



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.

Protection

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 26th February 2024

Board 7 last week showed the value of what is called “protection” in the auction (i.e. keeping an auction open that would otherwise be passed out). It also showed the value of passive defence and accurate carding by the defenders.

The normal start to the auction will be Pass Pass 1♠ Pass Pass. Now it’s up to West. A lot of tables appear to have passed the hand out in 1♠ but in fact East West can make plenty of contracts their way.

| | | | |
|----------|--------|-------------|----------|
| 7 | | ♠ AQJT8 | Dlr: S |
| | | ♥ K72 | Vul: All |
| | | ♦ KQ5 | |
| | | ♣ K7 | |
| ♠ 7 | ♠ K432 | 18 | |
| ♥ Q43 | ♥ AJ9 | 8 | 12 |
| ♦ JT964 | ♦ A2 | 2 | |
| ♣ AJT2 | ♣ 8543 | | |
| | ♠ 965 | ♠ ♦ ♥ ♠ NT | |
| | ♥ T865 | N - - - - | |
| | ♦ 873 | S - - - - | |
| | ♣ Q96 | E 3 4 2 1 1 | |
| | | W 3 4 2 1 1 | |

Even though West only has 8 points there are good reasons for him to bid:

- he has shortage in spades (so partner may have length in spades and there are plenty of reasonable hands where he couldn’t bid over 1♠).
- his partner is likely to have at least 8 points (see advanced section for how West can tell this).
- he has already limited his hand by passing to start with – so partner isn’t likely to get too over-excited in response!

All these things mean there is still a good chance your side can win the auction. But to do that West has to bid something at this point to stop the hand being passed out in 1♠!

When you bid in positions after two passes to you it is called “protecting” the auction - i.e. protecting it from being passed out in case you have a contract on your way but partner wasn’t able to conveniently bid. To allow for that, it’s OK for the hand protecting to bid with a bit less than usual. A broad rule of thumb I was taught in protective seat is to mentally assume your hand is about 3 points stronger than it actually is and bid as if you had that. Of course, to balance things out if your partner bids in this position you should then mentally subtract about 3 points from your own hand as well. Effectively the hand in protective seat has already bid some of your hand for you!

Hands that don’t have a bid tend to have length in the suit the opponents open so it’s usually the hand with shortage in the opponents’ suit that should stretch a bit to get his side into the auction. That’s West here.

Having decided to bid, the next question for West is what? I would double. It’s not perfect because partner will normally expect 4 hearts. But it’s more flexible than 2♦ as it offers 3 possible suits to play in. Also 2♦ might encourage partner to lead a diamond if North South compete further and end up winning the contract. But as West a diamond lead probably isn’t what you want.

On this hand over double North should redouble (showing a big hand and willingness to compete further). East can bid 2♣ (he should not be tempted to try his 3 card heart suit - see advanced section for why). Now South knows partner is stronger, he might now venture 2♠ as he does have support, despite his poor hand.

What about the play and defence? Both club and diamond contracts play quite well for East West. The heart finesse works but there is still a potential loser on the 3rd round of hearts. However, ♠K will provide a discard for West’s third

heart so the only losers are ♠A, one club (declarer leads towards the ♣AJ10 twice) and either 1 or 2 diamonds depending on how the suit is played.

But almost all tables defended spade contracts by North so let's focus on that. A common lead was ♦A. As mentioned earlier that might have been because West did bid diamonds at some point. Or it might just have been East's free choice of lead.

As so often is the case the lead of an ace into thin air (even in a suit partner has bid) works out badly. Here it just sets up both ♦K and ♦Q for declarer. Nor does it start attacking declarer's weakness. Aces are usually better held back to beat opponents' kings and queens.

As East I would lead a club on this hand for 3 reasons:

- a) Mainly just process of elimination. No other suit appeals at all.
- b) You are leading round into a strong hand and dummy (who passed partner's 1♠ originally) will be very weak. That tends to suggest a passive lead as most honours will be sitting over you so leading away from something could easily cost a trick.
- c) Holding 4 trumps East should be considering trying to force declarer to ruff so he can seek to gain trump control. The best chance of doing that is usually to lead what you think will be the defence's longest suit.

After ♦A lead against 1♠ most Norths made 8 tricks for +110. But after a club lead North shouldn't even make 1♠! West puts in ♣10 at trick 1 (see advanced section for why) and declarer is thrown into his own hand. He will most likely start on trumps but now West can play 2 more rounds of clubs which just forces declarer again. Now East's 4 trumps also become a problem - if declarer draws them all the defence can cash the 4th round of clubs. But if he doesn't then East will eventually score a small trump. In fact on accurate defence declarer is limited to 4 trumps, 1 diamond and 1 club trick only. Any East West pair who managed to push North South to 2♠ and then defended like this would have scored +200 which would have been a virtual top.

Key points to note

- Don't be afraid to re-open an auction that has had two passes to you if you have suitable shape. Your side could easily still win the auction.
- You can protect a bit lighter than usual with good shape. Mentally add about a King to your hand (and subtract a king when partner protects).
- Try to lead passively when dummy's hand is known to be very weak and declarer strong.
- Leading aces into thin air (even in a suit partner has bid) is generally a bad idea - save your aces to beat kings and queens.
- If contemplating bidding a suit in response to a takeout double, consider which hand will most likely have the longer trumps and which the shorter. If your side has to ruff in the long hand that won't usually be good.
- When partner makes their opening lead, check the spot cards for that suit carefully. You can often work out what holdings the lead can, and cannot, be from - and hence what the layout of the suit is around the table and what card you should play after dummy.

More advanced

After 1♠ P P how does West know East must have some points? The answer is just to think about where they all are based on the auction so far. North opened at the 1 level so probably has at most 19 and South couldn't respond so he has at most 5. So North South are likely have at most 24. But there are 40 points in total so with your 8 points that leaves a minimum of 8 for partner and it could be more.

I said East shouldn't be tempted to try bidding his 3 card heart suit in response to a re-opening takeout double.

There are 2 reasons why not:

- a) he is looking at 4 spades so it's likely partner has shortage in spades. That makes it more likely he will have stretched to bid - perhaps with a slightly imperfect hand (e.g. one without 4 hearts).

- b) partner's likely spade shortage means that, after your ♠K has gone, he will most likely get forced to ruff in his hand. But those ruffs will come from his (hopefully!) longer heart holding and not your shorter hearts. Having to ruff with long trumps doesn't give you any extra tricks and increases the risk that a forcing defence will cause you to lose trump control.

If East does lead a club against a spade contract why should West put in the ♣10? From his perspective the ♣K is the key missing card. If partner has it then the ♣10 will win the trick. If declarer has it then the ♣10 will allow ♣K to score. However that's usually fine because playing ♣A means declarer will score both ♣Q and ♣K separately. It is better to allow the ♣K to score on round 1 and maintain ♣AJ sitting over ♣Q in dummy. Not only does that prevent declarer winning 2 club tricks, it also ensures he cannot get to dummy at all. The only time ♣10 might be wrong is if declarer has singleton ♣K. That's possible but it would give East 5 clubs which he might well have competed further with (remember we already know he must have some values). As discussed below, West may be able to work out that that holding is impossible.

Can West tell who has ♣K? Possibly. It depends on the leading methods East West play. A common method employed is "4ths and 2nds". What does that actually mean though? It means the pair leads 4th highest from suits headed by honours and 2nd highest from bad suits (i.e. those without an honour). Most often the 4th highest is quite a low spot card and the 2nd highest is much larger so partner can tell which situation applies. Here East would lead ♣5 (2nd highest from a poor suit).

This time West can't immediately quite tell what that is from. But he can work out the ♣10 is right regardless. How? Firstly by identifying what the missing clubs are – ♣K87543. Then by considering the possibilities:

- a) On the assumption East is leading a long suit then the only holding where it could be 4th highest is ♣K875 - in which case playing ♣10 is right. Alternatively, the ♣5 is 2nd highest. In which case:
- b) Can declarer have singleton ♣K? No - if he did that would give East ♣87543 but he would lead the ♣7 from that holding not the ♣5.
- c) Therefore, whenever ♣5 is 2nd highest, declarer has at least ♣Kx so playing ♣A will just give declarer 2 club tricks when he is only entitled to 1. Thus ♣10 is right then as well.

It can be seen from this how important it is as a defender to closely examine your partner's opening lead and consider what holdings it could be from. Frequently you can tell the exact layout around the table and, even if you can't do that, you can still work out which card you should play that will work in multiple cases.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)