



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.

Defensive cross ruff and signals

City and Canada Bay – Monday Morning 3rd June 2024

17	♠ KJT653	Dir: N
	♥ Q7	Vul: Nil
	♦ AJ6	
	♣ AJ	
♠ AQ9	♠ 82	16
♥ JT8532	♥	10 7
♦ K952	♦ KQ98542	7
	♣ QT87	
	♠ 74	
	♥ AK964	
	♦ T73	
	♣ 643	
		♠ ♣ ♥ ♦ NT
		N - - 1 1 1
		S - - 1 - 1
		E 2 2 - -
		W 3 3 - -

Board 17 last week was primarily a hand to defend. But let's first see what contracts either side might reach. North has a normal 1♠ opening. Holding a 74 shape East should definitely get involved. 3♦ (weak jump) is probably enough to start with – although he might be tempted to have another go later depending on how the auction develops (see advanced section for something he might consider with this sort of hand if the opponents bid to 4♥ or 4♠).

Over 3♦ South doesn't have enough to bid 3♥ (a new suit at the 3 level would be a game force) so he will pass. So should West – albeit with some trepidation! It's definitely a mistake to bid at this point though – 95% of the time you will just make the situation worse. Yes it MIGHT go X P P back to you but that hasn't happened yet. You know your side is in potential trouble but that doesn't mean the opponents do!

North actually has a tricky problem over 3♦. He has a better than minimum hand but partner hasn't made any noise. He has no guarantee of partner having any spade support (so 3♠ could backfire), and he has quite a lot of defence. Length in the suit that has been overcalled on your left tends to downgrade your hand. So there's a case to go quietly and pass 3♦ out. On the other hand, partner can still have a few points and his side could still make game. This is a good example of why pre-empts work. They force the other side to make some decisions at a level higher than they would ideally like to. Which means some of the time they are then going to guess wrong. Reopening with a double from North isn't a good option – with his diamond holding it's very unlikely partner is about to be passing it, he doesn't have hearts and what on earth is he going to do if partner produces a 4♣ bid?! 3♠ is the only other option I would consider over 3♦ (which it looks like quite a few tables chose).

So let's start by considering the defence to 3♠. Quite a few Easts led the ♦K and ended up taking it 2 off. One way this might happen is for West to ruff and then the defence cross ruff in the red suits to make all 5 of their trumps separately. However, that isn't actually the best defence. They need to switch to a club earlier to set up their trick there. If they don't then, if declarer has been watching carefully and realises all 5 of the opponents' trumps have gone, he can win ♣A, cross to the ♠7 in dummy and discard his ♣J on the ♥A.

A better defence is actually for West not to ruff ♦K – there are good reasons not to anyway (see advanced section). Declarer wins ♦A. He might now try to cross to dummy in hearts to take a spade finesse but will get a nasty surprise when East ruffs! Now he can go ♦Q, diamond ruff and receive a 2nd heart ruff in return. Then the defence exit a club and declarer is stuck in his own hand. West still has the ♠AQ (he has only ruffed one diamond) so he will score both those and the defence also get their club. That would be 7 tricks (all 5 of their trumps plus ♦K and a club) for 3 off.

How could declarer do better? By playing trumps from his own hand. This removes one of East's heart ruffs. But that would be very double dummy and would look very silly whenever East was not void in hearts and West had, say, ♠AQ doubleton.

There's another option to the ♦K lead though – see advanced section for more.

OK so North South playing the contract doesn't fare well. What about if they leave East in 3♦? This can be beaten but it's not that easy. Suppose South leads the ♥A. No good! Declarer ruffs and starts with ♦Q (you might ask why the ♦Q and not the ♦K? See advanced section for the answer). North wins and can't do better than another heart. But declarer ruffs and can clear the trumps with 2 more rounds. When he plays on clubs, North's ♣AJ drop quickly so declarer ends up losing 1 spade, 2 trumps and ♣A only.

What about the ♠7 lead (partner's suit) from South? That's a better start. If declarer tries ♠Q, it's fairly easy for the defence – North wins and continues spades. Declarer can ruff a heart to hand to start on trumps but now when North wins ♦A he can play a third spade and that create another trump trick for South (try it and see – if declarer ruffs high, the defence have the ♦J and ♦10 as winners, if he ruffs low South overruffs and North will still score his ♦J later). This is known as a trump promotion.

But what if declarer plays the ♠9 at trick 1? After all North is almost certain to have the ♠K so the ♠Q can't really gain. North wins ♠10 and now it looks a lot less attractive to lead back into dummy's ♠AQ. In fact doing that could be really silly as it might allow declarer to discard a heart loser. So North will surely switch to a heart. Declarer ruffs this and the same position as before is reached. He forces out ♦A and, if North now plays a 2nd spade it's too late – declarer wins, ruffs another heart and gets all the trumps out before the defence can get their trump promotion going.

So, counter intuitive though it seems, North actually does have to play a 2nd spade at trick 2. And then a 3rd spade when in with ♦A. By that stage it should be clear because he will have seen declarer ruff a heart to hand so he knows there are no heart losers to discard. Allowing a club discard won't matter because declarer must have some length in clubs to make up his 13 cards (he has 2 spades, 0 hearts and most likely 7 diamonds).

Key points to note

- Don't be afraid to bid with 74 shapes – they can be very powerful! Pre-empts can also give nasty problems to your opponents.
- Be wary of re-opening with length in the suit overcalled on your left.
- As a defender it's frequently right NOT to ruff if you would just be ruffing one of declarer's losers. Better to wait, let him have the high card, and set up winners for partner (you may still be able to get a ruff later).
- Always watch for suit preference signals when partner is giving you a ruff (or thinks he might be). It should guide what he wants you to return.
- Don't always lead your honours from the top as declarer – if you lead the 2nd highest, a defender might duck for fear he might crash a singleton honour in his partner's hand. Being able to play a 2nd round of trumps could then be very valuable.
- Having opened or pre-empted in a minor, a bid of 4NT on the 2nd round of the bidding usually shows 64 or 74 in the minors – this helps find a fit in either minor.

More advanced

If East is on lead against spades, he will want to try and draw partner's attention to his heart void which only he knows about. On this hand partner has some trump tricks but if that wasn't the case, the defence might need to get their defensive ruffs going immediately. How might East do that? With a suit preference lead at trick 1! What about leading the ♦9? Having pre-empted in the suit, this looks an unusual card – he surely must have at least one honour in the suit and it's not the normal 4th highest. So it might wake partner up to what East is signalling? But, even though that seems to work nicely, and gets East 2 heart ruffs, he then needs to be careful. He must NOT give partner a 3rd diamond ruff and must switch to a club instead. As we saw earlier, if he does give partner the ruff with ♠A declarer will be able to reach dummy with a trump to discard his club loser. So how can East get that right? With suit preference help from his partner. West knows his last trump is the Ace so there isn't anything to be gained by ruffing with it – East doesn't know that (if West had started with ♠KQ9 then it probably would be worth giving him another ruff). So when West gives East his 2nd heart ruff, he should do so by leading the ♥2. If East trusts his partner he will read this as asking him NOT to give another ruff but to play a club instead.

If East does lead ♦K, why might West not want to ruff it? Several reasons:

- a) Couldn't East be leading from ♦AK?! That might depend on what leading methods the partnership plays.
- b) If East doesn't have ♦AK then he will have ♦KQ (and possibly ♦KQJ) – that means West will just be ruffing one of declarer's diamond losers. It's usually better to wait, let declarer have the ♦A which then sets up partner's ♦Q.
- c) He would be ruffing from what might easily be trump tricks (remember West doesn't know that declarer can't reach dummy with a heart – he will surely be expecting that to happen and a spade to be led through him – so reducing himself to ♠AQ immediately would then be a bad move).
- d) By discarding he can give his partner a signal (encouraging clubs here).

Deep Finesse says North can always make 7 tricks in spades (albeit with a double dummy play of a trump to stop one of the defensive ruffs) but South can't. Why not? Because the defence can go heart ruff, diamond ruff (East leading, say, ♦9), 2nd heart ruff and NOW East leads ♦K which West discards on. This still gets both their heart ruffs (necessary to cut the South hand off), but also preserves tricks for both West's ♠AQ and East's ♦Q. Declarer will end up losing these 3 tricks and a club trick on top of the 3 opening ruffs. Not obvious!

I mentioned that, if he is declaring in diamonds, East should start with ♦Q rather than ♦K. Why? Because declarer wants to get the trumps out as soon as he can – he should be worried about either a trump promotion in spades or a club ruff. If he plays the ♦Q it might tempt South holding ♦Axx(x) to duck for fear partner might have a singleton ♦K. That would then allow declarer to get a 2nd round of trumps played immediately. It doesn't work on this hand but that's no reason not to try it!

Lastly, I said at the beginning that East might want to come back into the auction later. Not on this hand but suppose North South had bid confidently to 4♥ or 4♠. It might be quite tempting with so much shape to bid on over that (although on this hand there are 2 warning bells not to – one is the heart void and potential ruffing defensive values, the other is the equal vulnerability where, even if their game was making, 5 minor might still go for 500 and be too expensive). But a bid East MIGHT consider with this sort of hand at favourable vulnerability is 4NT. This can't possibly be blackwood by a hand that has pre-empted – so it's typically used to show a hand with a 2nd suit but with disparate length (usually 64 or 74). That allows West to bid clubs with a fit there. A bid of 5♣ on the 2nd round would show at least 55 (in fact probably even more shapely since a 55 hand would surely have started with an unusual 2NT overcall of 1♠ on the 1st round). This 4NT bid can in fact also be made by declarer (who might have opened diamonds and had the bidding come back to him at the 4 major level).

Julian Foster (many times NSW representative)