

Bridge Tips to Make the Most of.....

(1) The Bidding

Make it as simple as possible. Don't play a complicated system that puts too much strain on you or your partner.

Understand what's *forcing* and what's not. In general, a new suit by unpassed hands is forcing, but once an "old" suit (ie one that has been bid before) has been mentioned, (and the points have been limited) it's no longer forcing. Eg 1C p 1H p 1S (all forcing – new suits - still looking for a fit), but 1C p 1H p 2H (not forcing, "old" suit). Still if either player has more than a minimum, they are welcome to continue. Once the strength of either hand has been limited, the auction is no longer forcing. Most notrump bids define the points within a narrow range. Eg 1C p 1H p 2NT (18 – 20, balanced, no heart fit).

Deciding whether to bid to *game* or not is the nitty gritty of bidding, and having information about how the hands fit rather than simply assessing high card points will produce more successful game contracts. This means using game tries, and splinter bids to evaluate WHERE the "good stuff" is, rather than WHAT it is. Knowing that your shortages are matching partner's small cards rather than having the high cards wasted is good. (eg a singleton opposite KJ10x is bad, you'd prefer the singleton to be opposite Axxx, and to hold something like Qxx opposite KJ10x)

Good judgement is developed slowly by being brave enough not to venture too far on hands with poor features, eg 4333 shape, aceless hands, too many Q's and J's, not enough 10's and 9's in your suits, poor long suit holdings, honours squashed in your short suits. Trust this sort of judgement. It works.

Don't bid slim slams just because you're feeling a bit wild, as the field is not usually in them. They will play safely (or boringly, as you may feel) in game. Failing in one of these will give you a terrible result – all your other good work wiped out on one lousy board!

Bid *more* with a fit, and bid *less* without a fit. Be prepared to defend, without a fit. In competitive situations the shape of your hand and partner's are vital – holding almost no cards in the opponents' suits is the green light. The bigger the fit, the more you should bid.

(2) The Play

As declarer, we are sometimes taught to draw trumps too early. Roughly 40% of the time, you need to do something else with the trump suit (usually dummy's) *before* you draw them. The trump suit is very useful as an entry to cross to and fro between hands. The *plan* is everything, and needs to be made on *every* hand right after the lead has been made. In no trumps, count winners, but in suits, count both winners and losers.

Check how many tricks you need to develop, and then decide which techniques you will use. Sometimes working out which technique to use first is the problem, but having a basic knowledge of the *odds* will save you here. You don't need to remember all the percentages, just the ones relating to 6,7,8,9 card holdings. (With an even number of cards against you, they will divide oddly more than evenly, and vice versa). Check it out.

Don't panic as declarer – that's the worst thing you can do, because you need to remember the lead and to visualise what that hand held. You also need to (try to) keep a **count** on important suits. You won't be able to count out every suit, just the crucial ones.

(3) The Defence

The **opening lead** requires that you to do two things – decide which suit to lead, and next which card of that suit. Don't lead the suits that the other side has bid, it usually doesn't work out. Follow the book re leading regulations, ie top of a sequence of 3 touching, or near touching in no trumps, or top of two touching in a suit contract, low card from an honour, top of a doubleton etc. The defenders are using the same techniques for developing tricks as declarer is, ie **promotion, length, finesse, cross-trumping, and discarding losers on winners**. The difference is they can't see each other's cards, so it's harder.

The crucial cards are the first one, and the first discard, so work out your favourite signalling method, and stick to it. Your role is to make the cards you play mean something to partner. Also, **don't give up** until the last card is played. Strange things can happen at the end of a hand.

Defenders should avoid:

- Snapping their cards on the table
- Grimacing or turning their head when partner leads a card
- Leading to the next trick before the previous trick is completed
- Detaching a card from their hand before it's their turn to play
- Making gratuitous remarks
- Prolonging hands unnecessarily

(4) Winning at Pairs (Matchpoints)

You receive a "top" (score) if your result was better than any other pairs', in the same direction. It's not the actual score that counts, but the number of pairs you beat. The size of the top depends on the number of tables in the field, eg with nine NS tables, you and your partner could have beaten eight other NS pairs, so a "top" will be 8, and a corresponding "bottom" 0. You receive one point for each pair you beat and half for pairs with whom you tie. So, in pairs, you need to go for any extra trick that comes your way.

It's a common error to think that if you didn't play the hand or made a contract it won't affect your side. These scores **do count**, and if your opponent makes more tricks than anyone else, they will receive a **top** and you, a **bottom**. Each pairs' scores are then totalled, and expressed as a **percentage** of the total matchpoints available. It would be impossible to score 100%, because on some hands every pair plays in game and scores the same result (so no-one has a "top" or "bottom"). Any percentage above 55% is considered good, with scores in the 60's excellent, and 70's rare!

(5) Winning at Teams (IMP's)

A different story altogether to pairs. Here you are usually trying to beat just one team at a time, rather than a large number of other bridge players (as in Pairs). Make your contracts safely, bid vulnerable games with great urgency, take everything that is yours without trying to steal what belongs to the opponents. Playing a steady game and making fewer mistakes than the opponents should see you winning at teams.

(6) *The Rules (Bridge Etiquette)*

There is a formal *code of conduct* in a serious game or tournament, and this may at first surprise newer players. A common problem is to do with the tone and speed of your bidding. It's supposed to be consistent, so that you give partner information based only on the bids you make, *not* the way you make them.

You might think that bidding in tempo all the time is hard, since some hands are more difficult than others. True, it's not easy, but the longer it takes for you to decide what to do, the clearer it becomes to everyone at the table, especially your partner, that you must have some strength or you wouldn't have a problem.

Suppose you think, and then eventually pass, unfortunately your hesitation (innocent or otherwise) has conveyed information to your partner. Your opponents have been put at a disadvantage. Your *slow* pass sent the message "I have a problem partner", even though you may not have meant it as such. If the director is called, your partner won't be allowed to bid supposedly based on your hesitation. They *may* well have been planning to bid *anyhow*, but now they probably won't be able to.

In general: Bridge should be played competitively, with a sense of fair play and friendly rivalry, and with an awareness of the rules. These simple guidelines should be kept in mind (thanks to Paul Marston at Grand Slam for these):

- Count your cards before you look at them
- Agree on the number of tricks before packing up your cards at the end of a hand
- Don't make any comments about the bidding or play until the end of the hand, and generally the less said at the bridge table the better
- Don't take too much time. There is a certain amount allowed per hand, and it's not fair to constantly be slow.
- Don't discuss a hand played earlier. Your opponents may not have played the hand, and you may be giving them an insight into what they should do.
- It's best not to comment on your successes, which are also the opponents' failures. Saying things like: "Oh that's a top partner" is very bad manners.
- Don't convey information to your partner by gestures, hesitations or mannerisms. It's unethical to do this
- You may draw inferences from the opponents' hesitations (at your own risk), but it is not accepted to draw inference from your partner's hesitation or manner
- Don't recriminate over a bad result. Don't harass partner by asking questions that start with "Why?"
- North or South should do the scoring, and East and West must check their score.
- Call the director whenever something goes wrong. It's proper procedure, and they will advise you of relevant rulings. The director is there to keep things equitable.
- You should warn the opponents, by saying "alert" when your partner has made a bid that isn't what it seems in your system. An opponent may, in his turn, ask the meaning of the alerted call. You are bound to give a full explanation

(7) *Your (Beloved) Partner*

To be successful at the bridge table, you have to work with your partner. There's no way to reach the best contracts by yourself, or to defend a hand without help from the other side of the table. Whether partner makes a contract or is defeated, your job is to be supportive. Bridge is a combination of luck, skill, and your relationship with your partner. No matter how much you have of the first two, you won't get far without the third ingredient. Audrey Grant suggests that you "Look at the person sitting opposite you, and think of something you love about the way they play".

(8) *Finally..... YOU*

Another of Audrey Grant's thoughts - Don't criticise anyone at the table, especially yourself, because even a little self-condemnation can quickly get out of hand. First we think that we simply made an unlucky lead, it didn't work out well. Then we consider that it helped declarer make the contract. As we continue to berate ourselves, we reflect that we never seem to make a good lead. In fact, we don't really understand the game at all...perhaps we just don't have the ability to play a good hand of bridge....and so on.

Timothy Gallwey, who wrote "The Inner Game of Tennis", puts it like this:

"First the mind judges the event, then groups events, then identifies with the combined event, and finally, judges itself. As a result, what happens is that these self-judgements become self-fulfilling prophecies"

As bridge players, we can often predict events that will put us in a state of nervousness. This commonly occurs, for example, when we agree to play a convention.....and hope that it doesn't come up! This foreboding can cause us to experience lapses in concentration during the auction and play where we had previously felt comfortable. We should take a non-judgemental approach at the bridge table, both of our partner and ourselves!



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Good luck at the Gold Coast 2012

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