

Scoring and Tactics (a simplified introduction)

When we first learn to play, we tend to focus on making our contracts. Successfully making what we bid is a “win” and failing to do so is a “loss”. Whilst it is always better to make our contract than to go down, the nuances of the scoring system reward us for pushing on to game aggressively – to the point where we will not always be able to make every contract we bid. For simplicity, in the discussion that follows, we will assume both sides are not vulnerable.

Warning: If you show this to an experienced bridge player, they will likely point out that nearly everything that follows is wrong! There are many ways to score bridge events (matchpoints, imps and a variety of variations) and the details below are not-quite-right. Nonetheless, this simplified presentation will illustrate sound principles. (Ask me if you want the gory details!)

The Value of Making Game

When we successfully bid and make a game contract (3NT, 4H, 4S, 5C or 5D) we will score anywhere from 400 to 420. In contrast, if we bid one less (2NT, 3H, 3S, 4C or 4D) and still make game we will score around 150-170. The value of “getting it right” in the bidding and pushing on to game is worth a boost of 250 to our score.

In contrast, when we push on to game and go down by one, in other words where we would be better off *not* bidding game we will lose 50 as opposed to scoring 120-140. The cost to us of “getting it wrong” in the bidding is around 180.

That arithmetic suggests that we should not be too concerned with going off in these marginal game contracts. Even if we only make 50% of these line-ball games, we will win considerably more in the long run than we will lose.

The way to win bridge is to bid game and make it as often as possible. If there is a game you feel might plausibly go either way.... bid game.

The Value of Competing in a Partscore

A similar consideration presents itself when we find ourselves in a low level competitive auction. If they are bidding one suit and we are bidding the other, there will be times when we should push on beyond where we are completely comfortable *even if we end up going down by one*.

If our opponents are likely to play at the two level and we have a decent fit and around half the points, it may well be worth bidding on to the three level. If we go down they will gain 50. If we leave them to their two level contract they may well earn 110. Even if we go down by two they will only get 100 and we are still better off to have bid.

Be careful! The above is only true if we go one or two off. If we go down by three, the opponents will score 150 and that is better than the score they could achieve by their own devices. Competing for these partscore contracts is important, but it doesn't mean you should just keep bidding until you win! Sometimes the price of outbidding the opponents is just too steep to pay and you will be better off leaving them to play the hand.

Judging When to Press On

Learning what constitutes a good hand is a matter of experience, judgement and style. It will come over time and is difficult to encapsulate in a few simple rules. Nonetheless, when deciding whether to bid a thin game, or whether to compete over the opponents' partscore, there are a few features of your hand you should consider:

- Points in your short suits are bad, points in your long suits are good.
- Points in the opponents' suits are bad, points in you or your partner's suits are good.
- Shortages in your partner's suits are bad (misfits), shortages in your opponents' suits are good.
- Big fits are good (if you have extra trumps, it may be worth an extra bid)
- Pointy cards (Aces and Kings) are good in play. Round cards (Queens and Jacks) are good in defence.
- “The three level belongs to the opponents” – bidding at the two level in a fit is rarely wrong. The three level is *often* wrong!
- If the opponents have pre-empted, consider bidding on. You can't let yourself be pushed around!