

More Principles for Improving Your Matchpoint Scores

by Steve Wood

Before we look at some more specific principles that will help you make better decisions at matchpoints, let's quickly review the ones from last time.

Principle #1 – Matchpoints is more about “how often” than “how much”

Principle #2 – Don't stretch and strain to reach thin game contracts

Principle #3 – Overcall with a real purpose

Principle #4 – Open light only if you are showing partner a good lead

Principle #5 – Know your defensive carding and agreements by heart

Now let's look at some more ideas to help improve your matchpoint scores.

Principle #6 – If the opponents have stopped at the 2-level in a “fit” auction, it doesn't pay to let them play it there

Notice that we are not saying, “Don't let the opponents play at the 2-level.” You'll hear players say that sometimes, but that statement is much too broad..... and actually, it's quite dangerous.

Let's say the opponents have stopped in 2♥, and you have to decide whether to compete or let them play there. The first thing to think about is whether the opponents' bidding shows that they have an 8+-card fit with each of them having at least three trumps. If their bidding shows that, then it is a “fit” auction – otherwise, it isn't.

Here are some possible auctions ending in 2♥. In each case, judge whether it was a “fit” auction.

- 1♥-P-2♥-P, P..... Yes
- 1♥-P-1NT-P, 2♣-P-2♥-P, P..... No
- 1♥-P-1NT-P, 2♥-P-P..... No
- 1♦-P-1♥-P, 2♦-P-2♥-P, P.....No
- 1♦-P-1♥, 2♣-P-2♦-P, 2♥-P-P.....No

Why is it important to know whether the opponents have had a “fit” auction? When the opponents are known to have a fit, then it is very, very likely that we also have a fit. That means it is quite safe for our side to get into the auction at the last minute – not for the purpose of reaching a game contract or anything like that, but merely to compete and bump the opponents out of their comfy low-level contract.

So, let’s say your RHO starts the bidding with 1♠, LHO raises to 2♠, and that is passed around to you. Both sides are vulnerable at matchpoints, and you hold -- ♠ 84 ♥ QT43 ♦ K94 ♣ QJ32. What do you do now?

It is 100% clear to double. The opponents have had a “fit” auction, which means your side also has a fit. They have stopped in 2♠, which marks partner with some HCP. You have support for all of the other suits, so you should double to find partner’s best suit and nudge them out of 2♠.¹

Are you thinking “it’s too risky to double!?” Think again.

If you let them play 2♠ to score +110 without breaking a sweat, experience shows that you can expect a matchpoint score of 15% to 40% on that board. Therefore, since you are headed for a below-average board or worse, it’s not very risky to take action and try to improve your position. If it fails, you have lost very little. But if it works – such as by pushing the opponents to 3♠ down one – you will have turned a poor board into gold.

By the way, did you notice that, in this particular situation, partner’s response to your double will give you new information? That new information may enable you to make a better lead against 3♠ than you would have been able make blind against 2♠.

¹ Typical ways to compete after they stop in a 2-level fit are: (1) bid a long suit; (2) make a takeout double; and (3) bid 2NT to show two suits, usually the minors. The important thing is to use common sense and stay flexible. Your goal is to reach a reasonably safe contract and force the opponents to either let you play there or increase their bid to the 3-level.

Let's try another example situation. At matchpoints, your RHO starts the bidding with 1♣, your RHO responds 1♥, and your LHO raises to 2♥..... and this is passed around to you. They are vulnerable and you are not, and you hold – ♠ KQ7 ♥ J3 ♦ KJ643 ♣ T83. What action, if any, do you take?

It would be a clear error at matchpoints to let the opponents play in 2♥ after a fit auction. If they score +110 against you, then you will get a bad board..... so why not try to do something about it? Because they have a fit, it is highly likely that you and your partner do, too. Therefore, the percentage action is to “double” and let partner pick the contract. Then the opponents will have a problem – do they let you play 2♠ or 3♦ (or maybe even 3♣, if partner has long clubs behind a short club opening), or do they press on to 3♥ and run the risk of going down? Do you see how much better your position has become because you had the courage to act? Now it's the opponents who are worried, not you!

Let's take a quick look at a few more auctions to see whether the opponents have shown a “fit.”

- 1♦-P-1NT-P, 2♣-P-P..... Yes!
- 1♣-P-1NT-P, 2♣-P-P..... Yes
- 1♥-P-1♠-P, 1NT-P-2♥-P, P.....Yes
- 1♦-P-1♠-P, 2♣-P-2♦-P, P-P..... Probably

The first three examples are “fit” auctions because the 1NT responder – who has denied a 4-card major and therefore must have at least seven cards in the minors – is almost sure to have a real fit for opener's long minor.

One last thing to keep in mind. When we are bumping the opponents this way, our only goal is to push them up one level and then try to set them. Don't get greedy and start thinking about bidding game or competing to the 4-level. Bidding that high is almost never justified – and you don't want to punish partner for being aggressive at the right time. Be satisfied with getting them to the 3-level..... then go out and try to set them!²

² One of the world's greatest players – Zia Mahmoud – says that the most fun thing in bridge is to get the opponents to the 3-level and then set them one trick. It is hard to argue with him!

Principle #7 – Don't just count your HCP. Evaluate your hand!

Beginning players are taught about counting HCP to help figure out how strong their hand is. That is a logical starting point, because the beginning player has no experience to help him judge.

As you play more and more and make progress to intermediate status and beyond, you gain lots of experience, and you develop a sense of which cards are the most valuable on a particular hand. You might focus on your HCP initially, but as the bidding goes on and you get more information from partner and/or the opponents, you get a more refined idea about whether your hand is worth or more or less than your HCP-count seems to indicate.

Here's a bread-and-butter situation where looking beyond mere HCP to evaluate your hand can be very important. Both sides are vulnerable at matchpoints, and your partner opens 1NT, showing 15-17 HCP. What would you do with each of these hands?

- ♠ J53 ♥ Q74 ♦ K832 ♣ Q52
- ♠ JT82 ♥ QT5 ♦ KT92 ♣ Q9

Beginners are taught that when you have a balanced 8-9 HCP and partner opens 1NT, you're supposed to raise to 2NT (or start with Stayman, if you have a 4-card major). But for players at the intermediate level and above, this is much too simplistic. Evaluate your hand!

The first example hand has 8 HCP, but to bid anything over partner's 1NT opening would be a serious error. The hand is very flat (4-3-3-3), the honors are isolated, and there are no useful intermediate cards. Even if partner has 17 HCP, he will be an underdog if you raise him to 2NT and he carries on to game. When you have a boring 8-count and partner opens 1NT, pass and take your plus score in 1NT. You will pick up points from the pairs who just blindly followed a "rule" and tried for game via 2NT.

The second example hand also has 8 HCP, but it is much better. There are two 4-card suits to provide sources for tricks, including a 4-card major that serve as a good trump suit. There are excellent intermediate cards supporting the honor cards in every suit. Once you make the effort to evaluate your hand, you recognize that you have much more than merely 8

HCP. You should start with Stayman to check on a possible spade fit, and then you will invite game in either spades or NT.

Another example. With both sides vulnerable at matchpoints, partner opens 1♥ as dealer, you bid Jacoby 2NT, and partner bids 3♦, showing a singleton or void in diamonds. In that scenario, which of the two hands below is stronger?

- ♠ AQ3 ♥ A982 ♦ KJ92 ♣ K8
- ♠ AK2 ♥ KJ942 ♦ 953 ♣ A8

The first hand is just fine – 17 HCP with nice trump support and good controls – but it has one glaring negative. The fact that partner is short in diamonds means the K and J of diamonds are virtually worthless. Basically, you can throw those 4 HCP in the trash, and you are left with 13 working HCP. Nothing special.... and certainly not a hand that has you overly excited about slam prospects.

The second hand is much better, despite the fact that it only has 15 HCP. There is an extra trump, and the AK, A holdings in the black suits are very promising. Best of all, your diamond holding is perfect – three small opposite partner's known singleton or void. With this hand, you are going to bid 3♠ (over 3♦) to show your spade control and let partner know that you are highly interested in slam.

By the way, this type of hand evaluation is the whole reason behind the Jacoby 2NT convention. Opener lets responder know whether she has a short suit.... and if she does, then responder can evaluate his hand in light of opener's shortness.³

Let's try one last example of hand evaluation. With both sides vulnerable, your LHO opens 1♥, your partner bids 2♥ (the Michaels convention, showing 5+ spades and a 5+-card minor), and your RHO raises to 3♥. You pass, and so does your LHO, but partner comes back in with a bid of 3♠. The auction has been:

1♥-2♥-3♥-P
P-3♠-P-?

³ Splinter bids operate in a very similar way, and the same type of hand evaluation applies.

Your hand is – ♠ K ♥ T854 ♦ J843 ♣ T954. What do you do now?

I can hear some of you saying, “What do you mean, what do I do now? I only have 4 HCP!” But take another look.

Partner made a vulnerable Michaels bid.... and then, with no encouragement at all from you, he took the risk of bidding a vulnerable 3♠ all by himself. If he is a reliable partner, his hand will not be chopped liver. It will look something like this: ♠ AQJT5 ♥ 6 ♦ A ♣ KQ8762. If partner has a hand like that, don't you want to be in 5♣? Of course you do!

How do you get to 5♣? By evaluating your hand and recognizing that what started out as a crummy 4-HCP has blossomed into a very nice supporting hand. You have 4-card support for whichever minor partner has, and you have the singleton K of spades, which is worth its weight in gold. From the bidding, how many hearts do you think your partner has? The opponents have shown at least eight hearts between them, so partner is marked with a singleton and may even be void. Sometimes, a miserable hand can morph into a pretty good one, if the auction goes just right – and this is one of those times. Jump to 5♣ to tell partner to pass if his minor is clubs or correct to 5♦ if that is his minor.

Don't just count your HCP, evaluate your hand!!

Principle #8 -- Don't just jump to game without telling partner you have a good hand

What do the following auctions have in common?

- 1♠-P-4♠
- 1♥-1♠-P-4♠
- 4♠

In all three cases, the 4♠ bid is preemptive. It does not show a good hand. It shows a hand with which your goal is to shut out the opponents and make it hard for them to bid. Therefore, when you have a good hand, you don't just preemptively jump to game.

If partner opens 1♠ and you hold – ♠ KQ8 ♥ A983 ♦ A654 ♣ 85 – you don't just jump to 4♠. You definitely are going to end up in at least 4♠, but you are going to get there in a way that lets partner know you have a good hand, not a weak, preemptive hand.

Why does this matter? A 4♠ bid is a 4♠ bid, isn't it?

Not at all. What if partner has extra values and may be interested in slam? If you crowd her with a 4♠ bid that shows a weak, preemptive hand, then a potential slam is out the window. What if the opponents barge in and bid 4NT over 4♠ to show at least 5-5 in the minors? How will you and your partner figure out whether to double them in 5♣ or 5♦ or continue on to 5♠ (or even 6♠)? By grossly misdescribing your hand with a misguided 4♠ bid, you put your partnership in danger of making a very bad high-level decision.

So, with the example hand, don't jump to 4♠. Sure, you have a good hand and good support, and it may seem like fun to make a happy announcement to partner..... but don't do it. Bid 2♦ and then raise spades in whatever way is forcing in your methods. Now, partner will have a very good idea what you have..... and if she is interested in slam or required to deal with a wild bid from the opponents, your partnership will be in a much better position to figure it out.

Similarly, if your LHO opens 1♦, partner overcalls 1♥, the next player makes a negative double, and you hold ♠ T4 ♥ KQx ♦ A943 ♣ K962, resist the urge to jump to 4♥. That bid is a preempt, and you don't have a preemptive hand. You have good support and solid HCP. Tell partner that by making the standard cue-bid of 2♦, showing at least 10 support points with at least three hearts. Even if the auction is quiet, and partner tries to sign off in 2♥, you now will bid either 3♥ or 4♥ (not preemptive), depending on how sound your partner's overcall style is. But if the bidding explodes – what if opener jumps to 3♠ or 4♠ over your 2♦ cue-bid, for example? – you and your partner will have enough information to decide what to do. If you had just jumped to 4♥ and opener then said 4♠, how would you and your partner have any idea whether to double or carry on to 5♥? You both would be just guessing..... and “just guessing” is a great recipe for a bad result.

One more example – from actual play on BBO just this week. Both sides are vulnerable at matchpoints. Partner opens 1♥, your RHO overcalls 1♠, and you hold ♠ 6 ♥ KT975 ♦ A63 ♣ Q974. What bid do you make?

The BBO player with these cards chose to jump to 4♥ -- a preemptive bid that shows a weakish. This did not work out well when his partner turned up with a very nice hand – ♠ J74 ♥ AQ642 ♦ K8 ♣ AK5 – cold for 6♥.

Responder could have bid 2♠ -- a standard cue-bid showing at least 10 support point and at least 3-card heart support. For my money, though, the best bid is 3♠ -- a splinter bid showing a good hand with short spades and at least 4-card heart support. A 3♠ splinter would have been music to opener's ears, and she surely would have made a control bid of 4♣ to try for slam. When responder comes back with a 4♦ control bid, it's easy for opener to ask for key cards and bid 6♥.

Even if opener hadn't held a slam-range hand, responder's 2♠ cue-bid or 3♠ splinter would work better than 4♥ in other scenarios. What if the overcaller's partner jumps to 4♠ right after responder's first bid? If responder had preempted to 4♥ with a good hand, opener would be completely in the dark. By telling opener that he has a good hand – via 2♠ or 3♠ -- responder brings opener into the picture, in case the partnership has to make a difficult decision.

If you have a good hand, tell your partner. Two heads are better than one.

Principle #9 – On defense, figure out what your goal is

At IMPs, the goal of the defenders is to try to set the contract. You and your partner will take some risks to try to set them..... and if you give up an overtrick in the process, that is no big deal at IMP scoring.

At matchpoints, it's very different. If the normal contract is 4♥ and most of the declarers are making exactly 10 tricks (-420 nonvulnerable), then you are going to get a bad score by trying desperately to set them, when they end up with an overtrick (-450 for you). That overtrick will turn an average board into a 10% board in the blink of an eye.

Therefore, whenever you are defending at matchpoints, you and your partner need to figure out whether you are trying to set them or just trying to avoid letting them take any extra tricks.

Let's say the opponents bid 1NT-3NT, and you are on lead with the following hand -- ♠ J843 ♥ T93 ♦ KQ6 ♣ Q72. What opening lead do you choose?

The opponents have bid briskly to 3NT, and they sometimes will have more HCP between them than the normal 26 HCP. No strategy works all of the time, but the defenders in this situation will save a lot of overtricks by leading conservatively. The "book" lead is the ♠3, but for my money, the best opening lead is the 10 of hearts.

Let's say you make that lead, and the following hand comes down in dummy:

♠ Q96
♥ J74
♦ A62
♣ AJT5

Dummy has 12 HCP, and declarer has 15-17. You and your partner would have to be very, very lucky to defeat 3NT. If you had gone all out on opening lead to try to set them, you would have led a spade..... but unless partner's spades are very strong (and how likely is that, now that you know he is marked with only 3-5 HCP?), your spade lead would have cost your side a trick. Your heart lead has given them nothing. If you play carefully the rest of the way, you may be able to hold them to 10 tricks when most other declarers are making 11 tricks..... or maybe 11 tricks when other declarers are making 12 tricks against overzealous defense.

The moral of the story? On defense at matchpoints, figure out as early as possible what your goal is. This may be at Trick 1 when you are planning the opening lead, or it may become apparent once dummy comes down. Once you can see they are going to make it, play carefully and make sure you stop as many overtricks as you can.

Don't just flail away desperately, giving away overtricks until the hand finally is over. Be realistic and practical, not careless.

It rarely pays to joust at windmills.

Principle #10 – “Stay in the boat”

This principle is more about a philosophy of the game, as opposed to anything technical or statistical.

Bridge is a partnership game. Each partnership has its own essential structure (Standard American, 2/1, Precision, etc.) and also its own agreements about specific conventions and treatments they are using. In general, the purpose of all of these structures and agreements is to give the partnership the tools to figure out and handle both routine and difficult situations. The more the two partners play within the agreements they have made, the better their chances to play in a well-coordinated way..... which allows them to be solid in routine situations and also gives them a better chance to succeed in difficult situations.

If you agree with this overall philosophy – and most strong players do – then it follows that each partner’s normal approach should be to play within their agreements..... in other words, “stay in the boat.”

Of course there are exceptions – mostly odd or unusual situations where it is unclear what to do and the partnership agreements don’t provide much guidance. But those are just exceptions. Most hands can be handled within normal guidelines and strategies.

So, if you want to be clever and make a unilateral decision to preempt 3♣ vulnerable with a suit like J975432, that is your decision. But don’t be surprised when the opponents double and cart you out for -800 or worse..... or when partner bids 3NT, trusting your bid..... or when partner disastrously leads the K from Kx in your “suit.” When those things happen, it will be because you took a flyer.

When I describe the game to people who don’t play bridge, I tell them the game is at its best when it involves both partners working together at a team to solve problems.

If that is what you want to do – and I believe it should be – it’s essential that both partners “stay in the boat.” You will have more fun and have consistently better results if both players do that.