



# Hamilton Bridge Centre

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## Matchpoint Bidding

**Good matchpoints is bad bridge.**



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## Introduction

There are two basic types of duplicate bridge normally played in clubs and tournaments:

1. **Pairs:** In a pairs game, you play with one partner and sit either N/S or E/W. Scoring is done by matchpoints (see the article on [matchpoint scoring](#) for more details).
2. **Teams:** In a team game, you play on a team of four players. Your team plays against another team of four players for the duration of the match. You and your partner take either N/S or E/W at one table, and your teammates take the other direction at a second table. The opposing team does the same. Scoring is done by IMPs (which, rather confusingly, is short for "international matchpoints". Forget the long term; everyone calls them IMPs).

This article will discuss bidding strategy for pairs (matchpoint) games only. This is the most common type of game played at a bridge club.

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## Scoring

Scoring in a matchpoint game is fairly complicated, but understanding how the scoring system works is critical to doing well.

Refer to the separate article on [matchpoint scoring](#) for all the details.

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## Bad Bridge?

The subtitle, "Good matchpoints is bad bridge", comes from Mike Lawrence's "Complete Book On Overcalls". Here is an explanatory passage from the book which explains this statement:

"Matchpoints is a wild struggle where every hand is a separate battle. Winning a hand by an extra trick may be as good a result as getting +800. The worst you can do is get a zero. If, in one two-board round you steal a trick in 2♣ and make an overtrick for +110 and get a top, and then on the next board you do go down -800 and get a bottom, you have achieved an average round."

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## Two Ways To Win

An action which has more than one way to win is usually a better bet than one which puts all your eggs in one basket.

Let's consider a common decision: you have a borderline preemptive opening bid. Should you preempt or not?

1. Passing is a decision which tends to only have one way to win. If the pass was correct, you win. If not, you lose.
2. Preempting offers several ways to win. Your primary hope (way to win) when you preempt is that the hand belongs to the opponents, but they get to a bad contract because your preempt steals the room they need to investigate the best place to play. The preempt is not so good if your partner has the strong hand, but it still might win if it helps your partner place the contract accurately. The bad case is when the preempt is passed out, or doubled for penalty. But even here you have a chance to win: maybe the opponents had a game or slam which would have outscored the result they get by setting your contract.

Your extra chance to win often depends on your opponents misjudging a competitive auction. That's why competitive bidding is more important at matchpoints, and competitive bids should be made on less than desirable hands. Even expert players can go wrong if you present them with difficult bidding problems.

The most difficult opponents to play against are those who consistently present bidding problems by aggressive competitive bidding. These aggressive competitive bids are made with two ways to win: any choice you make (bid again, pass, or double) could be wrong.

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## Loading The Dice

Just as you should look for decisions with two (or more) ways to win, you should avoid giving this chance to your opponents.

Almost all bridge players will occasionally make non-standard or unorthodox bids. The extent of deviation may range from mild (opening 1NT with a five-card major) to outlandish (preempting on a jack-high suit).

Offbeat bids need to be part of your matchpoint strategy. The trick is to learn when (and **when not**) to use them. Most players make these bids when the mood strikes them, or when they've suffered a bad result and are trying to "get it back". Not a good approach.

Offbeat bids will lead to a very bad result if they are wrong. The only justification for making them is thinking that they are more likely to be right. Just as a bid should have two ways to win your way, it is equally important to make sure that an offbeat bid does not give your opponents two ways to win. Make an offbeat bid only when everything else about your hand is perfect for the bid. If anything else looks the least bit wrong, wait for another time.

### Examples

Here are some general situations (rather than actual hands) to illustrate "loading the dice".

- You hold a 7/5 hand (seven cards in one suit, five in another). You have zero points, and both your partner and your right-hand opponent have passed. Do you preempt in your seven-card suit, on the theory that your left-hand opponent must have a huge hand and the opponents have at least a game, and maybe a slam? You could, but your hand has a second flaw. Your extreme distribution suggests that no suit is breaking evenly, and if the opponents bid too high (especially to slam) they will likely go down.
- You are in second seat with a decent six-card club suit but only seven points. Your right-hand opponent (the dealer) passes. Should you try a 3♣ preempt? Not in second seat—the second flaw is that your partner is 50% likely to hold the good hand, and your unorthodox preempt may lead him to do the wrong thing. In third seat a 3♣ preempt would be clear-cut (partner has already passed), and in first seat it would be more likely to win (it's only 33% likely that partner has the good hand).
- Your partner is dealer and passes. Your right-hand opponent opens 1♦. Your spade holding is Q J 10 9 8 3, and you have no other face cards. Your opponents are vulnerable, and your side isn't. Most matchpoint players would bid 2♣, but what about trying 3♣? The only flaw is the lack of a seventh spade, but apart from that the hand is perfect. Yes, you might get doubled and get a bottom, but that still only gives your opponents one way to win. If the opponents don't double, your extra level of preempting will present them with a problem in determining how high to bid. This hand has only one flaw for the unorthodox bid, so it's worth the chance.

## Major Suit Game Or 3NT?

It is usually right to prefer 4♥ or 4♠, rather than 3NT, when you and your partner have a four–four fit in a major suit and the values for game. However, there are cases where 3NT is a better decision:

- **Strength:** If your combined hands have excess strength for game, but not enough for slam, then 3NT is generally a better decision. Consider 3NT rather than a major suit game when your combined hands hold 29 to 30 high card points.
- **Short Suits:** With a worthless doubleton, or a doubleton including the ace or the king, prefer the major suit game. With a doubleton queen or jack, prefer 3NT (assuming partner has strength in the suit).
- **Side Suit Length:** If you have a side four–card suit with the queen or jack, prefer 3NT. Otherwise, prefer the major suit game.
- **Trump Holding:** If the trump suit is weak in intermediate cards (Q, J, 10, 9), prefer 3NT. With good intermediates, prefer the major suit game.

You should generally reject a four–four major suit fit, and prefer 3NT, when at least three out of the four conditions given above exist.

Here are some examples illustrating these points.

### Example 1

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1NT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

You are sitting South with the following hand:

♠ K 9 6 5  
♥ Q 7  
♦ K Q 8 3  
♣ K J 3

Your partnership has a combined high card point count of 29 to 31 (assuming you play a 15–17 point 1NT). Disregard the possible spade fit, and bid 3NT on power.

### Example 2

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1NT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

You are sitting South with the following hand:

♠ K 9 6 5  
♥ Q 7  
♦ K 9 8 4  
♣ Q 10 3

Your doubleton ♥Q suggests 3NT will be the best contract, so disregard the possible spade fit. If you held two small hearts, you would prefer a spade contract.

### Example 3

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1NT	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♠	Pass	4♠	Pass

You are sitting South with the following hand:

♠ K 9 6 5  
♥ A 9 4  
♦ A 10 7 6  
♣ Q 3

Your red suit holdings suggest that the spade game is a better contract (you have no likely third round winners, and declarer may be able to ruff heart and diamond losers). Change the heart suit to ♥A J 9 and the diamond suit to ♦Q J 9 4, and 3NT is probably the best contract (you have a likely third round winner in hearts and diamonds).

### Example 4

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1NT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

You are sitting South with the following hand:

♠ A 7 6 5  
♥ K 8 6  
♦ K J 9 4  
♣ Q 6

3NT is likely to be better than 4♠, since your hand lacks intermediate cards (queen, jack, ten, nine) in the spade suit.

## Four–Three Trump Fit (Major Suit)

Although many players instinctively avoid playing in a four–three trump fit (preferring notrump instead), there are times when the seven card trump fit is likely to be a better contract:

- The trump suit must be strong (AKJx opposite Qxx is perfect).

- Extra tricks must be available by ruffing a loser in the hand with three-card support.

Remember that the opponents' trumps are most likely to split 4–2. However, a 3–3 split, while less probable, is also reasonably likely.

Here are some examples.

### Example 5

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
??			

You are sitting North with the following hand:

♠ K J 4  
♥ 7 3  
♦ K Q 8 6 2  
♣ K J 8

A rebid of 1NT is undesirable (no heart stopper). And you know never to rebid a five-card minor without a reasonable alternative. The reasonable alternative here is to bid 2♣ and see how the auction develops. If partner also lacks a heart stopper, a spade contract on a four–three fit could well be your best spot.

### Example 6

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
??			

You are sitting North with the following hand:

♠ A 6  
♥ J 8 4  
♦ K 10 9 4 3  
♣ K Q 9

A rebid of 2♥ is likely to work out best, since you have potential ruffing values in spades.

## Minor Suit Games

Prefer 3NT over a minor suit game in almost every case. A minor suit game generally requires about 29 points between the two hands in order to make. Even with this much strength, prefer 3NT unless there is an inadequately–stopped suit and no major suit fit that is strong enough to play.

Minor suit games can work out with less than 29 points between the two hands when each hand has a singleton (in different suits), and tricks can be won by cross-ruffing.

## Game Or Part Score

When there is only one choice of suit (or notrump), and your decision is whether to bid game or not, then avoid bidding marginal games. However, if you think everyone else will bid the game, go with the field whether you think it's a good idea or not.

If there are alternative contracts available, it's more difficult to decide whether to bid game or a part score.

- If the game you must bid is not likely to be best (for example, partner has bypassed 3NT to bid four of a minor, so your only game is five of a minor), or if your part score will likely be better than other part scores, settle for the part score.
- If your part score looks inferior to others, or your game will be the best result if it makes, stretch and bid the game.

Here are some examples.

### Example 7

**North dealer, neither side vulnerable**

North	East	South	West
1NT	Pass	2NT	Pass
??			

You are sitting North with the following hand:

♠ A K J  
♥ Q 8 7 4  
♦ K J 7 2  
♣ Q J

The only question here is: pass or bid 3NT? You do have 17 high card points, but they are a "bad" seventeen: 11 points in short suits, no tens or nines, and only one ace. However, you should bid 3NT even if it will likely go down. Most of the field will see 17 points and bid 3NT automatically, so you should go with the field and make the same bid.

### Example 8

**North dealer, neither side vulnerable**

North	East	South	West
3♣	3♦	Pass	3♥
Pass	4♦	Pass	??

You are sitting West with the following hand:

♠ K J 8 3  
 ♥ K Q 8 7 4  
 ♦ 5  
 ♣ K 10 8

Preempts always make life difficult. Perhaps you should have bid 3NT instead of 3♥, but who knows? The point is that partner's 4♦ bid was the last thing you wanted to hear (you really wanted to hear 3NT or 4♥). A 5♦ contract may make, but if it does then 3NT will also make, probably with an overtrick or two. You will get a bad matchpoint result whether you bid 5♦ or not. Your best bet here is **pass**, hoping that the distribution is so bad that neither 3NT nor 5♦ will make.

## Opponents Are Bidding

When your side opens the bidding and the opponents intervene, you have the additional option of choosing to defend.

Only defend if you expect to get a plus score that is higher than you would get playing the hand your way. This often means doubling the opponents' part score bid for penalty (with the accompanying risk that they'll make it).

- You open 1♠, and your left-hand opponent overcalls 2♦ not vulnerable. Your partner raises to 2♠, but your right hand opponent bids 3♦. You or your partner should only continue to the three level with a nine-card trump fit (unless you have enough points to bid game). If you only have an eight-card trump fit and not enough points to bid game, consider doubling. The opponents have stolen your likely +110 for making 2♠. If you don't double, you have to put them down three (for +150) to get a better score. If you double, you only have to put them down two. Risk the double, especially if your opponents are known to be frisky bidders.

## Part Score Hands

When your limit is a part score, look for the safest rather than the highest-scoring. Prefer a safe 2♦ contract to a dubious 2♥ contract, where you have a choice between the two.

## Opening A Four-Card Major

While you should always avoid opening a four-card major in first or second seat, there are times when opening a four-card major in third or fourth seat is a good choice. Considerations include:



1. **Trump strength:** Your partner will assume you have a five-card major and will support with three, so your suit must be good enough to play a four-three fit. A K Q x is good enough; J 10 x x is not.
2. **Side suit texture:** If you have a side four-card suit with late round losers, you will want to ruff them in dummy. Consider opening with the four-card major. However, if your side suit has strong intermediates (Q, J, or 10), then opening with the four-card major is less advisable.
3. **Rebid considerations:** Assume you don't open with a four-card major, but partner responds in your shortest suit (they always do). If you will have an awkward rebid that can be avoided by opening the four-card major, choose the major.

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