Duplicate bridge strategy:
Pairs (matchpoints) vs teams (IMPs)

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There are two main forms of duplicate bridge: *pairs* and *teams*. In pairs games, you and your partner compete against other pairs who play the same hands. Pairs events are scored by *matchpoints*.

In team games, you and your partner team up with another pair. You play against a pair from another team, and your teammates play the same hands (with directions reversed) against the other pair from the other team. At the end, your scores are compared and converted to *IMPs* (International Match Points).

At the bridge table, we are confronted with many types of decisions:

- Should we bid a close game?
- If the opponents are competing, should we outbid them, double, or pass?
- In game or slam, which suit (or NT) should we play in?
- As declarer, should we try for an overtrick or play safe for the contract?
- On defense, should we play aggressively for a set or avoid giving up overtricks?

It's quite possible the answer will be different depending on the type of scoring.

Review: duplicate scoring

In all forms of duplicate, the result of playing a hand is a score, which can be positive or negative.

Trick scores: NT: 40 for 1st trick, 30 for others; Majors: 30; Minors: 20
If doubled, trick scores are doubled; if redoubled; they are quadrupled. *Note:* game bonuses apply if a doubled or redoubled partscore results in a trick score over 100

Undertricks: Undoubled: 50 (NV), 100 (V)
Doubled: 100, 300, 500, 800... (NV); 200, 500, 800... (V)
Redoubled: twice the doubled value

Bonuses: Partscore = 50
Game (100+ points trick score)= 300 (NV) or 500 (V).
Small slam = 500 (NV) or 750 (V); grand slam = 1000 (NV) or 1500 (V)
Making a doubled contract: 50; redoubled: 100
Doubled overtricks: 100 (NV) or 200 (V); redoubled: 200 (NV) or 400 (V)

Matchpoint scoring

In pair games, each hand (or *board*) is played a number of times, which is usually the number of rounds; for example, 13 rounds when 2 boards a round are played, or 9 rounds when 3 boards a round are played.

At the end of the game, you get a matchpoint score on each board:

- **1 matchpoint for every pair you beat**
- **1/2 matchpoint for every pair you tie**

The best possible score on any board is called a **top**. This equals the number of times the board was played minus 1. A **bottom** is zero. The average score is **top**/2.

Your **total score** is the sum of your matchpoints on all the boards. The players are ranked (first, second, third...) by their total scores. Your **percentage** score at the end of the game = total score / (top score). If you scored exactly average you're said to have a "50% game."

Here's an example from actual play:

Board 4
West Deals
Both Vul

	♠ 6 5 4 3 ♥ K Q ♦ 10 7 6 3 2 ♣ 10 7	
♠ J 10 ♥ 6 4 ♦ Q J 9 8 4 ♣ A J 3 2	N W E S	♠ 9 8 2 ♥ 10 8 7 2 ♦ A 5 ♣ Q 8 5 4
	♠ A K Q 7 ♥ A J 9 5 3 ♦ K ♣ K 9 6	

NS 4♠; NS 3♥; NS 2N; NS 1♦; Par +620

Contract	Made	Scores		Matchpoints	
		N-S	E-W	N-S	E-W
4 ♠ S	4	620		10.50	1.50
4 ♠ N	4	620		10.50	1.50
4 ♠ N	4	620		10.50	1.50
4 ♠ S	4	620		10.50	1.50
2 ♠ S	5	200		8.00	4.00
1 ♥ S	4	170		6.00	6.00
2 ♠ S	4	170		6.00	6.00
1 ♥ S	4	170		6.00	6.00
1 ♥ S	3	140		2.00	10.00
1 ♥ S	3	140		2.00	10.00
1 ♥ S	3	140		2.00	10.00
1 ♥ S	3	140		2.00	10.00
2 ♥ S	3	140		2.00	10.00

The best result was 4 spades making 4 for 620. Each pair making 620 beat 9 other pairs and tied 3, so their score was 9 + 1.5 = 10.5. (Their table opponents got 12 - 10.5 = 1.5) Those that made 4 but didn't bid game got 6 MPs. Those that made 2 got 2 MPs. So making a single overtrick could improve your score by about the same as bidding a game! This is very different from IMPs.

IMP scoring

In a team game, you compare the scores at the two tables on each board. This results in a positive or negative number, which is converted to IMPs.

Point difference	IMPs
0 - 10	0
20 - 40	1
50 - 80	2
90 - 120	3
130 - 160	4
170 - 210	5
220 - 260	6
270 - 310	7
320 - 360	8
370 - 420	9
430 - 490	10
500 - 590	11

600 - 740	12
750 - 890	13
900 - 1090	14
1100 - 1290	15
1300 - 1490	16
1500 - 1740	17
1750 - 1990	18
2000 - 2240	19
2250 - 2490	20
2500 - 2990	21
3000 - 3490	22
3500 - 3990	23
4000 or more	24

The winner of a team match is the side that scored more IMPs. Team games can have different formats:

- In *knockout* tournaments, you play a long match (i.e. 24 boards) against another team. The loser is eliminated; the winner goes to the next round.
- In *Swiss teams*, you play matches against several teams; typically 6-8 rounds of 6-9 boards. Your opponent in each round usually has a similar record to yours.

Here is an example of an IMP match from Bridge Base Online. (It shows 12 boards from a longer match.)

#	Open Room				Closed Room				IMPs	
	N: Leibowitz S: Gosney		E: Gumby W: Lazer		E: Wu W: Rew		N: Neill S: Griffiths			
1	4♠N=	420					4♠N+1	450		1
2			4♥E+3	510	4♥E+3	510			--	--
3	3♥N=	140				50	4♥N-1		5	
4			3♠xW=	730	3♠W=	140				11
5	4♠N-1			100		100	4♠N-1		--	--
6	4♠N=	420					3NTS+1	430	--	--
7			4♠E+1	650	6♠E-1			100		13
8	6♣N-1			50			3NTS=	400		10
9	4♥S=	420					2♥S+1	140	7	
10			4♠E+1	650	3NTW+2	660			--	--
11			5♠E=	450	4♠E=	420				1
12			2♠W+2	170	4♠W=	420			6	

At IMPs, the size of the swing is much more important than at matchpoints, where all boards are equal. Looking at this match:

- 6 boards had small swings of 0 or 1 IMP, pretty unimportant at IMPs. But at matchpoints, 10-30 points could be the difference between a top and a bottom!
- 3 boards had moderate swings of 5-7 IMPs. These would be good swings at matchpoints too.
- 3 boards had big swings of 10-13 points. These have a significant impact on the whole match, while at matchpoints they would only be 3 boards out of 26.
- On board 4, both teams made 3 spades, but one was doubled, so they got the game bonus, for a big swing. Doubling the opponents into game is a disaster at IMPs! At matchpoints, it's not good, but it's only 1 board.

Summary of strategy: IMPs vs matchpoints

	IMPs	**Matchpoints**
Overall strategy	Play good bridge!	Play good bridge!
Cost/benefit analysis	Maximize large gains and minimize large losses. Small swings are less important.	Maximize number of pairs you beat. Small differences can be very important. Large losses are bad but they are only 1 board
Overtricks	Play safe for your contract. Go for overtricks only when not risking the contract.	Take reasonable chances to make overtricks *if* you are in a normal contract
Bidding games	Be aggressive, particularly if vulnerable. Bid the safest game, not the highest-scoring.	Bid 50%+ games. Be willing to bid riskier games if they score higher
Bidding slams	Bid small slams if 50%+. Bid safest slam.	Bid slams if 50%+. Be willing to bid riskier slams if they score higher.
Grand slams	Be very sure they will make.	Be very sure they will make.
Partscores	Compete aggressively, but not quite as much as matchpoints.	Compete aggressively. Rarely let them play a 2-level fit. +200 is great, -200 is bad.
Doubles	Don't double unless you are very certain, *particularly if doubling a partscore into game*	Double aggressively, particularly if they are vulnerable.
Defense	Take risks to beat game	Avoid giving up overtricks
High-level competition	Avoid double game swings	Take the action that is most likely to gain

Differences in strategy

When making bidding or play decisions, your approach is different in the two forms of the game.

IMPs: you try to **maximize positive swings and minimize negative swings**. Large swings are more important than small swings. Therefore, hands with slams, games or large penalties are more significant than partscore hands. A single decision can gain or cost anywhere from 0 to dozens of IMPs.

Matchpoints: you try to **maximize the number of pairs you beat** on each hand It doesn't matter *how much* you beat them by. You can lose to another pair because you went down or because you failed to make an overtrick. Neither is more important. A wrong decision on any hand will gain or cost 0, 1, or 1/2 matchpoint against each other pair. All boards count the same; partscore hands are just as important as slam hands.

Overtricks

Should you risk your contract to try for 1 or more overtricks? The short answer: in IMPs, no! In matchpoints, yes, if you are favored to succeed.

At IMPs, each overtrick gains about 1 IMP. But if you go down in your contract, you lose not only the penalty (50 or 100) but also the trick score and bonus you would have made. If you are NV in 4 spades making 4, you get 420. If you risk your contract for an overtrick, you lose 420 + 50 for the penalty, which is 10 IMPs. Since you risk 10 times what you can gain, you need to have better than 10:1 odds on the overtrick (90%+). In other words, forget it!

At matchpoints, things are quite different. If you expect the other players to be in the same contract, your possible gain and loss are about equal! If you play for the overtrick and win, you win the same number of matchpoints as you lose if you are wrong. Therefore, if you have better than a 50% chance of success, do it!

Note: If you are in an exceptional contract that you don't expect many to be in, or if you get a very favorable opening lead, you're already ahead of the game, so don't take any further risks for overtricks. On the other hand, if you are in a bad contract, then you should go all out to make it.

If you are on defense, the situation is similar. At IMPs, try to beat the contract at all costs, because there is such a big payoff if you do. Don't worry about blowing an overtrick or two by making an aggressive lead, for example. At matchpoints, sometimes a safer lead is better to cut down on overtricks, even if you are less likely to beat the contract.

♠AK
♥765
♦KJ103
♣AQ6

South plays 3NT; LHO leads the ♠2 (which looks like 4th best). You have 6 top tricks and can set up 3 more by driving out the ♦A. RHO wins the ♦A and returns the ♠3 (which also looks like 4th best). Now have 9 tricks but no spade stoppers. Should you finesse in clubs for overtricks?

♠532
♥AKQ
♦Q842
♣J103

At matchpoints, it's definitely worth a try; even if the finesse loses you probably won't lose more than 2 spades. At IMPs, it's best to be cautions and cash your 9 tricks rather than trust the opponents' signals.

♠32
♥872
♦KQJ109
♣AQ5

3NT contract; LHO leads ♠K. You have 6 top tricks and need 3 more. The best source of tricks is diamonds, but when the opponents take their ace, they will take *at least* 4 spades to set you. Is there any alternative?

♠A4
♥AQ109
♦654
♣KJ43

You can play for RHO to have ♥KJx. Lead a club to dummy and finesse the ♥9. Go back and finesse the Q. If all goes well you will have 9 tricks. At IMPs, that's the right play because a small chance of making the contract is better than none.

At matchpoints, just play diamonds. It's a normal contract so down 1 should be a normal result. Don't risk going down extra tricks when your chances of making the contract are so small (less than 25%).

♠A632
♥92
♦AJ109
♣KQ2

You are in 3NT; LHO needs ♥7. You have 9 top tricks if the spades split. At IMPs, test the spades. If they don't split you can take the diamond finesse. You can get some extra insurance by *ducking* the first 2 rounds of hearts. That way if the diamond finesse loses, RHO may be out of hearts.

♠KQ43
♥A653
♦Q54
♣A6

At matchpoints, it's very tricky. The diamond finesse is only 50% to succeed, so playing for overtricks is not clear. However, *most other pairs will be playing in spades.* They can lose at most 1 heart, so you can't beat them if the diamond finesse loses. Therefore, hope it wins and you can beat them by taking 12 tricks (11 if the spades don't split), since NT scores 10 points more. (It's OK to duck 1 round of hearts because you can't take more than 12 tricks anyway.)

Bidding games

Of course, we always want to bid games when they are making and avoid them when they aren't making. But often we are uncertain, so we have to play the odds. And the odds are different in matchpoints and IMPs.

Suppose you open 1♠ vulnerable, and partner raises to 3♠ (limit raise). If you bid game, you gain if it makes and lose if it goes down. At matchpoints, your possible gain is about the same as your possible loss. Therefore, you should bid game when the chances of making it are over 50%.

But at IMPs, your gain from making game is *greater* than the cost.
If you bid 4 and it makes, you gain 620 - 170 = 450, which is 10 IMPs.
If you bid 4 and go down, you lose 140 + 100 = 240, which is 6 IMPs.

Therefore your possible gain is much greater, and you don't need a 50% chance. About 40% is enough vulnerable, and about 45% not vulnerable. How do you know precisely what the chances are? You don't, but if you feel it's at all close, it's right to bid the game at IMPs, particularly if you are vulnerable.

♠A10642 ♥QJ97 ♦65 ♣AQ	You open 1♠ and partner invites with 3♠. Should you go? It's close, so at IMPs it's worth it because the odds are good. At matchpoints, it's better to be conservative; even 3♠ might go down. If game makes, you'll probably have some company.

A big question is **which game to bid?** Your priorities are usually:

- If you can find an 8+ card major suit fit, you should play there.
- If not, think seriously about NT. NT is better than minors because it scores better, and takes fewer tricks to make game.
- Only if there's a big problem with NT (short suits, lack of stoppers) should you play in a minor suit.

However, things can vary depending on scoring:

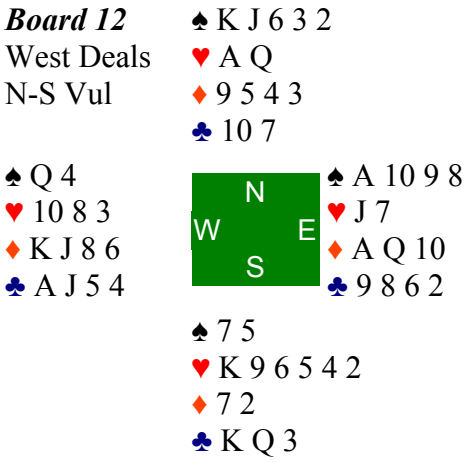
- At IMPs, you should bid the *safest game.* The difference between 600, 620 or 630 is too small to worry about. So if you have a choice between 5♣ and 3NT and you think 5♣ is safer, bid 5♣.
- At matchpoints, those extra few points are very important. 3NT is desirable because it scores higher. So you should usually bid the *highest-scoring* game even if the chances of success are slightly lower than a lower-scoring game.

The same applies to bidding slams: bid the safest one at IMPs and consider going for a higher-scoring one at matchpoints.

Partscores

Here's a partscore deal from a matchpoint game:

Board 12
West Deals
N-S Vul



NS 2♥; EW 3♦; EW 2♣; EW 1♠; Par −110

Contract	Made	Scores		Matchpoints	
		N-S	E-W	N-S	E-W
3 ♥ S	3	140		11.00	1.00
2 ♥ S	3	140		11.00	1.00
3 ♥ S	3	140		11.00	1.00
3 ♣ E	-1	50		8.00	4.00
3 ♣ E	-1	50		8.00	4.00
3 ♣ E	-1	50		8.00	4.00
Pass		Pass		6.00	6.00
3 ♥ S	-1		100	4.50	7.50
2 ♠ N	-1		100	4.50	7.50
2 ♣ E	3		110	3.00	9.00
1 NT W	3		150	1.50	10.50
1 NT W	3		150	1.50	10.50
2 ♥ x S	-1		200	0.00	12.00

This is a typical partscore deal where scores are all over the place. They tend to be more important at matchpoints because they are frequent but score less than games and slams.

Notice all the scores are between +140 and -150, except for one. A score of -200 (usually for down 1, doubled, vulnerable) is known as the "**kiss of death**" because it usually gets you a bottom in a partscore deal. +200 usually gets a top.

So, at matchpoints, if your opponents are vulnerable, **think seriously about doubling them if you think they are a favorite to go down.** You get a top if you are right and a bottom if you are wrong, so the odds are even.

However, at IMPs the odds are different. If they are in 3♠ and you double and beat them 1 trick, you gain 100 pts (3 IMPs) if you are right, but if you are wrong they get the game bonus and 730 instead of 140 for a 590 swing (11 IMPs). The odds are 11 to 3, which is very poor. Therefore, **do not double the opponents into game** unless you are **sure** of setting them and predict at least a 2-trick set.

In all forms of bridge, it's important to compete for partscores. If we let them make 110 and we can make 110, that's bad (6 IMPs, or several matchpoints). Even losing 50 or 100 instead of 110 is a big win at matchpoints; it's not so important at IMPs. So at IMPs you don't tend to compete quite as aggressively.

EXAMPLE HANDS

1. (IMPs)

	♠AK ♥765 ♦A9832 ♣Q65	
♠QJ1096 ♥J4 ♦76 ♣8742		♠874 ♥10983 ♦KQ5 ♣J109
	♠532 ♥AKQ2 ♦J104 ♣AK3	

South plays 3NT; LHO leads the ♠Q. You have 9 top tricks, and 3 more if you can avoid 2 diamond losers. You lead to your ♥A and run the ♦J, which loses to the K. A spade comes back, knocking out your last stopper.

You lead ♥K to hand and lead a diamond; LHO plays a small card. Should you finesse, hoping the Q is on your left? There's a very good chance it will win. At matchpoints, finesse! You figure to gain more often than you lose.

At IMPS, don't finesse! If RHO wins you could go down, losing 2 diamonds and 3 or more spades. You gain 3 IMPs if it works (3 overtricks), but you lose 10 IMPs (NV) or 12 IMPs (V) if you go down. It's not worth it.

1. (Matchpoints)

	♠AK ♥765 ♦A9832 ♣Q65	
♠QJ1096 ♥J4 ♦Q76 ♣874		♠874 ♥10983 ♦K5 ♣J1092
	♠532 ♥AKQ2 ♦J104 ♣AK3	

2. (IMPs)

	♠63 ♥92 ♦AKQ632 ♣J54	
♠Q10852 ♥74 ♦J987 ♣K3		♠J97 ♥QJ1086 ♦10 ♣A876
	♠AK4 ♥AK53 ♦54 ♣Q1092	

You are in 3NT; LHO needs the ♠5. You have 7 top tricks. You could try to set up 2 clubs, but the opponent's might be able to take 3 spades and 2 clubs. So it looks best to go after diamonds.

If you play diamonds from the top and they break 3-2, you will score 10 tricks. This is the best play at matchpoints, because there's a 68% chance of a 3-2 split. At IMPs, you should *duck* 1 round of diamonds. This allows you to get 5 diamond tricks when they split 4-1 because you don't kill your entry. This guarantees 9 tricks.

Also note the bidding: South would normally open 1NT and North should just raise to 3NT (at either IMPs or matchpoints), rather than bidding diamonds. A 9-trick NT game is usually easier to make than an 11-trick diamond game, *and* it scores higher (if you make an overtrick).

2. (Matchpoints)

	♠63 ♥92 ♦AKQ632 ♣J54	
♠Q10852 ♥74 ♦J98 ♣K63		♠J97 ♥QJ1086 ♦107 ♣A87
	♠AK4 ♥AK53 ♦54 ♣Q1092	