



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.

Minor suit slam

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 6th May 2024

17	♠ KQ42	Dir: N
	♥ J5	Vul: Nil
	♦ Q93	
	♣ AJ93	
♠ T98	♠ AJ7653	13
♥ Q6	♥ 743	5 5
♦ KT87654	♦ 2	17
♣ 6	♣ 874	
	♠ AKT982	N 7 1 7 - 6
	♥ AJ	S 7 1 7 - 6
	♣ KQT52	E - - - -
		W - - - -

Minor suit slams can be hard to bid but will generally score very well when you do manage it because a lot of pairs tend not to reach them.

Board 17 last week in fact had 7♣ available. That wasn't easy to bid but 6♣ should certainly have been possible. North will usually open 1♣. The minute his partner opens the bidding South should be considering slam given how enormously powerful his hand is with two big suits and lots of controls.

Let's start by assuming North South have an uncontested auction (unlikely here!). South will respond 1♥ and North is better to rebid 1NT showing the general strength and nature of his hand. Reserving 1♠ to show an unbalanced hand has a lot of advantages (see advanced section for more). After 1NT South might first use some form of checkback to see if partner has 3 hearts. When partner instead bids 2♠ that shows he has 4 spades and not 3 hearts (with both he should make the more economical 2♥ bid). Now South can continue with 3♣ natural. Many Norths would now bid 3NT but 4♣ is a better bid. If partner is prepared to introduce a new suit then he should have some reason for it and North should admit to his good support for it. What's more ♦Q9x in the unbid suit is hardly a robust diamond stopper to insist on playing NT with! Even if North does bid 3NT South should have another go with 4♣ - that now shows he is at least 55 and North should definitely raise now.

Perhaps a better way for South to bid here though is not to bother with checkback at all but simply to jump to 3♣ after a 1NT rebid. This should show a shapely game forcing hand with at least 55 in his two suits. He will still find out if North has 3 hearts (he'd bid 3♥ next). When North raises to 4♣ instead then South again should consider how to look for 7♣.

Club support is music to South's ears and his thoughts should turn to 6♣ or 7♣. Note how useful North's 2♠ response to checkback was - because it said he only had 2 hearts. That means South knows he has no heart loser and he can ruff one or more hearts with North's clubs to set the suit up. What's more even if North doesn't have ♠A or ♦K (to take care of ♦J) he should be able to discard North's remaining diamonds on his long hearts. Which means the only card South really wants to know about is ♣A! He can find out if he makes a 4♦ cue bid over 4♣. Assuming 1st round controls are cue bid (see advanced section for more) when North cannot cue 4♥ or 4♠ that is actually good news to South as it means North almost has to hold ♣A to have his opening bid.

Many players would use Blackwood over 4♣. But that is NOT a good idea on the South hand here. Suppose partner shows you one ace. Is it the ♠A or the ♣A? You have no way of knowing. ♣A makes 7♣ a good shot. ♠A makes it impossible. Blackwood with a void is often a bad bid for this reason. It works on hands where you just want to know how many key cards partner has. But here you need to know which one partner has. That's where cue bidding is better. There is another possible way though - “exclusion keycard” where you ask for key cards but excluding a particular suit (i.e. where you have a void and where partner having a key card there would be useless to you). See advanced section for more details.

Playing in clubs the best lead for the defence is a trump. When trumps are not 2-2 declarer can't draw all the trumps and ruff a heart because, although that will set his hearts up to discard North's diamonds, North would have no more trumps to ruff South's $\heartsuit J$ with. Therefore, he will have resort to either taking a diamond finesse or a ruffing spade finesse. The latter is better because it's going to be virtually impossible for East to duck the $\spadesuit K$ if he holds $\spadesuit A$. After all he'd look utterly stupid if South had a singleton spade! After $\spadesuit K \spadesuit A$ ruff that will set up the $\spadesuit Q$ to discard the $\heartsuit J$. When $\heartsuit Q$ drops there's no need to ruff a heart.

Today hearts plays the same as clubs because $\heartsuit Q$ drops doubleton but had West held $\heartsuit Qxx$ then he'd have a trick in hearts that he doesn't have in clubs. That's why clubs is a better contract.

Now let's return to the auction and see how much harder it might be if East West start getting in the way. Here the South hand is so powerful that it shouldn't stop the pair reaching $6\clubsuit$ but it might make reaching $7\clubsuit$ too hard.

East could make a $2\spadesuit$ weak jump overcall over $1\clubsuit$. South still bids $3\heartsuit$ and West might compete to $3\spadesuit$. North probably tries 3NT and South should continue with $4\clubsuit$. Again if North raises this South should at least now bid $6\clubsuit$. If East doesn't bid then West could also put in a $3\diamondsuit$ pre-empt after $1\clubsuit P 1\heartsuit$. That makes things a bit harder. North probably passes over that but South again continues with $4\clubsuit$. If North raises to $5\clubsuit$ South can bid 6.

Of course at pairs the one contract North South should never play in on this hand is $5\clubsuit$. That will score worse than 3NT or $4\heartsuit$. If they play in clubs they need to play at least $6\clubsuit$. But South can afford to bid $4\clubsuit$ to try further over 3NT because he is happy to alight in $4\heartsuit$ if partner really has rubbish for him.

As is so often the case bidding 7 is not necessary and just bidding $6\clubsuit$ got a very good score. In general when playing pairs you want to be very sure before bidding a grand slam. There's nothing worse than bidding 7, running into an unlucky break and going off - only to find that bidding 6 would have scored a top anyway!

Key points to note

- Big two suited hands with lots of controls are enormously powerful. If partner opens the bidding and there is any sort of fit then slam is highly likely.
- Using Blackwood with a void is generally a bad idea because partner having the ace in your void may be useless to you. It is better to cue bid because you want to know which key cards partner has rather than just how many.
- Rebidding 1NT with a balanced hand even with a biddable 4 card major is a good idea. It means when you do rebid a 2nd suit you are showing an unbalanced hand and that knowledge can be vital to partner. Checkback over 1NT can still find out partner's shape in the majors.
- A special form of Blackwood (exclusion) does exist where you can ask for key cards but excluding that suit. It's very useful for pinpointing possible grand slams. However, you need to be very clear with your agreements!
- Only bid a grand slam at pairs if you are almost certain it will be cold. Bidding 6 will usually be a very good score anyway (especially 6 of a minor).
- Raising 3m to 4m is far better played as natural and agreeing the suit – rather than Gerber or Minorwood.

More advanced

I've talked before about the advantages of playing a 1NT rebid as balanced even with a biddable 4 card major. Then using checkback to investigate a fit there. That then provides the very useful inference that if you do rebid a 2nd suit you are showing an unbalanced hand. As we saw here, the checkback response also pinpointed how many hearts North has. A common method is "two way checkback" where $2\diamondsuit$ is a game force and $2\clubsuit$ is an artificial relay to $2\diamondsuit$ followed by invitational bids.

I mentioned about cue bidding 1st round controls. Traditionally a cue bid showed 1st round control and this works well on this hand because North's LACK of a $4\spadesuit$ cue bid over $4\diamondsuit$ then means he doesn't have $\spadesuit A$. Note that partner NOT cue bidding something can sometimes be good news not bad! However, an increasingly common method these days is for cues to show either 1st or 2nd round control. That's often better as you

can first ensure you aren't off two cashing tricks in a suit and can then use Blackwood to find out whether partner's cue bid was the A or K. On this hand that doesn't work as well because a 4♠ cue from North doesn't help South find out what he wants to know.

Exclusion Blackwood can solve the problem of what to do with a void. If South can keycard but tell his partner to exclude spades in his responses he'll be able to find out what he wants to know. The responses to exclusion can vary but are usually something like 0, Q of trumps only, 1 keycard, 1 + Q, 2 keycards etc. The big problem with exclusion is identifying when it applies! It normally has to be a very unusual jump because other lower bids are needed as cue bids, splinters, or options to play. Something like 1♥ P 2NT (game force raise) P 5♣ maybe. Of course, like with regular blackwood, you also need to make sure partner's possible responses won't take you too high if he doesn't have what you want.

On this hand if an uncontested auction had gone 1♣ 1♥ 1NT 3♣ 4♣ then a jump to 5♠ could be exclusion keycard (what else could it be?!). South can afford to do that as a response of no keycards outside spades will still keep the pair below 6♣.

It's harder if you want to use exclusion in a suit partner has bid because there's a risk partner might think it's an offer to play! So you tend to need very clear agreements to know what you are doing. Had South gone via checkback and North had bid 2♠ earlier in the auction then you'd want to be very clear that clubs have been agreed before risking 5♠! That's why a raise of 3♣ to 4♣ by North should be natural and agree clubs. In my view that's a FAR better treatment than using it as either Gerber or Minorwood. I personally loathe both those conventions! 4♣ is almost always more useful as a cue bid or simply to get clubs agreed.

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)