

Getting Ready for Tournaments

Team Games and IMP Pairs

by Ed Rawlinson

It's generally true that people are more comfortable with the familiar than the unknown. Bridge players are no exception. For example, many party bridge players experience anxiety when trying duplicate for the first time. Playing with new partners or trying new conventions may also involve some anxiety. Another example of the "unknown" is a new event. Beginning bridge players become "comfortable" with pair games because that is what bridge clubs offer. Beginning bridge players typically don't encounter team games until a tournament comes along. Sometimes their response is to choose the pair game when a choice is available or to stay home when there is no choice. When less experienced players try a team game, it is usually a Swiss Team Game, because that's what is typically on the schedule for sectional tournaments.

Sometimes it may seem like there's no end to the list of unknowns. In recent sectionals, two new events have appeared: Bracketed Swiss Teams and IMP Pairs. Some tournaments also include Knockout Teams. What's a newbie to do?

As FDR said, "the only thing we have to fear, is fear itself. The anxiety one felt on starting duplicate disappeared when one became a frequent player. After initial nervousness, new partners and a new convention became OK. The same will be true for new game formats. In fact, Bracketed Swiss Teams have become the most popular event, particularly for less experienced players, in regional tournaments across the ACBL. They are increasingly popular in sectional tournaments. The reason is that the teams are ranked according to their masterpoint totals and divided into brackets. Teams only play against teams with similar masterpoint holdings. For less experienced players, it's very similar to playing in a 299er or 499er event. Another reason is that gold points are awarded to the top 3 (or 4) teams in each bracket.

There are two important differences between pair games and team games. The first is a different scoring system. The second is a difference in strategy.

Most players are familiar with matchpoint scoring, since it's used in all pair games at bridge clubs. The results for each pair on a particular board are ranked. You get 1 matchpoint for each result you beat and $\frac{1}{2}$ matchpoint for each result you tie. For example, suppose a board is played 6 times and the NS results are +120, +110, +110, +50, -50, -50. The +120 would get a 5; +110 would get $3\frac{1}{2}$; +50 would get a 2; and -50 would get $\frac{1}{2}$. Suppose the +120 was +800 instead. The score would still be a 5. It's the ranking that makes the difference; there's no credit for the size of the incremental difference between the ranked scores.

It's exactly the opposite in IMP (International Matchpoints) scoring, which is used in almost all team games. In IMP scoring, you compare your result on each board with that of the opposing team, calculate the difference, and convert this difference to IMPs using the IMP chart on your scorecard. So if you were +650 and your teammates were -620, then you are +30 on the board, which earns 1 IMP. If you were +620 when your teammates were -170, the difference of +450 earns 10 IMPs. So in the IMP scoring system, the incremental difference between the scores

makes a huge difference. An overtrick doesn't make much difference; a game bonus makes a big difference.

This difference in scoring between teams and pairs requires a difference in strategy. Did you know that experts go down in game more often in team games than in pairs? The reason is that you should be more aggressive in bidding games (particularly when vulnerable) in teams than in pairs. In pairs you learned that games usually require 26 points for success. Experts may follow this in pair games, but in team events they are going to be in game most of the time when the partnership has 24 points, sometimes less. Suppose they bid and make a vulnerable 4S on 24 points while the opponents stopped in part score. They would win 10 IMPs. Then suppose they bid 4S on 24 points and went down one while the opponents made 3S. They would lose 6 IMPs. Now imagine having these results for 100 deals. The aggressive bidders could go set 62 times (losing 6 IMPs each time for a total of 372 IMPs). They would make game 38 times (winning 10 IMPs each time for a total of 380 IMPs). While the experts aren't going to be so wild and crazy that they barely break even, it is clear that the scoring system rewards aggressive bidding (for game bonuses).

A second important strategy in team games is to play safe for your contract. Be willing to give up an overtrick for extra safety in making your contract (whether it's game or partscore). Suppose your dummy has a side suit of AKQxx with no side entries while you hold xx in the suit. If you need 4 tricks in the suit to make your contract, duck the first round. Then ensures 4 tricks when the suit breaks 4-2. In pairs, you might well play for the 3-3 split and the overtrick.

So what about IMP Pairs? For starters, it is a pair game; you don't have teammates. The movement is similar to a regular pair game. NS pairs remain stationary; EW pairs move up a table; boards move down a table. The difference is in scoring. In a team game, you compare your team's score to your opponents' team score on each board. Since you don't have teammates in a pair game, in IMP Pairs you compare your score to the average score on the board (actually the computer does this for you). Suppose that you are +620 on a board in which the average score in your direction was 300 (because some pairs didn't bid game or they went down). The difference is +320, which equates to +8 IMPs for you (the computer also computes the IMPs for you). The score sheet will look different from what you usually see in a pair game. In a regular pair game with a top of 12 on a board, you will typically have scores of 8, 4 ½, 12, 2, 0, 9 ½, etc. These get added up to a total score such as 156 (average) or 193 or 136. In IMP Pairs, you will see scores like +8, +4, -6, 0, -10, +14, etc. These are added to a total score such as 0 (average) or +48 or -42. IMP Pair games are similar to stratified pair games in that they award masterpoints to each strat (A, B, and C). In stratified pair games it's quite common for below-average scores to win masterpoints in Flight C. The same is true in IMP Pairs. A score of -8 might well win some points. I would encourage less experienced pairs to give the IMP Pairs a try. One advantage is that you can practice your IMP strategy without having teammates and thus no worries about disappointing them.

