 3 diamonds. ♥A and ♣A make 8 tricks so he just needs either a club or a heart finesse to make 3NT. He might therefore now try a heart to the ♥Q but when that loses a club will come back. Now you might think declarer will just try the ♣Q and curse his bad luck when that also loses? No! Declarer should play low and run the club lead around to South. Why? Because by now he can work out with certainty that East must have the ♣K! See advanced section for how.

Either of these lines of play should eventually end up with 9 tricks to North South. It looks, however, as if quite a few pairs did go off.

Key points to note

- When partner opens 1NT and your hand is really balanced it doesn't always mean 3NT is best. You might be 4333 but partner doesn't also have to be! A 4-4 major fit will still usually play better.
- When you have several suits you could play on, think about which ones might involve losing tricks to which hand. Once one defender has run out of their suit, that hand will usually be safe to finesse into. So that might influence which suit you try first.
- When you are missing intermediate spot cards in a suit, running honours isn't usually best – leading up to the honours is better.
- What someone did not do in the auction is often just as important as what they did do. If someone had the chance to open the bidding and didn't, check what points they show up with during the play. Since their hand is limited to at most 11 it is often possible to deduce that they cannot hold some other key cards.

More advanced

The spade suit in isolation is best played by starting with ♠A and leading low towards the ♠QJ. Because declarer has no intermediate pips, running the ♠Q isn't best (it will either get covered or will lose to the ♠K). On the layout here it doesn't actually matter since spades are 3-3 all the time - but suppose they were not? Now declarer would make at most 2 tricks in the suit because the defence have the ♠1098. If West started with ♠Kx or ♠Kxxx playing ♠A and a low one now works far better. In the first case the ♠K pops straight up; in the second case West might duck and declarer wins the ♠J in hand. But now he can cross to dummy and lead up to his remaining ♠Qx. He scores 3 tricks because the ♠K ends up having to be played into thin air, as opposed to beating another honour.

However, note that with the play as first described (i.e. starting on hearts), declarer could no longer afford to take that line in spades. That's because at the point he is up to, East has become the danger hand with winning diamonds left. So running ♠Q through him is safe but leading towards it is not. If you start on spades earlier, you can afford the best line since East's diamonds are not yet established.

In the 2nd version of the play I described (playing on spades first, then taking a losing heart finesse) at the point West leads a low club how can declarer know East must have ♣K? It's about counting points and thinking all the way back

to the auction. Remember the auction began with two passes to North. So West had a chance to open the bidding and didn't. How many points he has shown up with during the play so far though? He played ♦K at trick 1. Then he won ♠K and later also won ♥K. That's 9 points. If he had ♣K that would give him 12 points and he would have opened the bidding. Hence he cannot hold ♣K. Once declarer works that out, he knows that playing ♣Q cannot work. His best shot is therefore to play low hoping that West has underled ♣J (which there is still room for him to have). That works - the presence of the ♣10 in dummy means East has to play his ♣K which sets up ♣AQ as 2 tricks for declarer.

This sort of card reading is an important skill for improving players. It can be very satisfying to deduce where a card has to be – either by counting the distribution or, as here, the points. A book I recommend in this regard is Mike Lawrence – “How to read your opponents cards”. It was a real eye-opener for me.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)