

Tactics at Different Forms of Scoring

By Brian Senior

To the club player, bridge is bridge, and most play the same way whatever the form of scoring. The tournament player may not be fully conversant with the subtleties of the two forms, but generally knows that the most effective way to play teams bridge is a little different to the most effective way to play Pairs. And then there is BAM (Board-a-Match), also known as Point-a-Board, which is relatively new to the English bridge scene.

I liken the three forms of bridge to the three forms of cricket. Teams is like test cricket, with a relatively careful style; Pairs is 50-over cricket, a more aggressive style is warranted but there is still a place for caution; BAM is T20 cricket where, to be simplistic, batsmen take big risks and bowlers generally defend.

Teams (IMPs)

Bidding

Bidding at Teams is geared to the fact that the size of gains and losses is more important than the frequency of gain or loss. Take the decision whether to bid a thin game or stop in partscore and the simplistic assumption that you will be within one trick of making the higher contract. If you bid a vulnerable spade game and make it, you will be 10 IMPs better off than if you stop in partscore, scoring +620 instead of +170. If you go down one, you score -100 instead of +140, and lose 6 IMPs. And these gains and losses are identical, whether or not your counterparts at the other table bid to game - according to whether your counterparts bid the game, you are either trying to win the board or flatten it. It follows that if you if you make your game six times at 10 IMPs a time and go down ten times at 6 IMPs a time, you have come out exactly level: $6 \times 10 = +60$ IMPs, $10 \times 6 = -60$ IMPs. So if you could know that a game was 6 divided by 16, 37.5%, it would not matter in the long run whether you bid it or not - of course, in the short term it matters a lot, but we are talking theoretically now. As soon as the odds go above 37.5% you want to be in game, as soon as they drop below 37.5% you want to stop in partscore.

In practice, it is impossible to know, before seeing partner's hand, exactly what are the odds of success. It is also worth noting that the opening lead is one of the hardest parts of bridge, while declarer play is one of the easiest as you have no partner to worry about and can see all your side's assets. In practice, more contracts tend to make than should theoretically do so. What experienced players do is to bid optimistically when a vulnerable game is in the offing.

Non-vulnerable, the odds are not quite so good. Now we gain 6 IMPs when game makes, or lose 5 IMPs when it goes one down. So a non-vulnerable game should be bid when it is a little against the odds to succeed, but not by much - about 45% of the time.

Again, we are looking at an artificial scenario here where the contract either makes or goes down one.

Curiously, if it goes down two you have lost less, as you were going to fail by a trick if you stopped at the three level. Now you have turned -100 into -200, a loss of only 3 IMPs, while the gain from bidding a successful game is still 10 IMPs. The negative side of all this is that, if they can double a failing contract, your losses become greater. Down two doubled in game for -500 against down one undoubled for -100 a level lower costs you 9 IMPs.

Slam bidding is very simple - bid them if they are at worst 50%, for example, on a finesse, don't bid them if they are 50% at best. The size of the gain or loss is identical (actually, a non-vulnerable six of a minor is worth bidding when marginally anti-odds as you gain 11 or lose 10 IMPs).

Sacrificing over an opponent's game can be worth a lot of IMPs, but should not be overdone. I would suggest that, as a sound rule of thumb, one should have one undertrick to spare when contemplating a sacrifice. What I mean is that, if saving against a likely -620, there should be a reasonable hope of only going down -300, in

case things are not quite as friendly as you imagine. Then you still make a modest profit if you go down -500 instead. Before sacrificing you need to look carefully at the likelihood of the opponents' contract actually making. A lot of IMPs can be lost by sacrificing over a contract that is doomed to fail. Conceding -300 against a vulnerable game may gain you 8 IMPs when that contract would have made, but it costs you 9 IMPs when you have taken what is known as a phantom sacrifice, i.e. the opposing game would have failed.

I will make one more comment on sacrificing - if you don't sacrifice, that ends the auction and there is no further possibility that your opponents can misjudge in the auction. If you do sacrifice, they may sometimes bid on to the five level, and sometimes that will be a misjudgment and they will go down. That is the perfect sacrifice, when you push your opponents one level too high and you end up with a plus score. That factor suggests that, with a genuinely borderline decision as to whether to sacrifice, you should do so, as it gives your opponents one more opportunity to mess up.

And if your opponents do sacrifice against you? Unless you are pretty confident of making at a higher level, just take what money is available rather than risk going minus by bidding on. That way you may lose some IMPs, but you will avoid huge negative swings.

Partscore competition is a challenge at any form of the game. You do not want to risk going for penalties, which can happen if you push once too often and get doubled. At the same time, you don't want to let your opponents play in a contract where they are comfortable if you can find a way to compete without taking too great a risk. While team-mates always notice the odd -800 or -1100 on your card, costing 12 or 14 IMPs a time, they tend not to notice so much when there is a string of smaller losses, which can add up to more than the one big swing away. Letting your opponents make Two Hearts for -110 when you could have made Two Spades the other way costs you 6 IMPs. Two such boards cost as much as the -800 against a partscore. Again, it doesn't matter what happens at the other table - either you need to compete to flatten the board rather than lose 6 IMPs, or you need to compete to gain 6 IMPs, and passing for a flat board is a missed opportunity. Be careful when vulnerable, without overdoing the caution, but take some greater risk when non-vulnerable.

As for penalty doubles, the difference between -420 and -590 is 5 IMPs. The difference between +50 and +110 is 2 IMPs and between +100 and +300 5 IMPs. It follows that you should not be doubling a game for just one down. While the breaks may mean that the contract does go only one down, you should have a reasonable degree of hope for at least two down to double a freely bid game. Doubling partscores requires still greater caution. One down vulnerable in Two Hearts is +100, doubled is +200 - 3 IMPs, but the difference between -110 and -670 is 11 IMPs. You want to be pretty sure before doubling them into game.

Defence

Defence is pretty straightforward at Teams. You do everything you can to give yourself a chance to defeat the opposing contract, even if that involves risking giving away overtricks, or missing an extra undertrick. Where a contract looks to be likely to make if declarer is left to himself, you should risk making attacking, risky plays. Conversely, if it looks as though declarer will struggle, go passive and leave him to do all his own work.

This applies to opening leads as well as plays later on - if the bidding suggests that declarer will have an easy ride, that is the time to fish out king-doubleton leads and the like; when it looks as though declarer will find making the contract hard work, lead your MUDs and other safe leads to avoid giving him a leg up.

Regarding the overtricks, the difference between +100 and -620 is 12 IMPs, that between -620 and -650 just 1 IMP. You don't need to beat the contract very often to make a long-term profit by gambling an overtrick.

With regard to extra undertricks - they are worth having and missing out on them costs a little more than giving away overtricks - but still, make sure you beat a contract before you worry about the second or third undertrick. The difference between -620 and 100 is 12 IMPs, that between +100 and +200 only 3 IMPs.

Declarer Play

Declarer play at Teams is all about finding the best line to make your contract. Only once it becomes clear

that this is not really a possibility should you worry too much about extra undertricks or making overtricks. That is not to say that you should attempt real long shots - a 5% chance of success does not justify an extra undertrick, while a 20% shot to make a game probably does. Meanwhile, you should be sure that you are in control and will still make your contract before you try for overtricks.

If you are playing in a sacrifice, then just aim at a realistic number of tricks that will net you a profit if teammates are left to play in a successful game at the other table.

Pairs (Matchpoints)

Bidding

The tactics are quite different to those employed at Teams. At Pairs, what matters is not the size of gain or loss, but the frequency of gain or loss. There is no longer any premium on bidding thin games. To bid game you want exactly the same odds as to bid a slam - at least 50-50. In the long term, 51% shots will score you 51%. Of course, in the short term, you want to bid the ones that make and stay out of the ones that don't. It is impossible to know until the end of play, so just take the long-term view.

While the difference between +110 and +90 or the like, is largely irrelevant at Teams, but it could be the whole board at Pairs. Likewise, +400 or +420 doesn't really matter. Again, it can matter a lot at Pairs. Minor-suit contracts should be avoided if there is a plausible alternative.

Partscore bidding becomes more competitive. At Teams, the difference between -110 and -100 is zero, but at Pairs it can make a lot of matchpoints difference. It follows that you should compete much more freely than would be the case at Teams. If you turn that -110 into -100 three times, and into -500 a fourth time, you have improved your matchpoint result three times out of four and will make a long-term profit. At Teams, the -9 IMPs would cost more than the small profits.

Vulnerability is key to partscore competition. You want to push the opposition around - not allow them to play in their chosen contract at a comfortable level - but -200 is the kiss of death on a partscore deal as it cannot be matched by any pair declaring on the opposing cards. Even having said that, competition should be noticeably more aggressive, even vulnerable, than at Teams.

You should double the opponents' contract much more frequently than at Teams. Minus 590 is still a worse result than -420, of course, but if the contract goes down more often than not then the +100s instead of +50s will more than balance those occasions when the contract makes.

When I started out in bridge, I remember reading books which suggested that, if one expects to make Three Hearts for +140 and the opposition compete to Three Spades, one should double very aggressively to 'protect one's equity'. The theory is that taking an inadequate penalty will leave you with a bad result, so it is worth risking conceding a doubled partscore. Maybe that tactic is correct in a high-level event, but we all play in mixed-level events most of the time. I don't like to concede -530. Maybe it is as much psychological as anything, but I would rather take refuge in the protection that a large mixed field offers me and, if I get a bad result, it will still garner perhaps 30% of the matchpoints. I prefer to take my gambles in different situations. Still, if you have reason to be hopeful of defeating the opposing contract, feel free to double much more aggressively than at teams. After all, -530 is only a bottom.

Sacrificing should be a little more aggressive than at Teams. Three down for -500 scores very well against -620. If once in a while you go for -800 instead, it will be a bottom, but enough -500s will turn a long-term profit. The big bonus you get is that the opposition are also aware that their +500 may prove to be inadequate so are more inclined to take the push to the five level. That in turn gives you a greater chance of going plus if that contract fails. However, unless they are reasonably confident of success, the opposition should not take the push, settling for the penalty and trusting in the rest of the field to protect them and ensure a sensible, even if below average, matchpoint score.

Defence

Defeating the opposing contract is no longer what defence is all about. Now the key is to have a realistic target and not give easy overtricks away. Just as in the auction, so in the play and defence, the size of gain or loss is now less relevant than the frequency of gain or loss. The defenders should usually only take risks if there is a good chance to defeat the contract or if the opponents seem to have reached such a good contract that they will score very badly should it succeed.

Opening leads should be much more passive than at Teams. Unless the auction strongly suggests that there is a weakness in the suit, leading king doubletons, for example, risk giving an overtrick far more often than it leads to the defeat of a contract. An auction might suggest that these attacking leads are the only hope - both opponents bid strongly, dummy has a long side-suit which you know lies well for declarer, and so on. Now, even if the attacking lead blows a trick, it may be a trick that you were never going to get anyway. However, in general, there should be far more passive leads than at Teams. Three low, a trump, a safe sequence - leave declarer to find his own tricks. Against normal contracts, defend in a conservative fashion.

Declarer Play

Declarer play is a far more difficult aspect of the game than at Teams. Overtricks could be very valuable, while an extra undertrick may be very expensive. Simply going all out to make your contract in the safest possible way is no longer good enough. The first thing declarer should do before playing to trick one is to judge how good or normal a contract he is in.

Suppose that declarer thinks he is in an unusually good contract - perhaps a well-bid slam which will be missed by the bulk of the field - now declarer should protect the good work done in the auction and play just as at Teams, doing everything to make his contract. Conversely, what if he finds himself in a horribly inferior contract which most of the field will avoid. Now any failure will lead to a bad matchpoint score. Again, just as at Teams, declarer should go all out to try to make his contract, because it will cost him so little in matchpoint terms to lose an extra undertrick or two.

Most of the time, however, declarer will find himself in a normal contract, or perhaps one of a number of normal contracts for the particular deal. Now, over- and under-tricks could be worth a lot of matchpoints. It follows that declarer should take some risks to try to make the maximum, sometimes risking the contract in search of an overtrick. Equally, though it is psychologically difficult to make oneself do it, at times it is correct to give up on making the contract as soon as dummy goes down. If much of the field is in the same contract, -100 could be very good if most of the other declarers are down -200.

When contemplating taking risks in search of an overtrick, bear in mind that defence is difficult. Even when the cards lie such that you should now go down, the defenders may not realize the possibilities of the deal and you may still survive. So, in general, in a normal contract, take some risks and, again taking a long-term view, so long as what you try is sensible, you will make a profit.

BAM (Board-a-Match)/ Point-a-Board

At matchpoints, you have some protection from the sheer size of the field. A below-average result will be just that - unless you have a really bad result, you will still score a fair number of matchpoints because others will match or even do worse than you do.

At BAM, you are scoring up with just one other table. There is no such thing as a below-average board. You get either one, a half, or zero on each deal (some competitions use a two, one, zero scoring system). It follows that there is no field protection to keep your poor results from being disasters. BAM rewards accurate decision making and a strong nerve.

Bidding

As at pairs, there is no premium on bidding thin games. To put it simply, you want to bid those that are better than 50%, stay out of those that are less than 50% to make. Slams are just the same - bid the ones

that are over 50%, stop out of those that are below 50%. Once it becomes clear that both tables will reach slam, look to play 6NT rather than six of a minor and so on, just as you might at Pairs. On the other hand, if you think you have done very well to get to the six level, play in the safest spot available. Accurate judgment whether to play 3NT or four of a major could turn a zero into a half, or a half into a win. These are big decisions at BAM scoring.

Partscores should, as at pairs, be played in the best-scoring denomination - only play a minor if there is no alternative or it really looks as though it will provide an extra couple of tricks compared to the alternative. Doubles in competitive auctions need to be far more aggressive than in any other form of the game. Minus 530 may be a losing board but, if your counterparts at the other table have made something your way, is no worse than -140. Be careful against strong opponents about competing too hard when vulnerable - players who understand BAM will make speculative doubles because they know that +200 will usually win the board. High-level decisions are very tough at times. A sacrifice will pay off (assuming that the opposing contract would have been successful) if it costs less than their contract - if the alternative is -620, -500 will be just as good as -100. It follows that you should sacrifice more aggressively at BAM than at either Teams or Pairs. But now we turn our attention to the opposition, who have just been prevented from playing their making game. Should they settle for an indeterminate penalty, or should they gamble by bidding on to the five level? At this form of the game +500 will be useless if the result at the other table is -620, so the opposition will take the push to the next level far more often.

Defence

Even more so than at Pairs, the defenders should be looking to take a sensible number of tricks rather than to necessarily attempt to defeat the contract. Opening leads should often be passive, giving nothing away, while the approach to the subsequent defence can be decided after the sight of dummy, only trying to defeat those contracts that look as though the effort is likely to pay off. Conversely, you might take risks to get an extra undertrick against a normal contract. The over-riding factor is almost always, is this defence more likely than not to be successful?

Just as at Pairs, if you have reason to suspect that the opposition have reached a particularly good spot which may be missed at the other table, that is the one time to be aggressive in an all-out attempt to defeat it. Again, -620 and -650 will be all the same if team-mates are in partscore.

Declarer Play

As at Pairs, so at BAM. Declarer should in the first instance be looking to take a sensible number of tricks. If a contract looks to be very unlikely to succeed then declarer should not risk extra undertricks in pursuit of a miracle - just play safe for a sensible number of tricks. In an unusually bad contract, however, one that will not be reached at the other table, go all out to make it, because one, or two, or three down may all be the same losing board.

In an unusually good contract, declarer may play safely to protect the good work done in the auction.

In a standard contract, or one of two or three alternative normal contracts, play aggressively. Don't aim at your contract, rather, if a play looks odds on to work, try it, even though a 'cold' contract may now go down. That overtrick could win you a full point instead of a half.

Basically, most of what I have written about Pairs, applies also to BAM, only more so.

General

While we talk about three forms of the game, there are more than that when it comes to good tactics. I have discussed the three forms above but there are actually at least five.

Firstly, Teams. A long match, such as 48 boards in the Gold Cup, favours the test cricket approach - good solid play, though always taking opportunities to put the opposition under pressure. However, this approach is

designed to see you score at least one more IMP than your opponents. It may also a good approach to a multiple teams qualifying round - the type where you play 12 x 2-board rounds, for example. If a decent proportion of the field will qualify for the final, you can afford a solid approach. But if only two teams out of thirteen will qualify for the final you may need to loosen up somewhat - being +1 at the end of the session is no longer good enough. And, having made the final, +1 will again be insufficient, so to give yourself the best chance of winning you need to loosen up. Similarly, in a one-day Swiss event, you want to win some matches big. The solid approach may get a solid result, but a more aggressive approach may be required to give you a shot at actually winning the event.

Secondly, Pairs. The situation is much as for Teams. In a qualifying session of a Pairs tournament, you just need a solid session - 52% may be all that is required. Once it comes to the final, you will be aiming at 60% - that may not win every time, but it puts you in the mix for a win. And, once again, a more attacking approach gives you a better chance of overall success. It also, of course, gives you a greater chance of finishing nowhere, where continuing with the solid approach may ensure at least a top-half finish.