



# KNOCKOUT TEAM STRATEGY

# KNOCK OUT TEAMS STRATEGY OVERVIEW

Knockout team events are the most common form of team game in North America.

The matches are usually long (24-32 boards) and a way of eliminating a large field to the winner.

A large field is divided into smaller fields, usually flighting by master point total as a method of stratification.

If the field is large enough each team will compete against other teams of the similar master points total.

## What to do to win team games

*Taken in part from [Ko Teams Strategy](#)*



# Overview

You will learn what to do to win team games today:

- Before you get there
- Picking teammates
- Bidding with the odds
- Common sense bidding
- Doubling strategies
- Competing at lower level
- At the half (behind)
- At the half (ahead)
- Swiss teams

Later you will learn how:

- Psychology of team games
- Non-competitive auctions and play
- Competitive auctions and play
- Play of the hand (safety)
  - Safety plays, squeezes and advanced plays
- Defensive play
  - Aggressive defense
  - Passive defense

# Knock Out Teams Strategy

- The most popular tournament format is undoubtedly knockout teams. You cannot, however, compete successfully without changing your strategy.
- In pairs you want the best score on every hand.
- In team play, however, you want a reasonable plus score or, failing that, a small minus. A flyer that costs 1,100 points can no longer be written off as, "It's only one board"; it well may be the entire match.



# Before you get there

- If you have an established partnership, don't add anything new in the month before the tournament.
- Don't consider anything a part of your system until the partnership has blown it at least once. Practice at the club, not at the tournament.
- Try to pair up with an established partnership. They'll make fewer mistakes. In a close match the team that makes the fewer mistakes usually wins.



# Before you get there

- Arrive early, and have your teammates do the same. Don't make your teammates worry about your not showing up. You all need some time to get your "game face" on.
- Arrive rested, and take a walk between sessions. Everyone's game goes down when tired, but many do not realize it.
- Minimize post-mortems between sessions. They not only take mental energy best saved for the next match but also risk creating ill will among your teammates.

# Bidding with the odds (games)

- Bidding games is vital in teams. You'll probably do well not bidding the doubtful game in pairs.
- You'll still be close to average even if it makes and you risk a bottom when you're wrong. But most big swings in teams come on game hands.

# Bidding with the odds

- Bid games aggressively, especially vulnerable. Bid the vulnerable game if you judge it to be at least a 38% chance. The breakeven on non vulnerable games is 45%.
- Amazingly, the odds are exactly the same for majors, minors and no trump!



# Bidding with the odds (slams)

- A small slam is a 50-50 proposition. You gain the 500/750 slam bonus; you stand to lose the same amount if you're wrong. If you think your chances are better than 50%, bid it.
- Bid the small slam if it needs a finesse and there is a chance for a trick somewhere else. Possibly by establishing the 5<sup>th</sup> card or a 3-3 break in a side suit. The combined chances are much better than 50%.

# Bidding with the odds

W	N	E	S
			1♠
	2NT		3♥
	3♠		4♦
	5♦		?

♠ AQ843  
 ♥ 7  
 ♦ AJ1032  
 ♣ A6

South

- On this auction, you know you have a heart loser. It appears the hands fit well. Partner must have the ♣K or the ♠K, if not both, to make a forward-going bid of 5♦.
- With the ♥A, North would have bid 4♥ over 4♦.
- Maybe you can set up the diamond suit. At worst ♠6 should depend on a finesse and may well be cold.
- Bid 6♠.

# Bidding with the odds

W	N	E	S
			1♠
	2♥		3♦
	3♠		4♣
	5♣		?

♠ AQ843

♥ 7

♦ AJ1032

♣ A6

South

- You hold the same hand but the bidding is different. Slam is now less assured. Partner has denied the ♥A and the ♦K.
- How do you know?
- Over 4♣, South would bid 4♦ with the King of ♦, or 4♥ with the Ace of ♥.
- Unless partner has a running club suit, the contract at best depends on a diamond finesse. You face the added danger of a bad trump break (better than a 30% chance), making the slam less than a 50/50 proposition.
- Sign off with 5♠.

## Bidding with the odds (slams)

- First, the opponents may not bid the small slam. Now your grand gets you only 4 more IMPs, while going down turns a +13 into -13.
- Don't ask how they could miss the small slam. It happens.
- There is also the psychological factor; going down in a grand slam is bad for team morale. Bid the grand when only you can count 13 tricks.

# Bidding with the odds (grand slams)

- Grand slams require 55-57% odds to make them a good bet, based strictly on the IMP differential.
- If you're wrong, you lose the small slam bonus as well as the game bonus. In practice you need much better odds.

# Common sense bidding

- Be cautious when pushing the opponents into game, especially a vulnerable one.
- They might make it. They get 620 when they were willing to settle for 170.
- That's a 10-IMP swing.

# Common sense bidding

Knowing whether to push after a competitive auction is difficult.

The factors to consider are:

- quick tricks,
- trump length and strength,
- a second suit fit and
- the aggressiveness of opponents (do they tend to overbid?)

Sometimes the X factor is the opponents' trumps

- There is the possibility that they have +140 and so do you. Not bidding 3♠ over 3♥ could cost you 7 IMPs.
- The keys are trump length/double fit and whether your hand(s) is/are offensive or defensive oriented.
- If you do push to, say 3♠, on an offensive hand, you'll probably need to go to 4♠ over 4♥.

# Common sense bidding

South			
W	N	E	S
		1♠	X
2♠	3♥	P	P
	?		

♠ KJxx

♥ xx

♦ Axxx

♣ xxx

South

- Let's say you're faced with the bidding decision with this hand in pairs, both vulnerable.
- The logic supports a 3♠ bid in pairs.
- Nevertheless in teams you should pass.
- The opponents may bid 4♥, and they may make it. Partner promised two tricks with his opening bid, and you might only add one. Your distribution is flat.
- You have the worst possible heart holding. You should not risk a 10 IMP swing.
- PASS



# Common sense bidding

W	N	E	S
		1♠	X
2♠	3♥	P	P
	?		

♠ Q1063  
♥ 6  
♦ A109732  
♣ 32

South

- Same bidding, but now you hold **this hand**.
- Now 3♠ is a good bid.
- You are willing to compete to 4♠ should the opponents bid 4♥. (You might even have bid 4♠ earlier.)

# Common sense bidding

W	N	E	S
	1♦		1♥
	1NT		??

♠ 74  
♥ K1084  
♦ Q10752  
♣ 96

South

- In pairs you would probably pass, banking on the higher value of NT tricks.
- In teams, you should bid 2♦. You certainly have an eight-card fit, probably nine. Take the sure 90 or 110. Even if 1NT occasionally nets a +120, the safety of the minor is much more important than the occasional 1 IMP.
- You might even consider 2♦ with only 4 trumps, though that bid might help the opponents find their spade fit.

# Common sense bidding

W	N	E	S
3♦	X	P	?

♠ AQ10  
♥ J976  
♦ A5  
♣ K952

North

♠ 532  
♥ AKQ  
♦ KQ  
♣ J10863

South

- Consider five of a minor rather than 3NT. While this is the opposite to a pairs partnership, the minor suit contract will frequently offer more safety.
- This is particularly true when the bidding indicates one or both of you are short in a suit and/or only have one stopper in the suit.

# Common sense bidding

W	N	E	S
	3♦	X	5♦

- You know the opponents have a sure game, most likely a small slam and maybe even the grand.
- Bid 5♦ against opponents not likely to find their slam.  
Against better opponents, try 6♦.

♠ 95  
♥ 8  
♦ A863  
♣ J108632

South

# Common sense bidding

- Be careful about sacrificing. Down 500 vs. 620 can earn you a top in pairs. But it's only 3 IMPs in teams. If they couldn't have made their contract, you lose 12 IMPs.
  - In addition, they are much more likely to double you than push to the 5-level in teams. They may take the sure plus.
  - If you are certain your maximum loss is 3 tricks at equal vulnerability, your sacrifice is less risky. You gamble  $-800$  vs.  $-620$  ( $-5$  IMPs) against the hope of only  $-500$  ( $+3$  IMPs) or  $-200$  ( $+9$  IMPs). But  $-1,100$  or worse is not good for team morale.
  - **If in doubt, opt for safety and don't sacrifice.**

# Double or not Double?

- Do **not** double them into game unless you “know” you can beat them two tricks. Say you double 2♠. If you’re right, you can turn a 200 into 500. But if you’re wrong, you give them 790 rather than the 110 they were entitled to.
- On the other hand, there can be great rewards in doubling contracts below 2♥ (always on a trump stack, preferably with a defensive oriented hand). Let’s change the above doubled contract to 2♦. You still can turn the 200 into 500. But if you’re wrong, you only lose 90.
- (The opponents would never get overtricks or redouble when you double a part score, would they?)

# Double or not Double?

- The old adage that “the five-level belongs to the opponents” has great merit in teams, especially when the opponents are clearly sacrificing.
- Say both sides are vulnerable. In pairs you can't afford +500 on a hand where you can make five of major. But the loss is only 4 IMPs in a team game. Find another trick and you're +4 IMPs. Find two more and you have a big swing.
- Remember the strategy in IMPs is to get a good plus score, not necessarily the best plus possible.

# Competing at lower levels

- Many matches hinge on the battle for the part scores. Those 5 and 6 IMP swings add up. Try not to let them play in an 8-card fit at the two-level. Larry Cohen in *To Bid or Not to Bid: The Law of Total Tricks* makes this point much better than I ever could .
- Remember that as long as you have a good trump fit, they aren't likely to be doubling you below game. That assumes they understand teams strategy!
- This allows you to compete vigorously for part scores.



# Play of the hand (Safety 1<sup>st</sup>)

Contract: 6 Spades

Lead 9♣

IN Teams, your primary object is to MAKE THE CONTRACT. You get only an IMP or two for overtricks, but blowing a makeable game or slam costs 10 IMPs or more.

♠ AQ107

♥ KQ5

♦ A103

♣ K652

North

♠ 98652

♥ A74

♦ 7

♣ AQ873

South

- Playing 6 spades, the opening lead is the 9♣ .
- In a pairs you want to make the maximum tricks, so finesse spades.
- In a team game, win the lead and play to the ♠ Ace.
- Return to your hand and lead toward the spades remaining on the board.

# Play of the hand (Safety 1<sup>st</sup>)

Contract 6 Spades

Lead ♣9

In teams, your primary object is to **MAKE THE CONTRACT**. You get only an IMP or two for overtricks, but blowing a makeable game costs 10 IMPs or more.

♠ AQ107

♥ KQ5

♦ A103

♣ K652

North

♠ 98652

♥ A74

♦ 7

♣ AQ873

South

- On the previous hand, our opponents didn't bid the slam and got 650 and 13 IMPs. If I play it right, we net +780 and the 13 IMPs. That's a 26 IMP swing.
- Make sure that your safety play is not jeopardizing the contract! There are few comments more disheartening than hearing partner say, "Sorry I went down. I played it for safety."

# Play of the hand (find a lie of the cards that will allow you to make)

Contract 3NT

Lead  $\diamond 4$

$\spadesuit$  AQ10  
 $\heartsuit$  J976  
 $\diamond$  A5  
 $\clubsuit$  K952

North

$\spadesuit$  532  
 $\heartsuit$  AKQ  
 $\diamond$  KQ  
 $\clubsuit$  J10863

South

- Find a lie of the cards that will allow a bad contract to make, even at the cost of additional undertricks.
- The rewards for making the contract almost always offset the cost of an extra undertrick.
- Playing for down one may be good in pairs, but it rarely works in teams.

# Play of the hand (find a lie of the cards that will allow you to make)

Contract 3NT

Lead  $\diamond 4$

$\spadesuit$  AQ10

$\heartsuit$  J976

$\diamond$  A5

$\clubsuit$  K952

North

$\spadesuit$  532

$\heartsuit$  AKQ

$\diamond$  KQ

$\clubsuit$  J10863

South

- You win East's jack and take the club finesse. East takes her queen and returns the  $\diamond 9$ .
- In pairs you would cash out for down 2, or maybe finesse the  $\spadesuit Q$  to beat those cashing out.
- In teams you should double finesse the spades.
- Yes, the odds are 3:1 against you, and you'll probably go down three rather than two. But the extra undertrick only costs you 50 (perhaps 2 IMPs) while making the game nets you +500 for 11 IMPs. That's more than enough to go for the game.

# Play of the hand (find a lie of the cards that will allow you to make)

Contract 3NT

Lead  $\diamond 4$

$\spadesuit$  AQ10

$\heartsuit$  J976

$\diamond$  A5

$\clubsuit$  K952

$\spadesuit$  532

$\heartsuit$  AKQ

$\diamond$  KQ

$\clubsuit$  J10863

- You win East's jack and take the club finesse. East takes her queen and returns to  $\diamond 9$ .
- In pairs you would cash out for down 2, or maybe finesse the  $\spadesuit Q$  to beat those cashing out.
- But if you are doubled with a small chance (say, 15-20%) to make the contract versus down 3 or more, it is usually right to **avoid the big number**.
- Let's say East doubled 3NT (not lead directing) and you are faced with the same decision at trick 4. Now the extra undertrick costs you 200 while making it gets you 650. In addition the double by East undoubtedly means he has a spade honor if not both.
- Best now to cash out rather than risk 5 IMPs against long odds.

# Defensive play

In teams, your primary object is to BEAT THE CONTRACT.

If you beat a non vulnerable game, you win 10 IMPs. An over trick is not very important in the grand scheme.

- Considerations for aggressive or passive defense include:
  - They bid confidently to game, suggesting they may even have some extra values. A passive lead is better when they inch their way to game (e.g., 1♥-2♥; 3♥-4♥).
- Aggressive action is required if:
  - Key cards are favorably placed for declarer.
  - Key suits are breaking well for declarer.
  - Dummy has a long suit that figures to be a source of tricks.
  - They have a double fit.
  - You know from the auction that partner has quite a few points.
  - They are in a *non-vulnerable* game. (They are more likely to push for a vulnerable game, suggesting this one is more likely to make).

# Defensive play

- Lead of the king from Kx makes more sense in teams than in pairs, especially if the auction suggests an aggressive lead.
- A singleton is more likely to be the winning lead than in pairs.
- The lead of an ace against a suit slam may save a valuable overtrick in pairs, but holding them to 6 is *not* the objective in teams. It is somewhat less likely to get a good result in teams.
- Factors against cashing the ace include:
  - Declarer is the stronger hand
  - They cue bid their way to slam rather than rushing to 4N. (When cue bidding, they are less likely to be off the AK in a suit.)
  - The hands are not particularly distributional, reducing the chance of a sluff in the suit you hold the A.
- Lead more cautiously if they are in a close game.

# Defensive play

## Later plays

- Now you can better judge the likelihood the contract will make. If you are sure it's making, almost any chance is reasonable.
- But don't hope for the impossible. Give them enough +1's and you may lose by that margin!
- Your risky play, even if well timed, will often lose 30 points, or 1 IMP. But when it works, you stand to gain 470 to 720, 10 or 12 IMPs, respectively. Just make sure your aggressive play doesn't give them a contract that was going down. (Ugh, it's too painful to compute that IMP cost.)



# At the half (behind)

- If you're behind by a lot, say 35-40+ points
- You need some big swings. You often must "shoot for tops" to get them.
- You won't catch up by staying out of the marginal game where the opponents may go down. In part scores you can only pick up 6 IMPs or so. You must bid (and make) the game or slam they miss.
- Warning: for experienced partnerships only. Consider changing your systems to get results different than the other table. If your opponents at the other table play weak NT's, think about changing to strong NT. Or try regular Blackwood rather than RKCB. You may get to a slam that depends on a finesse for the trump king. Just be sure you and your partner know the new system well enough. You certainly can't afford bidding misunderstandings at this point.

# At the half (ahead)

- Since you want flat, boring hands, some recommend shuffling the cards really well at your table. This creates hands close to normal distribution, meaning almost  $2/3$  of all hands have no singleton or void.
- I believe the opposite is true, that poor shuffling creates even flatter hands. In any event, I personally think it's unethical to shuffle differently based on the score. It may be not in the same league as stacking the deck, but that doesn't make it right.
- Be aware the opponents should be following the strategy in the discussion in the previous slide.

# At the half (ahead)

- If you think they'll push on a hand, perhaps you should too. You can't lose as long as you duplicate the opponents' results.
  - Once after my opening bid of 2NT, partner bid 3N on xx, xxx, xxx, Qxxxx. She reasoned the opponents would bid it and she wanted to keep even with them. They didn't bid it. Personally, I think it was a terrible bid. Unfortunately I did make 3; a wonderful opportunity for learning was lost!
- Remember shooting for tops is a losing strategy in the long run. It works because it's just as bad to lose by 10 as it is by 60, and sometimes you'll win. But most of the time you'll lose by 60!
- So be careful in "keeping pace." This is not a license for crazy bidding.

# At the half

W	N	E	S
	1♦		1♠
	2NT		3♣
	3♠		4NT
	5♣*		5♦*
	5♠*		P

♠ A73  
 ♥ A43  
 ♦ K975  
 ♣ AK6

North

♠ J10962  
 ♥ 7  
 ♦ AQ432  
 ♣ 109

South

- At the other table they play RKC and the bidding will likely go as shown on the left.
- 5♣\* shows 0 or 3 Keycards, 5♦\* asks for the Q of ♠, 5♠ says I do not have the ♠Q.
- On this hand few RKCB pairs will get to 6♠. After learning the partnership is off a key card and the ♠Q, it's hard for South to bid the 25-point slam.

# At the half

W	N	E	S
	1♦		1♠
	2NT		3♣
	3♠		4NT
	5♠		6♠

♠ A73  
♥ A43  
♦ K975  
♣ AK6

North

♠ J10962  
♥ 7  
♦ AQ432  
♣ 109

South

- Let's say you decided to switch to regular Blackwood because you are behind.
- On this hand few RKCB pairs will get to 6♠. After learning the partnership is off a key card and the ♠Q, it's hard for South to bid the 25-point slam.
- However, playing regular Blackwood, you know you have all the aces and a double fit
- Bid 6♠

# At the half (behind)

- I suggested that you bid only grand slams you are sure you'll make. That is more conservative than the actual percentages dictate. If you think it's somewhat better than an even chance, go for it.
- But this isn't a license for crazy bidding.
- You can also get a big swing with an unusual lead, usually against NT. For example, you might lead your broken 5-card suit rather than the top of a sequence of 4 cards. Or try to hit partner's suit rather than from your length. As one top player put it, "I'm not making up 38 points leading 4<sup>th</sup> best."
- Keep mental track of where you are. If you feel you've earned a few big swings to get back in, stop shooting for tops. You stand a much better chance of giving the big swings to them.

# Swiss teams (shorter matches)

Most everything already discussed has relevance to Swiss teams, but not entirely.

- For example, one overtrick is much more likely to win a match of 6 or 7 boards than a 24-board match.
- Each overtrick in Swiss may move you up one level on the Victory Point conversion chart. There is no such benefit in KO's.
- So be careful in applying all of the above to Swiss.



# Summary

- View everything here as a guideline.
- Guidelines never replace thinking.
- Bid your vulnerable games aggressively.
- Bid part scores aggressively, following the LAW, especially with good trumps.
- Find a way to make your contract, even at the cost of more undertricks.







# Summary continued

- Find a way to beat their contract, but be careful that your aggressive play doesn't let them score an unmakeable one.
- Double them in part scores only with trump tricks and when you can see defensive tricks.
- Preempt a little more aggressively, especially when you are not vulnerable, but always base the level on the LAW.
- Most of all, avoid the big disaster. The team that makes fewer mistakes usually wins.

Dealer - South

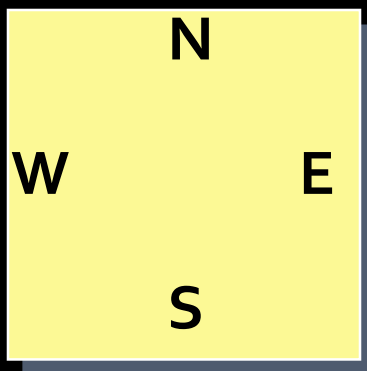
Contract 4 Spades

Lead ♥A

Hand One

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

♠ -  
♥ A K Q 10 6 2  
♦ 10 9 4 3  
♣ 9 5 4



♠ Q J 7 5  
♥ 8 3  
♦ 7 2  
♣ Q J 8 6 2

Defensive commentary: East starts a high low in hearts and West continues with the K and Q, dummy ruffing the third heart with the 9. What should East do?

♠ A 8 6 4 3 2  
♥ 9 x x  
♦ A x  
♣ A T

If you overruff and partner shows out on the ♠K, declarer will have an easy time finessing you out of your remaining honor.

Dealer - South

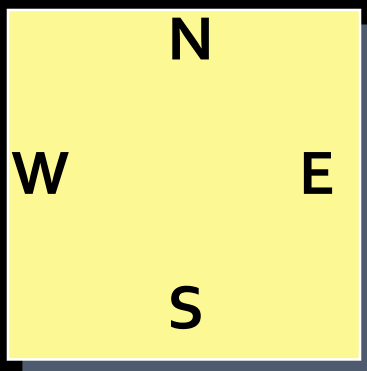
Contract 4 Spades

Lead ♦ Q

Hand Two

♠ 9 3 2  
♥ 6 5 4  
♦ 9 6 3 2  
♣ J 9 8

♠ -  
♥ KJ98  
♦ QJT5  
♣ Q7532



♠ 8764  
♥ T7  
♦ K84  
♣ KT64

Defensive commentary: East plays the ♦ 8 at trick one to show partner the king.

Play commentary:

How do you play at matchpoints vs IMPs?

♠ AKQJT5  
♥ AQ32  
♦ A7  
♣ A

If you can ruff a heart in dummy with the ♠ 9, that makes 10 tricks. Do it. Win the ♦ A and play the ♥ A and another heart. No matter what the opponents do, you are in great shape.

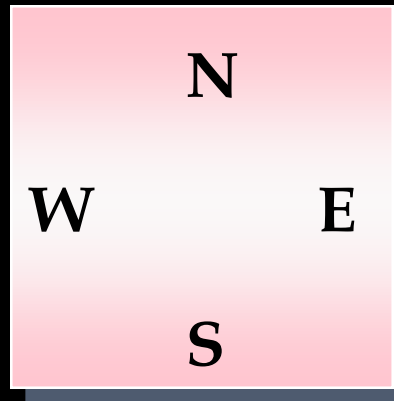
Contract: 3NT

Lead: ♠ J

Hand Three

♠ Q 4  
♥ 8 5 2  
♦ 10 7 4  
♣ A K 6 4 2

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



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

♠ A K 7  
♥ A K 6  
♦ A 8 5 2  
♣ 8 7 3

You are in 3NT.

Plan the play at matchpoints vs imps.

*At matchpoints*

*You should duck ♣ once to get the maximum number of tricks. ([review odds](#))*

*At IMPs duck ♣ twice and make sure of 9 tricks.*



# What have you Learned?

- You will not retain everything presented today. You will need to review and practice.
  - Review: What have you learned today?
- 