



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.

Lebensohl and point counting

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 4th March 2024

23	♠ AK92	Dlr: S	
	♥ QT2	Vul: All	
	♦ T42		
	♣ 742		
♠ J865	♠ T7	9	
♥ A874	♥ 9	15	5
♦ AQ	♦ J8653	11	
♣ A93	♣ KJT65		
	♠ Q43		
	♥ KJ653		
	♦ K97		
	♣ Q8		
		♠	♥
		NT	
		N	- 1 - -
		S	- 2 - -
		E	5 4 - 2
		W	5 4 - 2

As is often the case the bidding and play of board 23 last week was heavily influenced by which side opened.

South is first to speak. Where he passes, West will open 1NT and it's quite possible that will end the auction. Neither North nor South can easily bid. This is an example of how it tends to be easier to bid if you get into the auction first.

These days, therefore, many Souths would open 1♥. After that start West has a normal 1NT overcall (15-18 or thereabouts). North has an easy raise to 2♥ and it's then up to East to keep his side in the auction.

Given his shape and the knowledge his partner has 15-18 balanced East certainly should do something. He can't easily show both minors, however (a takeout double isn't viable with only 2 spades). So I'd probably just compete to 3♣, my better 5 card minor (partner will have at least 2 for his balanced 1NT overcall).

A useful convention here is “Lebensohl” - which is basically a way of distinguishing between strong hands and hands which just want to compete. It's frequently played after your side's opening 1NT has been overcalled and it's also sensible to play it if your side has overcalled 1NT and the intervening hand has bid. 2NT usually asks partner to bid 3♣ and then the weak hand either passes or bids its suit at the 3 level. Immediate 3 level bids are then forcing. See advanced section for more details.

If East does compete over 2♥ neither North or South can really bid again so 3♣ is likely to end the auction.

In practice, however, most tables played in either 1NT by West or 2♥ by South so we'll look at the play and defence for those first.

Against 1NT North may well lead his 4th highest spade. After winning ♠Q South needs to decide whether to continue spades or switch to hearts. He can tell from the ♠2 lead that his partner only has 4 spades and that means declarer also has 4. So he may therefore take the view that hearts could be more profitable for the defence and find the switch. While declarer can make 1NT, in practice he may well go off because the most likely way to play clubs is to cash ♣A and then finesse into the ♣Q. Doing that would give the defence 3 spades (possibly even 4), 4 hearts and ♣Q for a very good score of +200.

If West is on lead against 2♥ his only realistic choices are a spade or a heart. Neither works especially well. Declarer can draw trumps and can take 4 spade tricks if he finesses the ♠9 on the 4th round. In practice, however, he may get that wrong. But instead he can duck two rounds of diamonds which West will be forced to win and set up declarer's ♦K. There is a good case for declarer to get this right too. Whenever someone opens or overcalls no-trumps they show a fairly closely defined point range. If that ends up being one of the hands you can't see then whether you are declarer or a defender you can add the points from the two hands you can see to that range, subtract from 40 and that gives you the point range for the last hand. So for example here South can see his side has 20 points (11 in his hand and 9 in dummy). West has shown 15-18 with his 1NT bid. That comes to 35-38. Which leaves East with 2-5.

This is a good exercise to get into the habit of doing as you gain more experience at bridge. See advanced section for what it means on this hand.

Lastly let's briefly consider what might happen if West did play 3♣. North is likely to lead ♠A and may continue the suit or might switch to hearts trying to force dummy to ruff (remember South will have opened 1♥ most times that West ends up in 3♣). If declarer plays perfectly he can actually make 11 tricks in clubs! He can take ♥A, play ♣A, ♣K (dropping ♣Q), take the diamond finesse, cash ♦A, trump a heart, trump a diamond in his hand (setting up the rest of the suit), trump a heart back to dummy, draw the last trump and cash 2 more winning diamonds! What's more he can legitimately find this play as well. Although it's lucky that diamonds are 3-3, he certainly should know the ♦K and ♣Q are with South - see advanced section for how.

Key points to note

- The side opening the bidding first tends to get an advantage as it's easier to bid. So don't be afraid to open a bit light sometimes.
- Lebensohl is a good convention to use after they have overcalled your side's 1NT (or if your side makes a takeout double of their weak two bid). It helps distinguish between competitive and forcing hands.
- Whenever anyone has bid no-trumps, count points as either a defender or a declarer to calculate a range that the hidden hand can have. Often this will help you place many of the missing high cards.
- Consider what the opening lead tells you. Often you can work out what holding he does have in that suit or probably does NOT have in another suit (which he would otherwise have probably led instead).

More advanced

If your side opens 1NT and they overcall then it's important for responder to be able to compete but he also needs to be able to make a forcing bid with a strong hand. After, say, 1NT 2♥ you can't therefore bid 3♣ in both cases. One solution to this is "Lebensohl". 2NT is used as an artificial bid over which opener must bid 3♣. Responder will then pass or bid 3 of a suit. This shows a weak hand that just wanted to compete, knowing partner was 15-18 balanced. That then frees up a direct bid at the 3 level to be natural and forcing. There are lots of more advanced variations to Lebensohl but that's the basic gist of it. You can go further and ascribe meanings to sequences like 2NT-3♣-3♥ compared to 3♥ directly. You can also distinguish between bidding 2NT-3♣-3NT and 3NT directly.

There's also another level available on some occasions. Suppose you open 1NT and they overcall 2♥. There are now 3 sequences available to responder to show spades:

- 2♠ directly (weak, competitive)
- 2NT-3♣-3♠ (invitational with spades)
- 3♠ directly (forcing with spades).

Note the invitational option is only available in suits higher than the one overcalled – i.e. where you also had the option to bid at the 2 level. In clubs, say, you just have to choose between weak and forcing.

There are other methods in use after overcalls of 1NT too. An increasingly popular one is to play transfers. That enables responder to transfer and pass with a weak hand, or bid again with a stronger one.

Even though the situation is not quite the same when LHO opens, partner overcalls 1NT and RHO bids something, it is still a position where you want to be able to distinguish strength so Lebensohl is still useful to play.

The other common position Lebensohl is played is after the opponents open a weak 2 and your side doubles. Once again here you need to be able to distinguish strength. Say it goes 2♥ X P to you. If you bid 3♣ with 0 points and also with 10 points, then it's impossible for partner (who may sitting with a better than minimum hand - say 16-17) to know what to do. Once again use of 2NT as Lebensohl helps solve this problem. Going via 2NT shows a weak hand (about 0-7); bidding immediately shows about 8-11. Hands better than that cue bid to force to game. Being able to define

partner's point range more accurately helps the doubler know whether he should be moving again. Otherwise it's just a guess holding, say, 17 points. Pass and find partner had 10. Bid on and find partner had 0!

Those are the two common positions where Lebensohl is played. There are a host of other situations and experienced partnerships tend to have a lot of discussions about what 2NT means in competitive auctions (natural is seldom one of them)!

If South plays 2♥ and West leads a trump or a spade, we have seen declarer can work out East only has 2-5 points. What can that tell us? Well, observe that both ♣AK are missing. Surely if West had both of those he'd have led a club? So there's a very good presumption East's 2-5 points includes one of the top club honours. Which means West is a raging certainty to hold the ♦A. Once declarer works that out, he knows that playing a diamond to the ♦K cannot work. Hence he needs to try something else and playing West for ♦Ax is the best.

What about if West is playing 3♣ after 1♥ 1NT 2♥ 2NT P 3♣? North is likely to lead ♠A and will most likely switch to a heart to the ♥K and ♥A. Once again declarer should do some point counting! North's ♠A lead will almost always have ♠K too (why else would he lead ♠A into thin air and not his partner's suit?) Then in hearts North has led low and South has played the ♥K. That surely places ♥Q with North. So that's already 9 points with North. But after 1♥ 1NT he only bid 2♥. So he's very unlikely to have anything else - if he did he'd either have invited in hearts or doubled 1NT. Therefore, declarer can place all the other high cards - including ♦K and ♣Q - with South. He is short of entries to East to take both club and diamond finesses easily though. So a reasonable line of play is ♣A, ♣K (getting the good news when the ♣Q drops). Now diamond to ♦Q, ♦A. Heart ruff back to dummy and ruff a diamond in hand with ♣9. Today is declarer's lucky day when diamonds are 3-3. He just ends up losing 2 spades. However, on the hand, it turned out that merely getting the auction beyond 2♥ had won the board!

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)