

Matchpoint Theory 101

We all bring our prior experiences to the game of bridge. Those experiences affect our success, sometimes positively, and sometimes negatively. I've noticed two preconceptions many players bring to the matchpoint game that need to be examined, if a duplicate player wants to improve his or her success rate.

- ♣ Although we rightly call the opposing pair at our table our opponents, our real opponents are the pairs sitting in our direction at all the other tables. Our score is *matched* against these players. We get a *point* for each pair whose score we beat, and we don't even get to see these scores we're trying to beat until the end of the game!
- ♣ In most of our prior games playing, we learned that a plus score is good and a minus score is bad. That's not necessarily the case in a duplicate bridge game. The less experienced the duplicate bridge player, the more likely they are to be surprised by the results their plus or minus scores may achieve.

What Are Matchpoints?

They say, "Misery loves company." Players like me, who frequently get bad cards, can take comfort from the fact that they're really only playing against those who hold the same bad cards. In a duplicate game scored by *matchpoints*, your score on each hand is based on how well you played that hand compared to the other pairs holding the same cards. You get one point for each pair whose score you beat, and a half point, signified by the hyphen after the matchpoint number, for each pair whose score you tie.

```
27>          0    3-   3-   8    8    3-   3-   3-   3-   10   11   8
      ----  ---- 100  110  110  130  130  110  110  110  110  150  200  130
```

Look at the scores for board 27 in this example from a Doubleton Club game. The *matchpoint score* is given on the top line; the actual score on the hand is given on the bottom line. How many times was this board played? What is the highest matchpoint score?

- ♣ No matter how high your score is on a board, the largest matchpoint score you can get is one less than the number of times the board is played. In our example, that number is 11, the score awarded to pair 13 for their +200 score.

On this board, pair 3 set the opponents' contract one trick for a +100 score. Even though this was a positive score, it was the *smallest* positive score. This pair got a matchpoint score of zero. They could have gotten a score of -800, and their matchpoint score would still have been zero.

- ♣ No matter how bad you think your score is on a board, the lowest matchpoint score you can get is zero.

Matchpoint Strategy

How a game is scored always affects a player's strategy. If you don't understand the consequences of the scoring, your strategy may be ineffective.

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25>      5    0    5    5    10    5    5    1    9    5    11    5
      ---- 400 -300 400 400 430 400 400 170 420 400 450 400 ----
```

Look at these NS scores on board 25. (The hand will be given in class.) Eight of the twelve pairs were in a 3NT contract, seven of them making that contract for a score of +400. 3NT was the *normal contract* on this board. Each of these seven pairs beat two pairs and tied six for a matchpoint score of 5. Pair 6 made an overtrick for a score of +430. This one overtrick allowed them to beat ten pairs, giving them 10 matchpoints on the board!

- ♣ Overtricks are very important in the matchpoint game. When declaring, if you know you're in the normal contract, you'll need overtricks to get a good score. You may have to risk the contract to try for that extra trick.

What about the remaining four pairs? Pairs 9, 10 and 12, were in a spade contract. This is not the normal contract on the board, but notice that the two pairs in 4S both got excellent matchpoint scores. In fact, pair 12 got a "top" on the board for their overtrick! What happened to pair 3? They were in 6C, doubled, down two. Oops! It's only a zero.

- ♣ As declarer, if you think you're not in the normal contract, sometimes you'll get a good score simply making that contract. How do you know you're not in the normal contract? You develop this ability through experience.

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25>      6      6    6    10    11    2    6    6    6    0    1    6
      -400  ---- -400 -400 -170 300 -420 -400 -400 -400 -450 -430 -400 ----
```

If we examine the corresponding EW scores on board 25, we can look at some defensive strategy in matchpoint scoring. Pair 12 was unfortunate. Their opponents made the extra trick in the 3NT contract. Their score only beat one other pair, so they won only one matchpoint. Pair 11 won no matchpoints for allowing their opponents to make an overtrick!

- ♣ You may not be able to set a contract, but holding declarer to the fewest possible tricks may be good enough.

There's always some luck involved in any game, and bridge is no exception. Did NS pair 12 get his excellent result on his own skill? Or did his EW opponents miss a defensive opportunity? Again, experience will teach you the difference.

- ♣ Despite the fact that duplicate bridge attempts to minimize the luck factor, it still creeps in. We may not have been responsible for our good results - or for our bad ones.