

"Odd shapes on the Bay"

The Strathfield Congress was played at the Canada Bay Club and was won convincingly by Pauline Gumby - Warren Lazer, Wendy Ashton - Peter Gill. It was a day full of interesting hands and odd shapes: someone must have clicked the "weird distributions" button on the dealing machine! For example, 7-card suits were commonplace, and there were three 7-5 hands during the day. Singletons and voids were everywhere. In round 2 alone, sitting West, I had a hand with a void on 4 of the 9 boards!

Here's one of those hands, which posed a bit of bidding challenge for the field:

Board 11	♠K96				
Dir: S	♥T		<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>
Vul: Nil	♦QJ732				<u>South</u>
	♣J873				Pass
	♠AQJT852	♠7	1♠	P	2♥
	♥976	♥AQJ8542	3♥/4♥	Which one is stronger?	
	♦AKT	♦95	3♠	Does this deny ♥ support?	
	♣	♣AK2	???	How would you continue?	
7	♠43	N:		Your goal is to end up in a	
14 14	♥K3	S:		♥ slam not ♠	
5	♦864	E: 1♣2♦6♥5♠5NT			
	♣QT9654	W: 1♣2♦6♥5♠5NT			

Of the 25 EW pairs, 10 got there.
Would you have done so?



Another distributional hand that generated some excitement was this one:

Board 18	♠KT952				
Dir: E	♥				
Vul: N-S	♦AQ97				
	♣KT87				
	♠		♠AQ8		
	♥AQ6542		♥98		
	♦KJT653		♦842		
	♣4		♣QJ963		
12	♠J7643	N: 2♣4♠2NT			
10 9	♥KJT73	S: 2♣4♠2NT			
9	♦	E: 1♦1♥			
	♣A52	W: 1♦1♥			

Only 5 NS pairs played in the making 4♠, while there were 9 doubled contracts of 5♥ or 5♦, which ought to have proved profitable for NS but mostly didn't yield as much as Deep Finesse suggests, presumably because of a club discard on a spade lead. Aggressive EW bidding persuaded 6 pairs to over-reach to failing contracts of 5♠ or even 6♠, while 2 pairs somehow managed to stay out of game altogether.



There are times when a **lead-directing** double can work out well, either by scaring the opponents out of their best contract, or by getting partner off to a good lead. In principle, a lead-directing double against a potential notrump contract should promise 5+ cards in the suit and a couple of high honours, but a bit of random mischief in the form of a double lacking either of those worked well on this hand:

Board 4	♠AKT7		
Dir: W	♥KT73		
Vul: All	♦AK		
	♣QJ9		
	♠J65	+	♠94
	♥Q9		♥AJ542
	♦QJ87		♦9642
	♣AT72		♣83
20	♠Q832	N: 3 ♣1 ♥4 ♠3NT	
10	♥86	S: 3 ♣1 ♥4 ♠3NT	
5	♦T53	E: 1 ♦	
5	♣K654	W: 1 ♦	

After P-2♦ (multi)-P-2♥ (correctable)-P-2NT (21-22) -P-3♣ (puppet Stayman) it seemed clear that NS had all the heavy artillery and quite possible that they would very shortly arrive in 3NT. Figuring that it could do no real harm, I made a lead-directing double of the 3♣ bid. The auction continued 3♦ (showing a 4-card major)-3♥ (showing spades)-4S. So much for defending 3NT! However, partner duly led a club and I returned the Q♥. This was covered and after partner took her 2 tricks, she returned a third heart. In theory the contract can still be saved by ruffing with the queen and finessing the 10♠, but who was going to do that? Three pairs went down in 4♠, while 12 made 4♠ and another 6 bid and made 3NT.



If that encourages you to try a few random lead-directing doubles yourself, think again! Warren Lazer told me the story of this hand, which features yet another void:

Board 5	♠AJ72		
Dir: N	♥AK75		
Vul: N-S	♦K6		
	♣942		
	♠KT95		♠83
	♥932		♥QJT864
	♦32		♦Q98
	♣AK83		♣Q7
15	♠Q64	N: 3 ♣3 ♦2 ♠4NT	
10	♥	S: 3 ♣3 ♦2 ♠4NT	
7	♦AJT754	E: 1 ♥	
8	♣JT65	W: 1 ♥	

Contrary to popular belief, even the most experienced partnerships have bidding stuff-ups. At Warren's table the auction went 1NT-2♣ (asking for a 5-card major)-2♦ -3♣ (Baron, looking for a minor suit fit) and West made a lead-directing double. Pauline Gumby passed to deny a club stopper, but Warren believed this showed

interest in playing 3♣x, so he also passed, quite happily. He was much less happy when he saw dummy ...

West led ♦3 to the 6, Q and A. Declarer played ♣5 to the 3, 9 and Q. East returned a diamond to dummy's king. Declarer played another club from dummy to the 7, 10 and K, and West exited a heart.

As Warren explained: "Now there's a problem ... the only way back to hand is to ruff a heart. If you then try to run the diamonds, West will ruff, draw your last trump and exit with a heart. There's a rather bizarre solution – use your trumps to ruff hearts and remove West's exit cards, so you can endplay him in spades."

Following that line, Warren played ♥A,K throwing winning diamonds as he couldn't afford to unguard ♠Q, then ruffed a heart, successfully finessed ♠J and ruffed dummy's last heart. West could over-ruff if he wished, but would then be endplayed as long as he had no more than 4 hearts. And so all the defence won was 4 trump tricks, while North-South achieved the unique score of +670.

Moral #1 – the lead-directing double is a dangerous weapon.

Moral #2 – watch out for those deadly declarers!

Moral #3 – no matter how horrible the contract appears, don't ever give up.



Finally, here's one of those rare hands on which it was possible to play as if all 52 cards were visible. As West, I opened an optimistic 2♥, showing 6-9 hcp, 5 hearts and ostensibly another 5-card suit (well, I was supposed to have 5 cards because I was vulnerable). North overcalled 2♠, partner raised to 3♥ and South bid 4♦. Now partner inferred that there must be an excellent club fit and happily bid 4♥. North led ♦6 and I was looking at:

♠JT5	♠AK98
♥AQJ97	♥543
♦T982	♦A7
♣8	♣QJ93

What seemed quite clear was that South must hold all 6 missing diamonds, while North must hold at least 5 of the 6 missing spades and surely had the queen. This meant things might yet work out if the heart finesse was on and the king then came down, because that would yield 5 heart tricks, 4 spade tricks and a diamond. So at trick 2, I took the heart finesse, but it lost. North cashed the club ace, got a discouraging signal from partner, and switched to a low spade, which was allowed to run around to the jack, South following. What next?

Well, any outside suit was going to get ruffed for sure, so it was time to draw trumps. And the hand was now completely cold:

Board 16	♠Q7642																									
Dlr: W	♥KT8																									
Vul: E-W	♦6																									
	♣AK76																									
<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; padding-right: 10px;">♠JT5</td> <td style="width: 33%;"></td> <td style="width: 33%; padding-left: 10px;">♠AK98</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♥AQJ97</td> <td style="text-align: center;">—————</td> <td>♥543</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♦T982</td> <td></td> <td>♦A7</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♣8</td> <td></td> <td>♣QJ93</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">12</td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">♠3</td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">N: 1 ♣2♦</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">8 14</td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">♥62</td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">S: 2♦</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">6</td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">♦KQJ543</td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">E: 4♥3♠4NT</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">♣T542</td> <td style="padding-top: 10px;">W: 4♥3♠4NT</td> </tr> </table>			♠JT5		♠AK98	♥AQJ97	—————	♥543	♦T982		♦A7	♣8		♣QJ93	12	♠3	N: 1 ♣2♦	8 14	♥62	S: 2♦	6	♦KQJ543	E: 4♥3♠4NT		♣T542	W: 4♥3♠4NT
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On crossing to the spade 9, declarer can play the Q♣, pitching a diamond and establishing the ♣J. North cannot lead another diamond, so two more diamonds are later pitched on dummy's winners. Declarer loses just a heart and two clubs. The same outcome is achieved if North does not cash a top club but instead leads a spade immediately, although it is now necessary for West to lead a club up, playing North for both honours, which appears likely given the overcall on a feeble suit. Most of the results on this hand were part scores, in both directions, while 4 pairs bid and made 4♥.