

IMP STRATEGY

By Steven Gaynor

Playing a team game demands different thinking than if you are playing matchpoints. Here are a few tips to get you off to right thinking:

1. **BID GAMES.** At pairs we try to be scientific about going to game on many hands. At teams the rewards are much greater for bidding and making games, so the most successful team game players bid games much more aggressively, especially vulnerable. One of my favorite partners, Brian, says if you are thinking about bidding game for more than 5 seconds, bid it! Vulnerable games need only about 38% chance of making them to be a good proposition (see #15 for details); non-vul should be about 50-50.
2. **MAKE YOUR CONTRACT.** Do not sweat the overtricks, just go plus!
3. **SET THEIR CONTRACT.** Do not sweat the undertricks, risk one if it gives you a chance to set them. Also, when you are looking at the setting trick, cash it before something bad happens.
4. **DO NOT DOUBLE PARTIALS FOR PENALTY.** At pairs sometimes you double knowing that if they make it, it is only one hand, barely 4% of the score. At IMP's it will almost always cost you the match. You better have a huge trump stack to sit for a penalty double of a partial. Aces do not always cash. Trump tricks do. Agree that doubles below game are primarily takeout. If you want to make a penalty double, pass and let your partner make a takeout double. Then you may pass again.
5. **DOUBLE IFFY GAMES.** However, doubling when they have bid a thin game may turn out great, especially if you set it more than one trick.
6. **DO NOT SACRIFICE.** At pairs, going down -500 is great versus their +620. At IMP's it is not a big deal. Sacrifices should be a pretty sure thing. On the other hand, going for -800 is not as big of a disaster as their +620.
7. **MAKE SOUND OVERCALLS.** At pairs we overcall with any reasonable (and sometimes unreasonable) holding to get partner off to a good lead or just jam the bidding. At IMP's it is a bit more dangerous as you do not want to risk going for a big number, so if you do enter the bidding at least have a decent suit. And when you support your partners overcall, have some values. Watch the vulnerability, and do not push them into game unless you plan to double it. So, you go down one in 4D for -50. Big woo. They can make 4S but forgot to bid it. A score of -170 is better than -300. Do the math; you will see that I am right.
8. **DO NOT DOUBLE PARTIALS FOR PENALTY.** Did I mention this yet? ONLY consider a low-level penalty double with a huge stack of their trumps.
9. **HAVE SOUND SLAM BIDDING.** Do not bid speculative slams unless you are sure the other table will bid it also. NEVER bid a grand slam unless you can claim 13 tricks BEFORE the opening lead.
10. **THE FIVE LEVEL BELONGS TO THE OPPONENTS.** When the opponents have made an obvious sacrifice, it is usually best to take your sure plus than bid unless you are **very** sure you will make it.

- 11. DO NOT DOUBLE PARTIALS FOR PENALTY.** Furthermore, when considering a low-level penalty double, bid your suit one more time, then double them if they bid again. It cuts down on those doubled overtricks.
- 12. BID THE SAFEST GAME.** No trump games only take 9 tricks, majors take 10. Here is what seems to be a little-known fact: AKQJXX of spades usually take 6 tricks in either 3N or 4S!
- 13. PRE-EMPTING.** Do not be afraid to jam the bidding, especially when you have a big fit for partner. Agree on your pre-empting style – frisky or disciplined. It is confusing to open with Jxxxxx on one hand and AKJxxx on another. However, do not make a wimpy raise with no points just because you have a fit for partner. That only encourages your opponents to keep bidding.
- 14. DO NOT DOUBLE PARTIALS FOR PENALTY.** Finally, if you do double a partial for penalty your goal should be to set it at least two tricks. One down is like bunting the runner to second when you trail by 4 runs in the bottom of the 9th. You need a big hit, not some +100 or +200. You do not win too many IMPs that way. Might as well bid your game unless you have them dead to rights – with a big trump stack!
- 15. WHY YOU SHOULD STRETCH TO BID VULNERABLE GAMES.** Let's look at ten hands where you have the decision to bid game or not. We will assume your opponents did not bid game. You make your thin game 4 of 10 times. That is 40%. Horrible at match points! But at IMP's....
- You are +620, and your teammates are -170 – Difference is +450, you win ten IMPs, so you are +40 on those four hands.
- You are -100 and your teammates are -140 – Difference is -240, lose six IMPs, so you are -36 on those six hands.
- Overall, you are +40 and -36, so you WIN 4 overall even though you went down 60% of the time.