

Teams strategies for novices

Overview

Many experienced bridge players regard teams as the purest form of the game.

These notes are intended to help newer players enjoy the teams form of bridge. The notes are full of opinions, all of them contestable: but if you have the debate with your partner, you'll already be half way along the path to taking great pleasure from playing teams.

These notes also apply to some extent to Butler and Swiss scoring.

What is a team?

We usually play with a four person team for two sets of 7-14 boards where your pairs sit East West at one table and North South at the other table: but there are different formats.

The two teams are competing and playing the same cards: you only care about your performance in comparison to the other team at your two tables. Whatever happens in the rest of the room is irrelevant.

Scoring

As in duplicate, you aim to make the most of your cards through good bidding and play.

Either half way through the match or at the end of the match we compare the difference in scores on the boards against a scale of IMPS (international match points).

If you bid and make 2S at your table your score is the usual +110 points (50 + 2 x 30): if your team at the other table pushed your opponents to 3S non-vulnerable one off, or -50, the difference in the scores is +110 - 50 or net +60 in our favour. Looking at the table we see +60 wins +2 IMPS.

A close match is usually won by a handful of IMPS. Accuracy and consistency are important. Think about potential swings BEFORE you bid!

Scoring example

What happens if the opponents bid and make 4S at their table where you bid 3S making 4S? Non-vulnerable the differential is -420 + 170 = -250, a loss of -6 IMPS. Vulnerable the difference is -620 and +170 or -450, a big loss of -10 IMPS. Vulnerability is important.

Victory points

We compare at the end of the match the difference in IMPS between the two teams, and then apply these to a second scale for VP (victory points). VP's help smooth results for the number of boards played, reduce the impact of huge wins and reward close battles. A perfect draw scores 10.0-10.0, a tiny win might be 10.3-9.7 etc.. A big win is 17-3 or more.

Bidding slender vulnerable games

A difference between duplicate and IMPS scoring is that you must consistently bid non-vulnerable games every time they look 40% or more likely to succeed. If you have three chances like this in a match and make one of the three opportunities, you will likely win. But assess your opponents carefully before the match to determine whether they are experienced teams players. If they are, you should be safe with this approach: if they are not, don't do it!

Bidding multiple slim vulnerable games in duplicate scoring is unwise.

Scenario A, overleaf, is a disaster: you bid three slim vulnerable games and fail, while your opponents are more sensible (or conservative) and come away with a huge 18 IMP swing: this is to be avoided. Nobody will want to play with you again. Be careful when your opponents may have chosen not to bid and they recognise you are set for a part score but want to encourage you to overbid. You need the right distribution for your bid and any bids from your ops help you in deciding how to play the hand. Not competing in teams on part score hands can be an excellent strategy. You may be able to make 5-6 tricks on defence but struggle to make 7-8 tricks if you win the auction.

Point difference		IMPs
from	to	
0	10	0
20	40	1
50	80	2
90	120	3
130	160	4
170	210	5
220	260	6
270	310	7
320	360	8
370	420	9
430	490	10
500	590	11
600	740	12
750	890	13
900	1090	14
1100	1290	15
1300	1490	16
1500	1740	17
1750	1990	18
2000	2240	19
2250	2490	20
2500	2990	21
3000	3490	22
3500	3990	23
4000+		24

US	Vul		THEM	Vul		Scenario A			Net
Bid	Result	Your score	Bid	Result	Their score	Difference	Our IMPS	Their IMPS	
4H	-1	-100	3H	3H	140	-240		-6	
5D	-1	-100	4D	4D	130	-230		-6	
3NT	-1	-100	2NT	2NT	120	-220		-6	
						Total	0	-18	-18

Scenario B goes to plan, where you make one of the three slim games but your opponents remain conservative and there is a small 2 IMP swing against you. Don't worry, at least you tried and only lost 2 IMPS.

US	Vul		THEM	Vul		Scenario B			Net
Bid	Result	Your score	Bid	Result	Their score	Difference	Our IMPS	Their IMPS	
4H	-1	-100	3H	3H	140	-240		-6	
5D	5D	600	4D	5D	150	450	10		
3NT	-1	-100	2NT	2NT	120	-220		-6	
						Total	10	-12	-2

In Scenario C both sides have the same strategy and make the same bids and nobody gains or loses materially.

US	Vul		THEM	Vul		Scenario C			Net
Bid	Result	Your score	Bid	Result	Their score	Difference	Our IMPS	Their IMPS	
4H	4H	620	4H	5H	620	0			
5D	6D	620	5D	5D	600	20	1		
3NT	3NT	600	3NT	3NT	600	0			
						Total	1	0	+1

Scenario D is more positive: you make two successful bids and ops only one, gaining 4 IMPS: this is a more typical outcome. When making these decisions it is worth considering your ops strategies at the other table: if you think they WILL have bid game and that game looks possible, you have to push yourself to doing the same unless you have a good reasons why not to bid game: you are all facing the same challenges.

US	Vul		THEM	Vul		Scenario D			Net
Bid	Result	Your score	Bid	Result	Their score	Difference	Our IMPS	Their IMPS	
4H	4H	620	4H	4H	620	-			
5D	5D	600	4D	5D	150	450	10		
3NT	-1	-100	2NT	2NT	120	-220		-6	
						Total	10	-6	+4

And scenario E is perfection: everything works and you are heroes: this may never happen!

US	Vul		THEM	Vul		Scenario E			Net
Bid	Result	Your score	Bid	Result	Their score	Difference	Our IMPS	Their IMPS	
4H	4H	620	3H	5H	200	420	9		
5D	5D	600	4D	5D	150	450	10		
3NT	3NT	600	2NT	3NT	150	450	10		
						Total	29		+29

Non-vulnerable game tries

You need to be nearer 50% certain that they will make because the relative reward for success is lower. And again, you must size up your opponents' tactics before the match starts.

If we assume both teams are playing the aggressive vulnerable strategies, winning will centre on the part-score hands.

In duplicate bridge when defending a 3S contract your primary concern is to stop ops making 4S or 170 rather than 140 points which could give you a bottom result.

This does not apply so strongly in teams: take a look at the IMPS table and the variation between the two outcomes is only 30 points or 1 IMP. What does this mean to your defence? The first thing to consider when leading is *'what would I lead at duplicate, and what might be different in teams?'*

Puzzle through the possible distributions and see if you can spot an angle which might yield a positive result because if you can change -140 to +50, this is worth +90 to you or +3 IMPS rather than swish or 1 IMP to them.

Dropping one trick from 140 to 170 is not worrying if you believe there is a chance of defeating the contract. This is the middle ground in which team matches are won or lost. You can take more risky approaches: you can break some of the normal rules, but only if you can see a possibility of success.

Run through a checklist when preparing your lead: what is the distribution and power of the ops? Which card(s) do you need your partner to have to defeat the contract? Which suit do you want your partner to lead back to you, and why? What cards does your partner NOT have and what clues are there about other holdings. Careful consideration of your ops bidding may yield some valuable clues?

A simple guide is to think of suits in terms of the top five cards (ace to ten). You probably want that suit returned to you when you hold two of the top five cards, but not if you only have one. In the absence of any other information you may want to consider leading

from KJ82 and perhaps not from Q853. Similarly leading from a long suit like Q98764 could be useless as the cards are so easily controlled. Of course there are no rights and wrong answers, but as soon as dummy is revealed take plenty of time to re-assess your position.

IMPS and duplicate scoring difference

Imagine a hand with 3S bid and made North south for 140 and East west sacrificing 4HX for -2 or 300. In duplicate scoring the 4HX bidders should face the same fate: a very bad board. But a large duplicate field is likely to have several pairs overbid so you may be saved 0% and perhaps receive a fortunate 30%: but you have just lost 10 IMPS at teams since the 'field' consist of you and the other table and other people's errors won't rescue you.

Signalling

Keep signalling when you have something worthwhile to signal (although you may find that more advanced teams players minimise their signals and make substantial use of false carding and false signals).

Declarer play

Never take a risk looking for overtricks.

You will find yourself in a series of dubious game tries. Plan your declarer play thoroughly and identify where you need good fortune. Make critical plays as late as possible once you have gathered as much information about the hand as you can. There is little damage done taking a risk to make a contract and going two down rather than one. Make sure you don't lose your entries between the hands without a plan.

Think about leads made to you. If ops lead you something like an ace, K or Q, what does this mean? A lead of a king would suggest the leader either holds the ace or queen or has a shortage. Not leading a high card therefore may suggest that the honours in that suit are split between your ops. You can learn from their leads to help you play the hand.

In suit contracts work out how to get best value from your trump holdings. Do you draw trumps immediately, develop a ruff or two or with

mismatched hands consider ruffing the entire hand without drawing trumps.

Defensive carding

Imagine you are playing to a lead and you hold KQxx. If you play the K you are telling your partner you do NOT have the Q and might have the ace. Similarly playing the lower card in sequences like AKxx and JTxx suggests you might have the higher card.

Agree what a lead of an ace or king means and demands. If you lead an ace, you are asking your partner for attitude (and have an agreement on how you signal). With a holding like AKxxx you might want to know if the Q is with you, or not, so lead the ace. If however you are more interested in how many of the suit your partner has, leading the K asks for count where your partner may play a low card to show an odd number of cards and a high card showing an even number of cards (or some other variation of a count agreement).

Typical leads are first, seconds, fourths and top of internal sequences. With something like KT986 leading the ten does not promise an honour, but suggest you have a run of cards below the ten and that you might have an honour. With a broken suit like QT875 perhaps play the 7: it isn't top of a useful sequence but could be a good return suit.

From KQxxx, leading the Q denies the K.

Never finesse your partner. If ops have opened 1H, for example, you need a very good reason to lead hearts with a sparse or hopeless H holding as your partner may hold the K straight into ops AQxx, especially if ops have not supported each other in the suit.

If your partner has bid a suit it is a good idea to lead the suit if you can, unless you have a strong plan. You will not win any post mortems if you ignore this rule.

Given this rule, breaking it sends a strong message to partner. For example, if you lead another ace followed immediately by partner's suit, you may well have a void or a special interest in the first suit.

Leading away from poor doubletons without a reason seldom does anything other than lose two tricks quickly.

Slam defence

Letting ops make a dodgy slam can be a match loser because of the different scoring mechanism.

In slam defences you may choose to use strong signals and perhaps different signals if there is a possibility of success. Let us say ops are in 6D.

You lead the ace of hearts, which wins, and you need guidance. Your agreement should allow your partner to play a card asking for another heart, or demanding a spade or club switch or even a diamond: whatever system you adopt may be a match winner if you get it right. Take a deep and measured look at dummy and remember the bidding: what card or cards must partner have to have any chance of defeating the contract? If you have not received a clear signal, keep neutral unless you can do it all with your hand. And if it does not work out, focus on the next hand and hope that your teammates made the same slam.

Some players like to use lead-directing doubles. Think before you give ops a huge message on how to play the hand! If you are certain this is a winning strategy, go ahead. And before making the double please think about who is likely to be on lead into the contract!

If you lack any direction when leading into a slam contract, stay neutral: don't part with potentially good cards in the absence of a plan.

Strategies

Often you will be dealt long sets of unexciting hands. Don't get bored and lulled into competing. Your team are playing the 'good cards' at the other table. Keeping quiet can generate good swings if you remain disciplined. Trust your teammates to make the best of the hands, and focus on solid defence.

We also should pause to consider two quite common starts, where you crank up valuable IMPS or give away a pile of IMPS. Either way you must not be reckless or retreat into a snail-like shell. Your teammates won't thank you. In

duplicate the odd moment of madness loses a couple of percent: in teams they lose the match.

On every hand consider what the 'par' contract may be. The par on a deal is the contract which results from optimal bidding by both sides and on which neither side could improve by further bidding. Assess this and use it as a guide. As soon as your bidding equals or passes your estimate of par, start thinking even harder!

Grand slams

Never bid a grand slam if there is doubt. If you bid 7NT vulnerable and make +2220, this is a big success especially if your ops did not. However it is usually fine to be in 6NT making 7 because the points' difference for failure is +2200 to -50 or -20 IMPS swing against you. Even the gentlest of teammates will question you sanity if you overbid. Think 90% plus chance when bidding a grand slam, and only go to 7 if you feel sure the same WILL happen at the other table. You hardly ever see 20 IMP swings as the normal shockers are in the range 10 to 13 IMPS lost.

How do shockers happen?

A common reason is false game sacrifices where opponents have bid a marginal game and you choose to win the auction and get doubled. If their original dubious 4S was worth -420 and you go three off doubled for -500, they have picked up -80 or -2 IMPS if neither side is vulnerable. But if their game never makes then you are sitting on -50 and -500 totalling -550, losing -11 IMPS and you should prepare your apology speech.

Light opens in first and second seats are unwise as they frequently result in your partner placing you in a hopeless game contract. And if you agree that light opens in third seat are acceptable, do not raise your partner's bids without care. Since your partner has already passed, if you open a light 1D and hear 1S from partner and you have four spades, pass and resist the temptation to raise to 2S. If ops compete, you probably still have the chance to bid 2S but your partner will now know your limitations.

Many players use conventions such as Drury or simple cues to identify light opens and therefore limit bidding.

Fourth seat light opens also require an understanding. There are several guidelines. Opening a light minor is probably asking for trouble because you are merely encouraging ops to compete cheaply in a major. If you do bid light in fourth then it should be a major and only if you are prepared to play at the 2 level in that major which means you need a distributional light hand weighted towards the majors rather than a flat light hand.

Another scenario is where ops open in first seat and there are two passes. Of course you do not want them to play in, say, 1H. What are your choices? If you are light and have some heart cover, perhaps a bid of 1NT in fourth seat is agreed as light and showing 10+ points and some heart cover rather than the much stronger meaning in second seat. Limit your exposure to overbidding where a double would therefore show a stronger opening hand if 1NT could be weak. Over a weak 1NT, treat any bid from your partner as 'to play'. So 1H Pass Pass 1NT Pass 2C means 'we are playing in clubs'.

Your agreements probably include two-suited bids (for example 1H then 2H showing spades and a minor or 1H 2NT showing minors). Quality is important. A suggestion is to guarantee at least 5/5 in the two suits, or at worst 5 and a good 4. You do not want to be playing at the 3 level with junk and you certainly do not want a game-level sacrifice which is doubled resulting in a shocker.

If you have a good two-suited hand resist the temptation to use your convention gadgets like Michael's and Unusual No Trump tools: bidding two suits separately is much clearer. Imagine you have strong heart and club holdings. A sequence like 1S 2H 2S Pass 3C is much more informative than 1S 2S and expecting your partner to gauge your capabilities.

This sequence is entirely different: 1S 2C 2S pass pass 3H shows a strong hand with the reverse and a minimum five clubs and minimum four hearts. If you bid the hearts

again your clubs are now a minimum of six in length. This type of bidding ensures you communicate clearly with your partner and shows superior strength to a sequence where you initially double and then freely bid, unless of course you have a single strong suit in which case the double and then bid route is your better option.

Since the upside and downsides in team scoring are so extreme, to some degree it may be worthwhile being very strict on your use of conventions in the sense of guaranteeing quality so that your partner can fully assess the possibilities.

In terms of grading of good competing hands, we have a third tool to show good hands over and above doubling and reversing. If you cue bid ops suit and THEN bid another suit you show strength somewhere between a double and a reverse. So 1S 2S pass (you help out with 3H) pass 4D says you are strong and going to game in hearts or diamonds.

Hopeless misfits happen. As soon as you spot the problem, stop bidding. Desperate NT bids after the misfit emerges often make matters worse since there are almost certainly very few entries between the hands.

If you have pre-empted, think of this as your only bid in the auction and do not rebid. Your partner knows what you have and is now in control.

Ensure that any reverse bids are kept for the purpose of showing strong 16+ hands, unless you are forced to bid a second time by your partner's double of a bid from your ops.

Little fibs seldom work out. If ops open 1H you cannot bid 1S without at least five spades because you might find yourself in a 4S sacrifice with a seven card rotten spade suit.

Be certain about the quality of your doubles and the levels to which doubles are for penalty or takeout.

Many people use simple guides to determine the level to which they can compete. The losing tricks count method is one which give a guide to the maximum level to bid to if there is a trump fit. Count the losers in your hand where

AKQ is zero losers, Ax is one loser, K is three losers, Qxx is two losers, Jxxxx is three losers etc.. You partner should only open with seven or less losers.

The hand Axx J QJxxx xxxx has eight losers. Your partner promised seven losers in the agreed trump suit. Add them together and subtract from 18: you can compete to the 3 level ($18 - 7 - 8 = 3$). It does NOT mean you will make nine tricks but it suggests ops have a part score contract their way and that your optimal spot for competing is at the 3 level in your suit. Your partner cannot raise without less than seven losers. This mechanism does not work in no trumps nor in the absence of an agreed trump fit.

Some dramatic deals come up from time to time where you feel invincible with known two suit 8+ card fits: say 5-4 in D and 5-5 in hearts. This also means that your ops have a two suited fit in clubs and spades and they may well be able to compete. In these cases the 3 and 5 level contracts belong to them. If your ops sacrifice (or can make a 5 level contract), weight up how many tricks you really have from a defending and attacking viewpoint before taking action. Here your choices are pass, double or bid: it could be the hand that decides the match. A good technique if you have the stronger hand is to allow your partner to make the decision: so an agreement might be that you always pass the five level bid which says I can stand either a double or a raise or a pass: your partner should know your hand by now and it is their holding which determines which action is best. Of course if you know you can take their contract down on your own holding, and this makes sense, doubling immediately tells partner your position and they can only take out your double with excellent reason.

If you have none of your ops suit at a high level and your partner doubles, this is likely good news so think very hard before taking their double out, if at all. And remember that even a ten or more card fit in your direction may be defensively useless and not material upon which to base a double. Flattish hands work much better defending a doubled suit contract rather than highly distributional hands where shortages are valuable assets for declarer.

Particularly difficult are fits where you might be 4-4 in one major and 5-3 in another. Generally the 4-4 fit will play better since you have more choices on where to ruff: ruffing from the five card hand is likely to end in tears. Once trumps are played the tail of the five card suit may play well.

Competing with minors is harder than with majors. A handy tool can be inverted minors where you jump to show length and weakness and bid at the 2 level to show support and 10+ points. So 1D 1S 2D is strong, asking for further description of the hand: as is 1D Pass 2D. 1D then 3D promises less than 10 points and five diamonds. So we can combine this with doubles so that 1D 1S Dbl shows hearts and clubs but not five hearts. And a cue bid 1D 1S 2S is definitely a strong hand asking for more information since you have driven partner to the 3 level and are prepared to field any bid they make. In this scenario 3D is a stop bid from partner, and 3C and 3H are ongoing: 3S asks for spade hold for 3NT. These techniques avoid you playing in something like 4D doubled without a prayer of success, or assist you to find a good game contract.

If your partner opens 1S only bid 2H with five hearts and 10+ points since you are forcing partner to the 3 level or 2NT or to state longer spades with a 2S bid, all of which may be a step too high.

Pass is a good bid! Do not worry about keeping an auction alive with non-forcing bids like 1H pass 1NT. Just because you may hate hearts and may not be able to bid spades is not a reason to bid a 2 level minor without the cards to merit the bid as this is a rapid route to failure.

In this context weak jump shifts are handy to tell partner you have only one place to play: 1D then 2H is a drop dead bid and the opener can only rebid if they have significantly more than an average opening hand. If you prefer intermediate jumps then make sure the hand is not overbid when weak because you can't have the best of all worlds!

Especially in teams, if your partner opens and you have a flattish game-going hand you

should focus on a quick 3NT rather than telling your opponents about the distribution and the possible weaknesses in your hands. 3NT is much easier to defeat after a drawn out bidding sequence.

In duplicate you are often concerned that 3NT making for 400/600 is a bad choice if the winning auction was 4H/S for 420/620. In teams the contracts score the same number of IMPS. Your only concern is to find the safest game contract. Few matches are won or lost by 1 IMP.

Mistakes will happen, doubles will prove to be unwise: but if four out of five of your doubles work, you will probably win, and that is also probably true if even three out of five are successful. If all of your doubles succeed you are probably not doubling enough.

Accuracy

You must compete soundly. Overbidding in duplicate is unpleasant but in a typical 26 board duplicate session one hand like this will lose you a few percent on your score, whereas in teams it can take you out of the match. You may never be able to recover in teams.

Suit quality

One way to avoid problems is to have stricter understandings on the quality of your competing bids. If you know that a suit bid contains either five cards in the suit and at least two of the four honours between ace and jack, or six cards with at least two of the honours between ace and ten, then you can compete more safely. If your partner opens a weak six card 2H and you hold KJx in that suit you know you are missing no more than one card between ace and ten. If however your partner's holding could be as poor as J96543 you will need a good hand to consider raising and have no method to gauge the best course of action. Assuming you play some of weak 2's, having a couple of tools is worthwhile: many people agree that a raise to 3 is not an invite but a further pre-empt, and that quality can be assessed through a 2NT bid asking for more information.

What is an invite?

Given that reaching game and succeeding is so beneficial at teams, one of the simplest methods to keep out of game but still compete is to agree that 1-2-3 is NEVER an invitation. For example, the bidding goes 1H from your partner, 1S from ops, 2H from you, 2S from them and then 3H from your partner. This is not an invitation: your agreements should cover this common situation when anything other than 3H is ongoing and 3H means stop, in this example.

No trumps

Bids of 3NT are very common in teams since there are frequent game tries and only 9 rather than 10 or more tricks are required.

Focus on the probabilities which are especially important in NT. In general suits with an odd number of missing cards divide evenly: suits with an even number of missing cards break oddly.

Imagine you have an eight card suit split 5 3. You are missing five cards. You have an excellent chance of making two small tricks at the end of the suit since there is 67.8% probability that the suit will break 3-2. So be happy perhaps to lose the first one or two tricks in the suit to make the other four or three tricks.

If you have a 4-3 holding be careful as the chances of an 'honest' split are 64.5% against you (48.5%+14.5%+1.5%).

Missing	Split	Probability
2 cards	1-1	52.0%
	2-0	48.0%
3 cards	2-1	78.0%
	3-0	22.0%
4 cards	3-1	49.7%
	2-2	40.7%
	4-0	9.6%
5 cards	3-2	67.8%
	4-1	28.3%
	5-0	3.9%
6 cards	4-2	48.5%
	3-3	35.5%
	5-1	14.5%
	6-0	1.5%

Leading from a long suit like Q97643 might work well, but you are missing four of the top five cards. Without information you might be better placed with the suit being played to you, rather than the other way around. If you have a slightly better long suit which you want to develop, ops are unlikely to stray into your

territory. So you must lead it to tell partner you want that suit back, but also make sure you keep one or more entries in other suits if you can. You may find yourself with a single entry back into your hand and that is very precious. In teams you may well want to hold the entry back far longer than you might in duplicate as the upside of running your long suit is so great, against the minor loss of gifting ops an overtrick.

Cue bids

If your partner interferes, you may want to know about the merit or otherwise of their bid. If your opponents open 1H, your partner bids 1S, ops pass, do you compete further? Perhaps the answer lies in determining --- and assuming you have something to say --- the quality of your partner's 1S bid. So a bid of 2H asks your partner to bid 2S if unpromising, or anything else if they are confident there are possibilities. If you hear 2S you should not bid again unless your hand is spectacular.

If your partner is weak and gives a negative response, and your holding of the suit is also weak, perhaps it might be time to consider a different lead and let your opponents guess your suit layout.

Gadgets

Since the price of mistakes is so high in teams, it might be worth only using your carefully learned conventions entirely accurately without any stretches and shading, and make sure you only use them at the appropriate moments. In short, don't pretend your hand qualifies for using a gadget when it does not.

Slam bids

On higher level bidding we can see there is a premium on successful slams and cue bidding showing first round controls can be a much cheaper assessment mechanism that leaping into some form of slam enquiry.

Be prepared to go slow because, if you are sure your partner won't drop your bid, you can make progress in teams if your opponents over-compete when you have good cards. The best position is to be non-vulnerable against vulnerable and to be prepared to double anything that looks overbid.

If the hand is obviously your contract, do not rush. If your partner opens spades and you have good support and a strong hand, focus on making informative bids that are descriptive, forcing and exploratory: you don't want to miss a cold slam because you rushed straight to 4S.

You can even tell a few white lies with a big hand opposite an open. For example 1S then 2C cannot be passed and you may well have nothing useful in clubs but want to prevent a club lead and find out what partner really has. Partner's second bid should then set the scene and you should know whether you are interested in slam within two rounds. Jump bids from strength are unhelpful when there is almost always an alternative.

Conventions and doubles

It is useful to have a bidding understanding which allows you to give finely graded responses showing both distribution and strength to allow your partner to make fine judgements.

This also helps when deciding near the end of an auction whether to double, bid or pass. The accuracy of your system will allow one or other of you to take the best option. Reverses, splinters, mini-splinters, doubles, redoubles, Jacoby 2NT, Bergen, single raises, jumps and shifts, trial bids and cues are all examples of tools you may wish to use.

How you use doubles and redoubles in competitive auctions is worth plenty of discussion as a strong tool in your armoury. Your position in an auction may change the meanings of bids. If ops open 1D is an immediate double in second seat different to a double in fourth seat?

Redoubles are often underestimated as excellent communication tool. If your partner opens 1H and ops double, what does your redouble mean? If you view the auction process to be as much about what you did NOT bid, as well as about what you do bid, then a redouble can be used to say 'I have 10+ points but nothing in your suit partner'. In short, continue with your suit at your peril but I do have support for (almost) anything else.

Making sure you absorb distribution information in a bidding sequence: 1D then 2C suggests 5/4, 1D then 3C sends a different message, as does 1C then 2D.

Vulnerability is the key factor after weighing up your hand, as well as determining whether you are better winning the auction and attacking, or defending. Try to categorise your holding into defensive or attacking.

In a competitive auction where ops stop in 4S over your 4H bid, no matter how tempting a double, slow down and assess your hand's capabilities.

How many tricks can you make on your own, and how many tricks can your partner generate? As a guide, never count more than one trick in your suit.

You therefore need three more tricks to defeat 4S. Where will they come from? If both sides have bid to 4S, how are the points distributed? If points seems evenly split then surely there must be some distribution advantage or problem somewhere?

What is the par for the hand? And if you do double and are on lead, what would you lead and why? Or if your partner is on lead, are you confident they will know 'the right lead' to make your double good, and is there a way you can signal regardless of the course of the first few tricks?

A double which depends upon your partner finding the miracle lead may be asking for too much (for example you have an undeclared void).

Competing against weak opens

How do you choose to compete against your opponents pre-emptive weak 2 and weak 3 opens? For the weak 2's some form agreement will pay dividends, perhaps Lebensohl. If ops open 2H and your partner bids 2S rather than doubling, you need to understand whether this is a stronger bid than a double, or a weaker bid: it does not matter what the understanding is, so long as you have one! And maybe carry the same ideas through to pre-emptive 3's.

Your weak opens

How do you treat your own weak 2/3 opening bids? If, as mentioned earlier, you have an understanding of quality on these, you can also reach a much better view of the par contract and whether to raise as a further pre-empt, sacrifice, pass or game try, again in the context of vulnerability. Accuracy allows for better decisions and better decisions win matches. And what do you mean if you raise your partner's weak open to the three level? Is this an invite or an extended pre-empt?

Be cautious about broken suits. A holding like QJTxxx may well be more effective than KTxxxx because the first may command four tricks whereas the second could succeed in making only two or three tricks. Suits with big gaps generally do not play well.

There are several categories of weak 3's. If you are first or second in hand a light weak 3 open can be expensive, particularly if vulnerable, and may devalue or overvalue cards in your partner's hand. Clearly by third seat a light open can seem more attractive. As with weak 2's, broken 7 card suits generally do not play well so make sure there is a minimum understanding on quality. If you make an overall over ops open (say 1S then 3C), your partner is entitled to expect a minimum standard for that bid because what you didn't bid is equally important (from Pass, double then free bid being strong, double then pass being not much, 2C promising 5 cards and some points and 3C promising 6+ cards and perhaps no less than 8 points non-vulnerable and 10 points vulnerable).

Your opponents

In duplicate you play many different pairs. It helps to understand which system they play but you will only play a few hands against them.

In teams make a point of understanding your opponents bidding system BEFORE you are in play. Establish your ops 1NT open strength, 4/5 card major open, basic discard system(s) and two level opens strengths and specifically ask ops to mention any unusual features of their agreements.

Gauge the experience of you ops and decide whether you will be playing a 'thin vulnerable game strategy', or not.

Slow play

On the first two or three boards, note the start time of each hand. If you find yourself up against slow ops, there is little you can do but the evidence will be compelling if slow play turns into a problem. Bring slow play to the director's attention after a few hands if you are clearly slipping behind schedule. Consistently taking more than 8 minutes a hand will lead to difficulties.

Never allow ops to take ages playing their hands and then be in a position where they are rushing you to play your hands quickly. The teams game is packed with some tricky wily players, do be on your guard!

Questions

You have the right to ask anything you like of the opponents bids and play. But there are likely to be many marginal game tries, which have implications. The answers to your questions are often helpful to your opponents: the fact that you ask suggests there is a reason for the question and it may change how they tackle the hand. You should know within a bid or two whether the hand belongs to your ops, or whether you are competing. If it is not your hand, keep silent during the auction.

Leave any questions to the end of the auction and always ask in a general manner with open questions rather than questions which can be answered 'yes or no'. Even better, don't ask unless you MUST know.

Passive approach can work

If you ever watch an international teams match, one thing you may notice is how passive the players seem to be. This is often because they view the hand as 'for the ops' and the risk of competing and losing is too high without a reward in sight. In short, there isn't any value in competing unless you can see some upside. Be happy to sit back when you have nothing to offer, or even if you have plenty to offer in defence. Overzealous bidding loses matches.

A small example may illustrate. In a sequence 1H from partner, 1S from ops: if you have nothing to offer but a weak marginal 1NT without three hearts and with useless spades, pass. If your partner has more to say than a minimum open, expect them to double or make a second bid. Pass tells your partner everything they need to know. There is no value in misleading your partner with anything other than an accurate bid of Pass.

Things to avoid

- Distracting yourself by discussing or thinking about a hand already played
- Incomplete, inaccurate or misleading explanations
- Poorly phrased questions which pass information to your partner ('Ops, does that bid promise diamonds?')
- Don't try to answer your own question thereby missing part of the explanation you really needed. "Ops, is that a rangefinder?" can be answered "Yes/No" but "What do you understand by that bid?" may give you useful information. Ask open questions.
- Bidding out of turn
- Insufficient bids
- Failing to follow suit
- You won't have the time between boards to change your approach against an unfamiliar system. Making changes to your tactics midstream may be necessary but is not desirable: plan ahead and agree how to combat different conventions and systems
- Asking questions about a hand before the end of the auction when you have no ability to bid and potentially pass unauthorised information to your partner. At worst you are actively helping your ops confirm that they have understood each other's bids correctly. You cannot expect your ops to give you a bridge lesson on their conventions: their duty is to explain the meaning of any bid but not any inferences which may be associated with the bid.
- IF you are asked a question please give a good explanation. If you can't, give one of the following replies --- "not discussed", "could be 2 or 3 things, would you like me to continue?", etc..
- Failing to correctly use the Alert and Stop cards. This can be very sad in teams where a Director's adjustment resulting from some infraction can lose a match. Here is a true event from the author. Ops opened a genuine 1C, my partner went 4H WITHOUT using the stop card, they immediately raised to 5C, I pondered and passed and my partner raised to 5H which he made. The 5H +650 was adjusted to 5C made for -400. And even worse, the other table made 5HX, a swing of -1250 or -16 IMPS. Why? My partner's failure to use the STOP card denied me the extra time to think and we were penalised for my hesitation. Think of your STOP card as a tool to give your partner time to reflect.
- Being too social distracts you and your partner: of course be pleasant but you are likely to spend anything up to 1¾ hours with your opponents and too much chatter is unlikely to help
- Be wary of ops who chatter when it is 'not their hand'
- Forgetting to call the Director promptly when there is a problem: pushy ops may place you in an even worse position if they persuade you that 'everything is ok, carry on'
- Since there are likely to be many dubious game tries, be careful about long pauses and out-of-tempo play. You can take as long as you wish if you make a bid, but a long think followed by a pass will place your partner under terrible pressure to justify any further bid they may wish to make.
- If your ops make long pauses followed by a pass and another bid from ops, ask ops to acknowledge the hesitation as they too may have to justify any additional bids after a pause.
- On defence make sure you don't give away penalty-prone information through long sighs and funny looks. Ask your ops to acknowledge any sighs, stares, thrown cards, grins, groans, moans or exclamations immediately if they make the same mistake when you are declarer.
- Dummy should limit any comments to merely confirming if partner is out of a suit ('No diamonds, partner Dummy must not

point out revokes or infractions until after the end of play

- North South are responsible for managing the boards: preserve your brain cells and let them do the work if you are East West

You and your team

You are a team with your three or more teammates. A team member facing unconstructive criticism, barrages of advice, huffs and sighs will guarantee you a miserable time and miserable results. Successful teams have good spirit, are supportive of one another, laugh at their mistakes and quickly pass over any upsets.

If you make a mistake or two, just be honest and freely admit your errors: your teammates will not be happy if you argue a dubious self-serving cause when the evidence is not in your favour.

End of play

You will have scored your match on a special form. Agree the scores for your table with your opponents before regrouping with your teammates. If you are not using electronic scoring, then compare the scores from the two tables in IMPS. Add up the IMPS columns to see the difference in IMPS and finally fill out a tiny form with the names of the two teams and the IMPS scored by each team. All this takes a while to learn. You may also calculate the VP's.

Summary

There are five rules to follow, sometimes:

- pass is a good bid
- bid your hand
- stop bidding when you have bid your hand
- leave your ego elsewhere
- have fun

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