

ChRONicles of Cardplay

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Play team games for fun and profit

Welcome to my new column. I'm delighted to contribute to TableTALK. I plan to take a different approach to this endeavor and **not** write about bidding conventions. While conventions are fun, they really don't improve your game that much. The story I tell is about the "Scientists versus Naturalists" match held in London in January 1992. The American "Scientific" team of Eric Rodwell, Jeff Meckstroth, Bobby Wolff and Bob Hamman won over the International "Naturalist" team of Gabriel Chagas, Marcelo Branco, Tony Forrester and Andy Robson. The Naturalists could use Blackwood and that's ALL. No Stayman. No Transfers. Nothing else. It was a long match and surprisingly, the margin of victory was quite thin. The Scientists won, but it turned out that systems and conventions had very little to do with the victory. Dummy play, defense, and solid partnership understandings made the difference.

In this and future columns, I'll avoid discussing bidding conventions for the most part and instead focus on other aspects of the game. Hopefully this approach will improve your results and increase your enjoyment and satisfaction at the table!

Why should I care about Team Games?

The ACBL masterpoint award scale is skewed dramatically towards team games as opposed to pairs. If it's masterpoints you're after, you should play in as many team games as possible. Most regionals now offer team games every day. This article will give you some pointers on how they work and how to win. Hopefully this information will familiarize you with team game mechanics, scoring and strategy and entice you to try a team game at your next sectional or regional.

How do Team Games work?

Team Games are scored using *IMPs (International Match Points)*. If you're a typical duplicate player, most or all of the time you play in events called *Matchpoint Pairs*. In Matchpoint Pairs, you have a partner and you either sit stationary North/South or move East/West. When playing in a team game, four people play on your team as opposed to just two when you're playing matchpoint pairs.

The two most common team events are *Swiss Teams* and *Bracketed Knockouts (KOs)*.

In a Swiss you play a short match (5-9 boards, most commonly 6 or 7) against another team. You win, lose or tie (more about that later) then get a new *assignment*. If you lose your first match, you usually play against another losing team. If you win your first match, you usually play against another winning team. As the day progresses, in each new match you play against other teams with similar records. You never play the same team twice. Teams move up and down in the standings and the team with the best record at the end wins.

In a knockout, you play one long *head-to-head* (24-board) match against one team, or simultaneous 12-board matches against two teams in a *three-way* match. If you win your head-to-head match, you *advance*, and if you lose, you're *knocked out* of the event. In a three-way match, two teams advance and one gets knocked out. Occasionally you'll play one of your three-way teams again later in the same KO.

The Mechanics of a Swiss Team game

First, you get together a team of at least two pairs (5 or 6 people are allowed too – only four play at any one time). The best teams have *established partnerships* on the team. If you go to the partnership desk to look for teammates, one of the questions you should ask is "how long have you two played together?" A Swiss is a half-day or a full-day event. If half a day, you'll play 4 other teams. If a full day, you'll play 7 or 8 other teams with a break somewhere in the middle. It'll likely be a *stratified* event and throughout the day, you'll be matched against teams with both more and fewer masterpoints than your team. You get masterpoints for each round you win. There'll be 1-7 overall winners at the end in each stratum based on the number of teams in the event. If your

masterpoints for placing overall are greater than the total masterpoints you've won in the rounds, you'll only receive the overall masterpoints.

Once you've got your team assembled, you need to buy an **entry**. Take the entry back to your team and fill it out with the names of all the people on your team. The first name on the entry is the **team captain**. In the upper right-hand corner of your entry is your **team number**. Memorize it. Make sure every team member knows it. You'll need it all day. When the game gets underway, there'll be an **assignment board** hanging on the wall near the scoring table. The assignment board will be cloth and has little pockets. One pocket will be labeled with your team number. There'll be a piece of paper in the pocket identifying your **home table**. Your home table will be a section letter and table number and will change throughout the day. If you're handicapped you may request a stationary home table so you don't have to move. Once you find your home table on the assignment board, you and your team should go to your home table. Your North-South pair plays at this table. The directors will announce the **crossover** sections. Something like, A goes to B, C goes to D, etc. For example, if your home table is A10, your East-West pair should crossover to table B10 and play the North-South pair sitting there. If there are an odd number of teams, the directors will set up a three-way. You play two teams simultaneously, but you compare only after all the other teams have played two rounds. When playing in a three-way, it's very important to follow the director's instructions exactly. To start the **round**, split the number of boards in play evenly between the two tables, and **make the boards** (shuffle and deal). This is done at the **start** of each round, but NEVER IN THE MIDDLE! When you finish playing all the boards on your table, call a **caddy** to take your boards to the other table and bring back the boards that the other table has played. You'll have about 40-60 minutes to finish all the boards – more or less based on the number being played each round. You must play quickly enough to finish all the boards from both tables in the allotted time. North is responsible for watching the clock and keeping the round on time. If the director announces: "Do not start another board," and you have more boards to play, you cannot play them and they'll be scored as a tie even if one table has played them and the other has not. When the match is over, the East-West pairs return to their home table and compare their results with their North-South partners. Your team plays all day and cannot be eliminated. You cannot drop out in the middle just because you're losing (without a specific OK from the directors).

Scoring a Swiss Team match

To win, you must understand how team games are scored because the strategy changes between matchpoints and IMPs. At matchpoints, your score is based on **HOW MANY** pairs you beat. At teams, it's **HOW MUCH** you beat them by. This is an **important distinction**. You compare your team's N/S result to your E/W's result on each hand. Your net result will be positive, negative or identical (a **push**). Say both teams bid 4 hearts vulnerable. At one table, the contract made on the nose for a +620. At the other table, they made an overtrick for a +650. The difference is 30 points that translates into 1 IMP on the International Matchpoint Scale on your score sheet. If your team is positive, the IMPs go into your column. If your team is negative, the IMPs go into the opponent's column. A push is scored as zero for both teams. Add up the IMP columns for each team. The higher IMP total wins. The team captain of the winning team goes to the other team's table and confirms the result. Any discrepancies must be worked out at this point. The winning team captain then fills out a **pickup slip** (there should be some on every table) and turns in the IMP differential to the directors at the scoring table. Based on the size of your win (loss) the IMP differential is converted into **Victory Points**. You need to know which **scale** is being used. There are two possibilities, the **20-point scale** (most common) and the **30-point scale**. You look at the appropriate table on your convention card to determine how the Victory Points are split with your opponents. If you win all the victory points, you've **blitzed** the other team. The total Victory Points for all your matches determines your standing in the event. There'll be a chart on the wall that shows each team's total victory points after each round. You wait for each round to be completed and scored and then look for your new assignment to be **posted**. When your new home table assignment is placed into your team number pocket, your N/S pair goes to that table, and your E/W pair goes to the crossover table. You make the boards and play the new match.

The Mechanics of a Bracketed Knockout event

Again you start by forming a 4-6 person team. You'll need to determine each person's current masterpoint total, and then add up the total masterpoints for the entire team. Before you buy an entry, you'll receive a form to fill out with your team's total masterpoints and the number of players on the team. You turn in that form, pay your

money, and receive an entry with a team number and your total masterpoints on it. You fill in the names of the team members and their player numbers. The first name on the form is the team captain, and the subsequent rounds of the KO are all assigned by the team captain's name. Based on the number of teams that have entered and each team's total masterpoints (an average is taken when there are more than four players on a team), the directors split up the field into equitable chunks (brackets), none larger than 16 teams. Your **bracket** will contain 9-16 teams with approximately the same total masterpoints as your team. The higher your bracket, the tougher the competition, BUT the more masterpoints you'll receive if you do well. Once the brackets are formed, the director will post the home table for your team number, the same as done in a Swiss. A regular bracketed KO is a **4-session, 2-day** event and is **single-elimination**. You typically play 24 boards against a single team in a head-to-head match, but three-way matches are common as well. In a head-to-head match, you play a 12-board **half**, then compare, shuffle and deal, and play a second 12-board half. At the end of the 24 boards, the team with the higher IMP total advances, and the losing team is knocked out. In a three-way match, you play six boards against one team and six boards against the other team, and then compare. As in the head-to-head match, you then reshuffle the boards and play two more rounds of six boards each against the other two teams, and report the name of the winning teams' captains to the director. There are also **compact knockouts** that compress the 4 sessions into one day by playing only 12 boards (two 6-board halves) against the other team instead of 24 boards. You must beat all four teams you play to win the event. However, once you get past the first round, you're guaranteed to win some masterpoints. If you finish first, you'll usually win at least some gold points. In KOs, the scoring is only by IMPs, not Victory Points.

Team game strategy

Since IMP scoring is based on score differential, it's imperative that your team bid all your games and slams. The IMP differential for not bidding a vulnerable game is 10 IMPs to the other team (170 versus 620). For not bidding a non-vulnerable game, it's 6 IMPs **away** (170 versus 420). It's especially important to bid your vulnerable games. In fact, you should bid a vulnerable game if you think there's only a 37% chance you'll make it! Non-vulnerable games should be bid on a 50% or better chance. Slams should be more than 50%. Only bid a Grand Slam if you can count 13 tricks! Your prime objective is to bring back positive scores. I've never lost a match where I've brought back ALL positive scores. Therefore, on defense, your #1 objective is to BEAT THE CONTRACT. You're not interested in beating it 2 or 3 tricks (unless they've sacrificed against your game and you've doubled). You want to bring back a positive result, not go to bed with your ace. Cash the setting trick if you have it. If you give up an overtrick on defense trying to beat the contract, it doesn't matter. A no-no at teams is **doubling the opponents into game**. That is, you DO NOT make close doubles of part scores that will equate to game if the part score makes. For example, 2 spades doubled now becomes 4 spades if it makes (110 versus 470 or 670). If the opponents make it and your partners make 2 spades undoubled at the other table, you'll lose 8 IMPs non-vulnerable and 11 IMPs vulnerable.

Key points to remember when playing in a Swiss or Knockout team game

- ◆ Bring back positive scores.
- ◆ Double rather than bidding 5 over 5 – bring back the sure plus score.
- ◆ Always play to make your contract – unlike matchpoint pairs, overtricks are irrelevant.
- ◆ Do your best to beat their contracts – extra under tricks for you and extra overtricks for them seldom matter.
- ◆ Bid your close games and slams, particularly vulnerable – part score hands often aren't that important.
- ◆ **NEVER** double them into game! When you double, have a trump stack against them.
- ◆ **NEVER** go for a **telephone number** (minus 800) or a **zip code** (minus 1100 or 1400). A really bad result like that can put a match out of reach and will discourage your teammates.