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Team Games: General Strategy

Two more people to get mad at.



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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 general strategy for team games only, and will emphasize areas where team game strategy is different from strategy used in a pairs game. It's a fairly lengthy article, so be forewarned.

There are two types of team games. In the first type (which doesn't have a specific name) you play against the same team for the entire session (typically 26 boards). In the second type (called "Swiss teams") you play different teams throughout the session (typically 7 boards per team, against eight different teams). The strategies vary somewhat for the two types. This article will focus on the first type, where you play against one team per session.

Scoring

In a team game, you have only two tables to worry about (the two tables your team plays at). The other tables will be playing totally different hands, so their results cannot influence your score. This is different from matchpoints, where you have to worry about everyone else in the game.

The two tables will play the same hands. Each table scores the hands separately. Your final result depends on the **difference** in the total score for all hands played at those two tables. A high positive difference for your team gives you a good result; a high negative difference gives you a poor result.

Actual scoring at a team game is a bit complex, but not nearly as complicated as in a pairs game (see the article on [matchpoint scoring](#) if you want your brain to hurt).

One (or both) members of each partnership is responsible for keeping score (ie, at least one person from each team at each table must keep score). Scores are recorded on the inside of a convention card.

The score for each hand is calculated exactly the same way as in a pairs game (ie, 2♠ making is worth +110, down two doubled and vulnerable is -500, etc).

Let's look at some example hands and see how the scores are recorded:

- **Hand 1:** At your table, you (sitting N) played 3♠ making exactly 3. Your score for the hand is +140 (which is -140 for your opponents). At the other table, your opponent (sitting N) played 3♠ but made 4. His score for the hand is +170 (which is -170 for your team).
- **Hand 2:** At your table, your opponent (sitting W) played 4♥ (vulnerable) making exactly 4. Your score for the hand is -620 (which is +620 for your opponents). At the other table, your teammate (sitting W) also played 4♥ but went down one. Your team's score at that table is -100 (which is +100 for your opponents).
- **Hand 3:** At your table, your partner (sitting S) bid a miraculous 5♣ (vulnerable) making 6. Your score for the hand is +620 (which is -620 for your opponents). At the other table, one of your teammates (sitting E) bid and made 4♠ not vulnerable. Your team's score at that table is +420 (which is -420 for your opponents).
- **Hand 4:** At your table, your opponent (sitting W) played 3NT (vulnerable) making 4. Your score for the hand is -630 (which is +630 for your opponents). At the other table, your teammate (sitting W) also played 3NT and made 4 as well. Your team's score at that table is +630 (which is -630).

Here's a picture of what the scoresheets would look like for these four hands:

Scoresheet at your table (sitting N/S)

Hand #	Contract	Result	Plus	Minus
1	3♣, N	—	140	
2	4♥, W	—		620
3	5♣, S	+1	620	
4	3NT, W	+1		630

Scoresheet at the other table (sitting E/W)

Hand #	Contract	Result	Plus	Minus
1	3♣, N	+1		170
2	4♥, W	-1		100
3	4♠, E	—	420	
4	3NT, W	+1	630	

The next step in determining your score is to compare the results from both tables, and calculate your net score for each hand (either positive or negative). In a team game lasting a full evening, this is done twice: once at the halfway point, and again at the end.

Here's a chart showing the results of the comparisons for the sample hands discussed above:

Hand	Table 1 Result	Table 2 Result	Net Score
1	+140	-170	-30
2	-620	-100	-720
3	+620	+420	+1040
4	-630	+630	0

The next step is to determine the IMP score that corresponds to the Net Score. This is done for each hand. You determine the IMP score by using the table that's printed inside your scoresheet. Your IMP score will be plus or minus, depending on whether your Net Score for the hand is plus or minus. Here's the same table as previously shown, with the appropriate IMP scores added. **Note:** The IMP score is zero whenever the Net Score is 0 to 10 points. This is called a "push".

Hand	Table 1 Result	Table 2 Result	Net Score	IMP Score
1	+140	-170	-30	-1
2	-620	-100	-720	-12
3	+620	+420	+1040	+14
4	-630	+630	0	0

Once you've calculated the IMP score for each hand, calculate your total IMP score (add your plus scores and minus scores separately) to determine your final IMP score for the complete match. In the above example, your final IMP score for the match would be +14/-13.

The last step is to verify your result with the opposing team (this is done by the team captain). The scores should be mirror images (ie, if your team's score is +62/-37, the opposing team's score should be +37/-62). If there are any discrepancies, recalculate your scores.

Actually, there's one additional complication that you don't have to worry about. Your IMP score is actually converted to something called "victory points", according to a chart published inside each convention card. This conversion is done by the game director. It won't change whether you won or lost; what it does do is "smooth out" the results so that huge final IMP scores are cut back to something not quite so embarrassing.

Important Point

This brings up the major difference in scoring between team games and matchpoints. At matchpoints, every hand is equally important to your final game score, regardless of the size of the score on any particular hand (see the article on [matchpoint scoring](#) for more details). In a team game, this is not the case. Large scores (like your +1040 and -720 in the above examples) carry much greater weight than small scores (like your -30).

Bidding Strategy

Bidding strategy in a team game can be considered under four headings:

1. Partscore battles
2. Bidding games
3. Bidding slams
4. High level competitive bidding

Partscore Battles

These are hands where both sides are bidding, but neither side has enough strength to make a game. Consistently winning partscore battles is a big advantage in a team game; there will be lots of them, so doing them well adds up. Winning partscore battles in a long match can compensate for one bad result (always your teammates' fault, of course).

The results of partscore battles can be one of the following:

- Your team plays a partscore at both tables, and both contracts make. This could happen, for example, if you and your partner are bidding hearts and your opponents at your table are bidding spades. Suppose your opponents bid 2♠ and your partner competes to 3♥, which ends the auction. At the other table, your teammates will be bidding spades and your opponents will be bidding hearts. At that table, your teammates may be allowed to play 2♠. If both contracts make, your team gain 6 IMPs on the hand (depending on the actual contracts and results, the IMP gain will usually be between 4 and 7).
- Your partnership makes a partscore contract, and the opponents' partscore contract at the other table goes

down. Let's say that you and your partner play 2♠, which makes exactly. At the other table, your teammates (sitting in the opposite direction) compete over 2♠ with a 3♥ bid and your opponents push on to 3♠, which goes down one not vulnerable. Your team gains 4 IMPs (depending on the actual contracts and results, the IMP gain will usually be between 3 and 8).

- Your partnership goes down in a partscore contract, and so do your teammates. Let's say that you and your partner play 3♠, which is down one vulnerable (your partner decided to compete over the opponents' 3♥ bid). At the other table, your teammates (sitting in the opposite direction) are allowed to play 3♥, which goes down one not vulnerable. Your team loses 4 IMPs (depending on the actual contracts and results, the IMP loss will usually be between 3 and 9).
- Your team plays a partscore at both tables, but only one makes. Let's take the previous example, and assume that you make your 3♠ contract while your teammates go down one not vulnerable in 3♥. Your team gains 3 IMPs (depending on the actual contracts and results, the IMP result will usually be between -4 and +3).

Let's look at an example auction. Assume neither side is vulnerable, and this auction occurs at both tables:

North	East	South	West
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠
3♥	?		

Should East pass, or bid 3♠? Let's consider the possibilities:

1. **Both partscores will make.** In this case, E/W will gain 7 IMPs by bidding 3♠.
2. **Only one partscore will make** (the other will be down 1). In this case, E/W will gain 3 IMPs by bidding 3♠.
3. **Neither partscore will make.** In this case, E/W will lose 3 IMPs by bidding 3♠.

The above calculations assume that the East player at the other table passes in the first two cases, but bids 3♠ in the third case. If the East player at the other table does exactly the same thing, neither team will gain IMPs (since both teams will get the same score for the hand).

The odds definitely favour bidding 3♠ by a 10/3 margin. The margin will vary depending on the actual contracts and results, but the principle is the same.

Rule Of Thumb: If you and your partner have a trump fit but cannot make game, compete to the three level.

Rule Of The Other Thumb: Be very cautious about doubling the opponents in a partscore contract. Only double when you have trump tricks or trump length in your hand, and you know that your side has at least 23 high card points in the combined hands. In the example above, N/S should not consider doubling 3♠ if East bids it. E/W do have a trump fit, and presumably the high card points are fairly evenly divided between the two sides. Compare with this auction:

North	East	South	West
1♥	2♠	3♣	pass
3♥	3♠		

Here East is definitely taking a significant risk. A penalty double could well result in a good score for N/S, since they definitely have at least 23 points in their combined hands. Whoever has spade length (or potential spade tricks) should double. Be especially keen to double if E/W are vulnerable. One thing to consider though: if East has any sanity at all, he will definitely be short in either clubs or hearts. Don't count on taking too many tricks in both of those suits (but be especially happy to double if you have tricks in diamonds; East may be hoping his partner can supply some help there).

Bidding Games

Always bid the obvious games; missing one of those will give you a very poor IMP score. The question in this section is whether to bid game when your side has less than the normal number of points required (25-26 for 3NT or 4 of a major, 28-29 for 5 of a minor).

Whenever it makes any sense at all, stretch to bid vulnerable games. Stretch a little to bid a nonvulnerable game, but the odds aren't quite as much in your favour. Remember that playing the hand is much easier than defending. Quite often even good players will make a defensive error that allows you to make a game contract when you really shouldn't. And sometimes you just get lucky, and all the adverse cards are in exactly the right spot.

When does it make sense to stretch? The following guidelines may help.

- **Don't bid game strictly on high cards.** For notrump, long suits (5+ cards) will increase your odds. For suit contracts, side suit shortness will add ruffing tricks. Here's an example of a pair that has 29 high card points between them, but 3NT will likely fail:

♠ A K 10	♠ Q J 7
♥ A J 9	♥ K Q 10
♦ J 8 2	♦ A 7 6 5
♣ J 8 5 2	♣ K 7 3

- **Consider high spot cards when evaluating your hand.** A K 3 2 opposite Q 5 4 will win four tricks only when the suit is divided 3-3 (a 35% chance). However, A K 10 7 opposite Q 9 8 is a 60% favourite to win four tricks.
- **Hands with matching distributions (especially 4-3-3-3) and no long suit tricks are bad prospects for game.** Here's an example of a partnership holding 27 combined points, plus a 4-4 spade fit. Prospects for 4♠ are poor; even 3♠ may be an overbid.

♠ K 8 4 3	♠ A 9 7 2
♥ 8 7 3	♥ Q 10 2

♦ A Q 6

♣ K 9 4

♦ K J 10

♣ A J 8

- **Matching doubletons are bad.** Matching doubletons can substantially reduce game prospects. If you have only small cards in the doubletons, you have two quick losers. If you have honours in both hands in the doubletons (eg A 10 opposite K Q) you are wasting your high card points.
- **Matching 5-2 fits are bad.** When each partner has a 5-card suit, the pair may bid game hoping for long suit tricks. However, when partner only has a doubleton in your suit you may not have time to develop the long suit tricks. Here's an example of a hand where most partnerships would bid 3NT, but unless both 5-card suits break 3-3 (definitely against the odds), the game will go down.

♠ K Q 7 5 4

♥ 7 5

♦ Q 10 3

♣ K 9 4

♠ 8 2

♥ A Q 8 6 3

♦ K J 9

♣ A 8 7

- **Use the opponents' bidding to help.** When the opponents enter the auction, you have more information about your chances of making a game contract. Use this information to help you decide whether to bid game, settle for a partscore, or even double the opponents if you feel they've bid too high.
- **Choose the right game.** Frequently you have a choice between playing 3NT or four of a major. The general rule is, play the major suit game with an eight card fit, and play notrump with a seven card fit. However, don't be afraid to play a major suit game with a 5-2 or 4-3 fit if you have one suit totally open. Here's two examples; in both cases, 4♠ is a much better contract than 3NT.

♠ A J 10 8 5

♥ 4 3

♦ A Q J

♣ K Q 9

♠ K Q

♥ 8 5 2

♦ K 9 7 3

♣ A 10 4 2

♠ A K Q 10

♥ A K 6

♦ K 8 4 2

♣ 8 7

♠ J 4 3

♥ Q J 9 4

♦ A 9 6 3

♣ 9 3

Even with a 4-4 major suit fit, consider 3NT instead if you have a solid side suit that will provide long suit tricks, or if your combined point count is 28 or more.

- **Avoid minor suit games.** A minor suit game typically requires a combined point count of 29 or more. Prefer 3NT unless you have a very long but not solid minor suit and shortage in one or more suits. Here's an example where the minor suit game is much better than 3NT:

♠ A K 6
♥ K Q 5 3
♦ 9 5
♣ A K Q 5

♠ 7
♥ A
♦ Q J 10 8 7 6 4 2
♣ 7 4 2

Bidding Slams

This is the glamorous part of team games. A slam bid at one table but not the other will give the slam-bidding side a big lead in IMPs.

However, don't stretch to bid a slam. Your teammates won't be happy if you go down one in a speculative slam when the opponents stopped in game at the other table. That gives the opposing team a big lead in IMPs as well.

A small slam should have at least a 50% chance of success before you bid it. A grand slam should be almost cold.

Don't jump to Blackwood just because you think your side has enough high card points for a slam. First, consider where your twelve (or thirteen) tricks are going to come from. Remember, having all the aces and all the kings only comes to eight tricks.

- **High cards.** Two flat hands counting only high cards require about 36 points to make a small slam.

♠ A K 8
♥ K Q 9
♦ A 7 4 3
♣ Q 3 2

♠ Q 5 2
♥ A J 7
♦ K Q 5
♣ A K 7 4

- **Long suits.** Long suits are the best source of tricks. A 5 3 2 opposite K 10 9 7 6 4 is a heavy favourite for six tricks, and only uses seven high card points.
- **Ruffs.** Ruffs are a source of tricks in themselves, and can also help establish a long suit.

High Level Competitive Bidding

Your side holds spades, and the opponents hold hearts. Your opponents have bid up to 4♥ (which they expect to make), and you're considering whether to sacrifice in 4♠. Particularly at IMPs, the odds favour bidding on, for three reasons:

1. You might make your contract after all.
2. The opponents may bid on to 5♥ and go down.
3. They may not be certain that you are sacrificing, and not double.

In summary, bid on when you think both contracts are close, and defend only when one contract will clearly go down. When your side is vulnerable and the opponents are not, be more cautious about saving. Be certain that the opponents' contract will make, and that you won't go down more than one (in this situation, the opponents are essentially forced to either double you or bid on, and they should be more likely to double).

Another area where high level competitive bidding can create big IMP scores (good or bad) is preemptive bids. It's usually safer to make frisky preempts in a team game than it is at matchpoints. Your opponents will be less likely to double a part score contract; if you make it, their teammates will be very upset, and no one likes to have the other three people on their team mad at them.

Declarer Play

In a team game, the emphasis is on making your contract. If you get overtricks due to defensive errors, great. But (unlike matchpoints) never risk a contract for overtricks even if the odds look good.

In many cases, deceptive declarer play (when it doesn't risk your contract) will both improve your score and annoy your opponents.

Concentrate on all the cards played, and count all four suits. Watch your opponents' discards, and try to make them guess what to throw away.

Defensive Play

At matchpoint games, defensive play is frequently conservative. The worst thing to do at matchpoints is to let declarer make an overtrick he shouldn't have made.

This consideration disappears in a team game. Defend aggressively and try to set the contract, even if it means declarer makes one (or even two) overtricks that weren't justified. Your opponents may gloat so much that they'll overbid the next three hands and you'll get some great scores.

Closing Thoughts

Here are some additional general tips about playing in a team game:

1. Try and get a plus score on all partscore hands, whether by making a contract yourself or pushing the opponents too high and setting them. The individual IMP scores won't be big on any one hand, but all those 3 and 4 IMP gains add up over the full match. They can even compensate for the major disaster your

teammates always seem to have. A good rule is fight your opponents up to the three level, then play for a plus score.

2. Never criticize your partner or your teammates, regardless of what happens. If your partner thinks all three of you are annoyed, he'll frequently become ultra-conservative to avoid more criticism. This will lose even more IMPs for your team.
3. Many matches are decided by the first three or four hands. If your side has an accident or disaster, resist the temptation to "try and get it back" by being reckless. Stay calm, play some solid bridge, and take some chances later in the match. Similarly, if your opponents have a disaster in the first few boards, pile on the pressure. They're already rattled, so try and rattle them some more.

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