

Neil's Deals

Matchpoint Strategies

Author's note: This article is dedicated to Mike and Kevin: good luck in New Orleans!

There are a number of **effective ways to get ready for your bridge game**, whether it be your regular duplicate game or your first NABC. Some of them aren't about playing:

- Get plenty of rest
- Eat well before the game
- Stay focused
- Ignore good results, bad results, noisy playing site, rude opponents or uncomfortably chairs: Focus completely on the next deal.
- And above all, be kind and take care of your partner.

However there are strategies to employ which will maximize your chance of getting good scores. Let's look at specific ones that apply to playing matchpoints.

Matchpoint Strategy

There are a lot of techniques and information that can be used to improve your results in pair games. Let's go over them now:

It is a bidding game – it is vital that you compete in the bidding. This means overcalling, preempting, balancing, opening light*.

Get in early - It is wise to get in the bidding early, before the opponents have a chance to sort out their offensive and defensive prospects.

Ex 1: You hold ♠ AJ43 ♥ 743 ♦ KQ43 ♣ 52

West	North	East	South
-	-	Pass	1♣
Pass	1♥	?	

Double. You have both unbid suits. It is safer to double now than to balance at the three level.

Plusses – Many players think this is the most important objective: Take your sure plus. This means do not stretch to pushy games or slams. In a competitive auction, defend when you are reasonably certain of beating their contract, rather than declaring one level higher.

Scoring and strategies – notrump scores higher than a major, which scores higher than a minor. So that is why there is such an emphasis in playing in notrump. 3NT making four score 430, while five of a minor making six scores 420, as does four of a major making. However playing in the major when you have at least an eight card fit will usually be the long-term winning strategy.

But beware: if you stop in a partscore it is often right to play in a minor suit fit at the three level rather than 2NT.

Ex 2: You hold ♠ AJ43 ♥Q3 ♦KQ10943 ♣2

West	North	East	South
-	-	Pass	1♦
Pass	1♥	Pass	1♠
Pass	2NT	Pass	?

You are a minimum so will not accept the game invite, but don't pass! Bid 3♦. This is to play. Even if partner has modest support, such as, ♠Qx ♥AJxx ♦xx ♣Axx, a club lead will beat 2NT a couple while 3♦ will make even if you have to lose two diamond tricks.

Don't let the opponents play a 1NT contract – When each side has roughly the same values and no fit, it is often a race to who bids 1NT first. Rarely will you get a good result in these cases. If you have a decent five card suit, or reasonable support for most unbid suits, compete!

Declaring vs Defending - Declaring has advantages over defending. It is easier as you can see the combined assets of dummy and your hand as declarer, while a defender can only see their hand, and has to guess what cards declarer has, and what cards partner holds. So defending is hard and contracts that could be beaten are often made.

Consider the vulnerability – Favourable vulnerability (not vul vs vul) enables you take some liberties. Open lighter, compete higher, and consider sacrificing over their sure game, to name a few. On the other hand, the opponents will look at penalizing you at the three level if vulnerable, search for that magic +200 number. Have your full values

when competing at these colours. Similarly, don't preempt with a bad suit as the opponents may double you when your suit breaks even slightly poorly.

So -50 is good against -90. However if vulnerable, -100 will be bad...unless they make 2NT for +120. Tricky! But down two vul., -200 is always bad!

Balancing – if the opponents have found a fit, but stopped at the two level, consider balancing. The hand is probably 20-20 in high card points, so you can often do better in one of three ways:

- Make your contract.
- Go minus less than you would had you defended.
- The opponents may misjudge and bid one more, going down.

Warning: Make sure they have a fit. The auction 1♠-2♠ shows a fit, but the auction 1♠-1NT-2♣-2♠ does not.

Overtricks – Overtricks (and extra undertricks) are vital at this form of scoring. Getting an extra trick when declaring is often the difference between an average and a top. However, going for that extra trick may result in one less than the field. Judgement is needed when considering being greedy.

The same consideration is needed on defence. Be aware of the times it is good just to cash all of your aces.

Ex 3: Playing pairs, you hold ♠ A10 ♥7653 ♦A652 ♣876

West	North	East	South
-	-	Pass	1NT
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♦
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

You lead a small diamond, partner plays the jack. Dummy is:

♠ KJ72

♥ A10984

♦ Q

♣ K42

Now declarer plays a spade to the queen. Now what? As usual, it is best to think before playing. Dummy has 13 HCPs, so partner will have less than five. Declarer has ♦Kx(x...) left, so if partner can get in, they will lead the ♦10 through declarer. But is that going to happen? Not likely. And how many tricks does declarer have? 2 spades, 5 hearts (if declarer has the ♥K), 1 diamond, and possibly 4 clubs. Wine the spade and cash your diamond ace! Partner might have the ♥K, but likely doesn't. The actual full deal:

♠ K J 7 2
♥ A 10 9 8 4
♦ Q
♣ K 4 2

♠ A 10
♥ 7 6 5 3
♦ A 6 5 2
♣ 8 7 6

N
W E
S

♠ 9 6 5 4
♥ Q J
♦ J 10 9 8 7
♣ 9 5 3

♠ Q 8 3
♥ K 2
♦ K 4 3
♣ A Q J 10 3

The key on the hand was to count tricks and points, and **look at how favourable the suits lie for declarer.** Here your four small hearts are ominous.