

ChRONicles of Cardplay

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What's Your Objective at Matchpoint Pairs?

In the last column, I discussed team game mechanics and strategies. This time, I'm going to talk about *matchpoint pairs*.

Many newer players don't really understand how matchpoint pair scoring works. In order to win, you **MUST** understand the scoring! In matchpoint pairs, each hand is scored individually. Let's say you're playing in a 13-table section with two boards per round. Each board is played 13 times. Your result on the board is compared with the other 12 times the board was played. You get 1 matchpoint for each pair you beat, ½ matchpoint for each pair you tie, and zero matchpoints for each pair that beats you. A 12 on a board is a *top*. A zero is a *bottom*. A 6 is an *average*. It's important to realize that **EVERY HAND COUNTS THE SAME**. Bidding and making 1♣ may get you a top, whereas bidding and making a slam in the wrong strain may earn you a near bottom. Your **REAL** opponents are **NOT** the ones you're playing against. Your real opponents are all the other pairs sitting in your direction. To win at matchpoints, you want lots of averages and a few above averages and tops. Your above averages may either be *gifts* from the opponents or something great you and your partner accomplish via the bidding, play or defense.

Your fundamental objective is to score equal or higher than all other pairs in your section playing in your direction. Positive scores are good. Overtricks are essential. Interestingly, -50 or -100 scores are often excellent if the opponents are making a partscore.

Unlike teams where games and slams are all important, the battleground at pairs is partscores. Of course, it's still important to bid your games and slams, but a pair game is often won or lost at the partscore level. It's often a fierce bidding war until it gets to the 3-level and touch and go whether the contract can be made. Another vast difference between teams and pairs is overtricks. At teams, overtricks are usually irrelevant. However at pairs, an overtrick may mean the difference between an average board, a top board or a bottom board. Here are some hints and guidelines to help you when you play pairs.

Bidding:

- Bid your makeable games and slams, but avoid thin games. It's often better to stop at 2NT and make 3, then to push on to 3NT and go set one trick. **BUT**, you must bid game when your side has 26+ combined high card points. Everyone else will, so you should too. If the game goes set, you'll likely get a near average since other pairs will have the same result and you'll have *field protection*.
 - Use conventions sparingly and wisely – **KNOW YOUR CARD!** Avoid self-inflicted zeros due to bidding misunderstandings.
 - Be disciplined in your bidding so partner can count on what you have – deviate only occasionally and only when it doesn't affect your partner. Know what you're promising and know what partner promises with their bids.
 - Support with support. Don't give the opponents a roadmap to the defense by unnecessarily bidding new suits. Once you've identified a major suit fit, just play it there.
 - Bid one more on big fits and double fits. It's better to declare these kinds of hands rather than defend.
 - Stop bidding early on misfits before the doubling begins. Don't "rescue" partner after they've rebid a suit showing extra length. Be quick to pass with a singleton or void if partner rebids his suit.
- Fight for the part-score
 - Push them to the 3-level whenever possible – do not let them play at the 2-level if your side has half the HCP and you have a reasonable bid. If they have a fit, you have a fit.
 - You must use aggressive balancing doubles and overcalls to disrupt their bidding and force them to a higher level or into uncharted bidding territory. Even if you get doubled, it's only one board. You can still win a pair event with one or two zero boards.
- Bid your odds-on games and slams – avoid thin (24 HCP) 3NT games. Avoid slams with less than 33 HCP.
- Positive scores are good

- Don't overbid against good opponents. However, be willing to take a 1-trick sacrifice by bidding 3 over 2 non-vulnerable.
- Don't bid 3 over 3 without a reason (it's usually right to do so when your side has a 9-card fit).
- Don't bid 5 over 5 – it's usually best to double and take the sure penalty plus score.
- Interfere in their auctions aggressively to entice the opponents into a bad contract
 - Frequent aggressive pre-empts
 - Frequent aggressive overcalls
 - Frequent aggressive balancing doubles
- Play for the smallest negative score when you sacrifice or get bad breaks
 - When you sacrifice, play carefully and hold your minus score to a minimum
 - When you get bad breaks, do not panic – others will be in the same boat. Salvage all you can from the hand.
 - Bid 3 over 2 as a sacrifice (be willing to trade a -110 for a minus -50 or minus -100)
- Double more frequently
 - Double some close contracts if the opponents are vulnerable to try for the magic +200 score which is often a near top.
 - Double when they sacrifice. If they don't make an occasional doubled contract against you, you're not doubling enough.
 - Double when they get to the 3-level if you don't think they have a 9-card fit or if the cards are lying poorly for them.

Defense:

- Unlike teams where your objective is always to simply beat the contract, at pairs, your goal for the hand is often unknown at trick one. Should you try to beat their contract? Prevent overtricks? Allow only one or two overtricks?
- If the bidding was confident, often a passive lead that gives nothing away is best. If the bidding was tentative or you suspect there's a long runnable suit, you need to make an aggressive lead to make sure you get all your tricks before they get away
- Regardless, your fundamental objective is to take as many tricks as possible. One mistake I have seen newer players make is aggressively switching suits during the hand and presenting declarer with overtricks they could not get on their own.
- Once you see dummy, your goal often becomes clearer. As the hand progresses, keep adjusting your expectations as to how many tricks your side can take as defenders.
- Learn when to cash out. Not cashing out at the appropriate time gives up expensive overtricks. Hint: when you can see that declarer has pulled trump and established a side suit for discards, it's time to cash your winners before they disappear.
- In general, lead and defend aggressively against slams and games, and more passively against part scores.
- Avoid non-standard leads without a good reason. A non-standard lead might beat a contract for a top, or might give up an unexpected overtrick for a bottom. Play with the field and settle for average.
- Avoid long-shot betting that partner has specific cards. They rarely do, and when they don't, you may be giving up one of those costly overtricks.

Declarer

- Evaluate your contract
 - If GOOD, play safe to make it. Your bidding has already gotten you an above average result.
 - If POOR, pull out all stops to make overtricks. If you're in 3NT and should be in 4 spades like the rest of the field, making only 3NT will get you a filthy result. You must play to make 4NT even if it risks the contract. When the field is in a major suit game making, the difference between making only 3NT and going down one is probably not much. Whereas making 4NT will likely get you a top.
- Overtricks, overtricks, overtricks. At pairs you must be VERY greedy. You should always be thinking, "How can I get one or more overtricks?" Do not relax just because you're making your contract.
- Read up on solid declarer play and percentages. Avoid dumb mistakes that cause you to go set.
- Never give up. Many pairs will be in the same contract as you. Even if you go set, if you can play the hand one trick better than the other people, you'll often get an above average result.

Final word

Each hand at pairs is about 4% of your overall score. To keep track as you go along, in the convention card estimated column, put down a 4 for an estimated top, a 0 for an estimated bottom, a 2 for an estimated average. You can also put down a 1½ for an estimated below average or a 2½ for an above average, etc. At the end of the game, add up your estimates to get an estimated percentage of your game. Compare your individual hand estimates to the true scores at the end. This is a good exercise to learn the scoring and familiarize yourself with what kind of hands generate good results and which ones yield poor results.

For those of you who wish to learn more about how to succeed at pairs, get a copy of Kit Woolsey's "Matchpoints" (ISBN 0-910791-00-7). This is NOT a beginner book, but contains loads of helpful information and tips.