

Understanding the Matchpoint Game

Robert Ng 5/19/2021

Email: bob5ng@yahoo.com

What is Matchpoint (MP)

- The method of scoring used typically in a Pairs game
- Based on the comparison of all the scores achieved at the different tables for the *same* board
 - A pair is awarded 1 MP for each other score its score beats, $\frac{1}{2}$ MP for each other scores tied, and no MP against scores that it loses to
 - Score frequency (# of scores beat or tied) is what matters, not how large a particular score is compared to the other scores (quality of raw score)
 - A pair scores a TOP (100%) if its score beats all the other scores, a BOTTOM (0%) if it loses to all the other scores, and an average (50%) if it beats and ties as many scores that it ties or loses to.
- The MP award is for one board. The scores achieved on board 1 has no bearing on what the same pair achieves on board 2.
- The winner of the event at the end of the game is the pair scoring the most number of matchpoints

An example of MP award for a board

Table #	Contract and result	NS score	NS MP	EW MP	NS %	EW %
1	4H/S making 5	+450	1.5	2.5	37.5	62.5
2	4H/S making 5	+450	1.5	2.5	37.5	62.5
3	4S/E doubled down 3	+500	4	0	100	0
4	3NT/N making 3	+430	0	4	0	100
5	3NT/N making 5	+460	3	1	75	25

Strategy with MP scoring

- For each board, the goal is to score as many MPs as possible.
 - Achieved by beating all the other scores achieved by other pairs holding your cards at other tables
 - Making the required number of tricks for your contract is not always the main goal
- Bidding to the safest contract to ensure a plus score is not always the top priority
- Any score differential between your score and the other scores for this board is what counts
 - No matter how large or small the differences are
 - Overtricks and undertricks for extra 10 or 50 points frequently the key difference
- +1000 or -50 as a raw score by itself is neither good nor bad, it is all about how that score compares to the other scores on the same board
- Part score hands are often just as important, if not more so, in deciding the event winners or losers
 - Must stay focused on all small hands (part scores) as much as big hands (games and slams)
- **However**, gambling for a top on every board unsoundly is a **Losing** strategy
 - A Winning session is frequently not much more than 65% of total MP available

Contract choice biasing

- No Trump contracts most favored
 - Because of that extra 10 raw points awarded (40 point making that 7th trick in a NT contract)
- Majors suit contracts with good trump fit are frequently second choice
- Disdaining minor suit game contracts whenever 3NT is a possible alternative
 - Minor suit contracts are often only logical options for part scores, or safer slams compared to NT or major suit GAMES
 - Many natural minor suit bids are sacrificed and used as special purpose bids to facilitate exchanges leading to better major suit contracts, or NT
 - E.g. New Minor forcing, such as a sequence of 1D-1S-1N-2C(NMF)
 - Gerber (4C over NT)

Critical Part Score battle ground

- Auctions usually stall at part scores because neither side has a predominance of high card values
- Even deliberately going minus competing for the right to declare a part score may be the way to win MPs
 - -100 is a winner against conceding the right to declare by the opponents to achieve a possible 110 in their part score
 - But may be an even bigger winner if you succeed in forcing them to bid one higher and end up giving you +50
- Vulnerability for part score hand is critical
 - -200 (the magic number) in any part score battle hand is the kiss of death
 - Similarly, -500 (in exchange for their non-vulnerable game) or -800 (vulnerable game) is a losing bargain.
- Doubling an opponent's part score into game is not as big a crime
 - If you believe there is a chance to nip the vulnerable opponent one trick for +200
 - If you cannot score enough raw points beating the part score contract to compensate your likely plus score had they not competed as aggressively

Rule of engagements in the Part Score battleground

- It is rarely right to let the opponents buy a part score at the 1 or 2 level uncontested if they have established a trump fit.
- Shape (distribution) is often as potent as honor cards as weapons to enter the part score battleground
 - Strong trump fits limit side suit losers
 - Limited loss as a result is often a triumph (trading -100 for the likely -100-something defending)
- Favor aggressive reasons to bid as opposed to the excuses to pass
 - But temper competing aggressively when unsure if the opponents are limited, or have a likely established fit.
 - Try to get your voice in as early as you have a reason to
- Experience and tendencies of opponents is often a valuable aid
 - Are they conservative or aggressive bidders
 - Do they only double if they have sure trump tricks and enough aces

Rule of engagements in the Part Score battleground (continued)

- When opponents have established a fit and make no effort to explore for possible game, BALANCE when you are in the passed-out position with any reason
 - Especially with shape, even if lighter in value (Try to apply “borrowed King”)
 - If they have a good suit fit, chances are your side has one also
- Most doubles at the one or two levels tend to be takeout
 - Especially by player in front of opponent going to be declaring
 - Unless the opponents appear to have obvious misfits.
- Beware of partner contesting with more shape and less high card power when the opponent’s auction sounds limited
 - Do not punish partner for trying to contest with less value and more shape
 - Be more cautious about partner’s competing action when holding relative length in opponents suit
 - Try to push opponents to a level higher, but do not be stubborn about yielding them the right of way after you have pushed
- Always keep the magic 200 number in mind when fighting for the part score

Concept of Trick Target

- First task when dummy comes down is an assessment of your contract and establishing a ***trick target***
 - Try to decide whether you are in a contract that most of your peers are in
 - Consider if there are alternative contracts that your peers may get to
 - Focus on ***the number of tricks*** you need to achieve in your contract in order to at least match, and preferably outscore, the other likely contracts
- Decide on how the opponents' cards have to be distributed in order for you to achieve your hoped-for trick target.
- Mentally verify if the distribution you have hoped for is possible or realistic based on the opponents' bidding.
- Keep reminding yourself that the objective of the play is not always just to make your contract.
 - It is about playing your contract in such a way to outscore your peers.
 - ***Making the contract is often secondary for your purpose***

Adjusting play strategy based on Trick Target

- When you have arrived at a good contract that others are not as likely to get to, such as a 22 combined HCP game or 27 combined point slam
 - Forget overtricks and concentrate on playing as safely as possible to make your contract.
- When you are in a terrible or perhaps impossible contract
 - Assess any realistic contracts the other side may be able to achieve a plus score on
 - Try to play to limit a negative score that is better than their theoretical possible plus.
 - Do not worry about going down more by taking a risky play as a long shot to achieve your trick target
 - ***Do not waste your time and energy agonizing over the play of a contract where you have no realistic chance of saving worthwhile MPs.***

Balancing and Trick Target Examples

♠ K 10 8 6		♠ A 9 3 2
♥ 7 4 2		♥ K 3
♦ A 9 2		♦ 8 4 3
♣ J 10 4		♣ K 9 3 2

W N E
S

Same EW hands to separate bidding situations:

Neither vulnerable

N	E	S	W
1♦	P	1♥	P
2♥	P	P	2♠
all passed			

<https://tinyurl.com/yz4kpnag>

<https://tinyurl.com/yduvm2d5>

Preemptive tactics

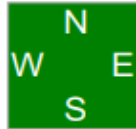
- When you know your side has big trump fit, but outgunned with high card power
 - Co-operatively preempt as ***quickly*** as possible to ***the level you are willing to give up***
 - Give up if they guess to bid on
 - Always leave them with the last guess
 - Do not second guess yourself or partner and try to sacrifice again

An example hand of preemptive tactics

Board 3
South Deals
E-W Vul

Competitive Preemptive Tactics

♠ 9 8 4 2
♥ Q 10 8 2
♦ K 8 3
♣ 8 3



Take full advantage of the vulnerability, S opened in first seat with 2 ♦. What should N do?

Declaring desperate hands at MP

- Must look for any possibility to achieve some MP even when facing a desperate contract
 - Make assumptions that would give yourself a chance and play accordingly
 - ***DO NOT JUST GIVE UP***
- Hand examples
 - <https://tinyurl.com/y9gyo9k5>
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yduvm2d5>
 -

Bidding games and slams

- Avoid bidding aggressively to marginal games or slams
 - You can win the board by just staying in part scores with the majority of peer, and outplaying them to win the bulk of the MPs awarded by just scoring one more overtrick, or one fewer undertrick
- Structure your partnership methods to favor getting to games in NT or the majors as opposed to the minors.
- Bid safer slams in strong minor fits and unbalanced hands as opposed to 6NT or weaker major fits
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yhjru4vk>
- **“DO NOT BID GRAND SLAMS UNLESS YOU CAN PICTURE ALL 13 tricks”**
- “shooting” for tops by stretching to thin games or slams is generally losing MP tactics.
 - Tops are achieved when your score is **DIFFERENT** than most common and logical score on your cards, not because your score is many points better
 - You can “shoot” for a top by deliberately stopping in 3H when everybody else is in the most common 4H game. ***If 4H fails unluckily, you achieve a top in 3H***
 - <https://tinyurl.com/ye5vx5bz>

Differences between MP and IMP play

	Matchpoints	IMPs
Relevance of score achieved	Frequency of comparative scores	Size of plus differential (Quality)
Declarer's objective	Achieve desired trick target to ensure reasonable MP reward	Make contract, or achieve smallest minus in a clear case of sacrificing
Defenders' objective	Secure enough defensive tricks to ensure favorable score comparison	Beat contract, no matter how impregnable it may appear
Scores across boards	Irrelevant across boards	Cumulative
Contract preference	Highest Score partscore, games or slams	Safest partscore, games or slams
Safety Play	Luxury to have, depending on contract	Mandatory
Overtricks	Frequently critical (and emphasized)	Nice to have, but not critical unless doubled/redoubled
Securing undertricks	Relevant up to a level	As many as possible
Surrendering undertricks	Relevant up to a level	As few as possible
Doubling partscore into possible game	Justified if beating contract would result in favorable score comparison	Rarely justified unless expecting to beat contract by at least 2 tricks

Example of difference in play between IMP and MP

- Playing the hand at IMPs, safety first
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yhgj8qbj>
- Playing the same hand at MP, maximize chance for overtricks
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yhggm9fl>
- What can go wrong ?
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yjw86zhg>

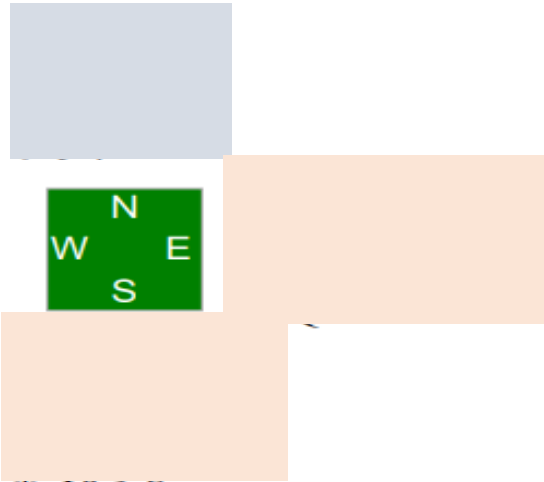
Speculative/risky part score double (possibly) into game in the *magic* (+200) *Kingdom*

- Capital offense at IMPs
- An acceptable tactic (by an understanding partner) for the right MP consideration
 - Must be judged based on MP consequence
 - Be able to block off result if unsuccessful (and be more forgiving of partner)

Example of risky MP part score doubling tactics

Board 2
East Deals
N-S Vul

♠ K 5 3
♥ A
♦ K 5 3
♣ A K 7 6 3 2



Summary

- MP is always about ***frequency of scores compared on a board***, not about ***the size of absolute raw score***
- Result of one board has no impact on the other boards
 - Unless you let it mentally distract your attention from other boards
- You do not need to aim for 100% (tops) on every board
- Try to get into auction to compete when appropriate, especially with distributional hands
 - Be active in fighting for part score right to declare
 - Always keep the boundary magic numbers in mind (+200, +500, +800, +1400)
 - Preempt quickly to the level you are willing to give up, but leave them with the last guess

Summary (continued)

- Compete with fit and distribution, stay quiet on misfits
- Be pushy, but be careful not to hang partner for his pushy effort
 - Remember that “borrowed” king from/by partner
- Think trick target for each hand
- Aim to bid for highest scoring contract as opposed to the safest contract in general
 - But play for safer slams and games when combined values is limited and success is mostly compensated for by distributional assets
- Make optimistic but sensible assumptions that would give your “hopeless” contract a chance for MP as opposed to giving up