

Playing Team Games or IMP Pairs by Ed Rawlinson

Overall Strategy

- Recognize the differences between IMP scoring (team games or IMP Pair Games) and matchpoint scoring (pair games). In matchpoints, accuracy matters. It is equally important to bid makeable games and to stay out of unmakeable games. In IMPs, size matters. The reward at IMP scoring for bidding and making a vulnerable game (usually 10 IMPs when the opponents don't) justifies bidding riskier games. In matchpoints, overtricks are important; in IMPs they are small potatoes.

Bidding Strategy

- Aggressively bid all borderline vulnerable games. You can go set 62% of the time and still come out ahead (over the long run).
- Be mildly aggressive in bidding nonvulnerable games. You can go set 54% of the time and still come out ahead (over the long run).
- Use a "middle of the road" approach to slam bidding (neither aggressive nor conservative). You want to bid slam only if it is at least 50%. If you have a choice of slams (e.g., minor suit vs. NT), bid the safer slam. Don't worry about losing 2 IMPs for being +920 vs. +990 by the opponents. You will be glad to win 14 IMPs for being +920 when 6NT results in down one.
- Be more conservative in competitive bidding when vulnerable. A ratty weak 2 may result in a big penalty which loses the whole match. There is much less incentive to "disturb the opponent's 1NT". Weigh the risks more carefully. Likewise, there is less incentive to balance when the opponents stop in two of a major.
- Doubling the opponents in a part-score (enough to give them a game bonus) should be **iron-clad**. Letting the opponents make such a contract is the kiss of death.
- A phantom save (taking a sacrifice when the opponents can't make game) is another kiss of death. Weigh your side's defensive prospects carefully.

Play of the Hand

- Making your contract is the absolute first priority. Don't risk the contract for overtricks. Be willing to give up overtricks to protect against bad breaks. Learn "safety plays".

Defense

- As in matchpoints, defense in IMPs play must sometimes be passive and sometimes aggressive. However, setting the contract is the absolute first priority, if possible. When an aggressive play may set the contract but also may provide declarer overtricks, go for the set. Don't worry about the overtricks.

Safety Plays

Suppose you have a trump holding of AJxxx opposite K9x. Introductory declarer play classes or books would say that the correct play for the **most** tricks is to cash the King and then finesse the Jack. But suppose you are in slam and have no outside losers. Thus, your job is to avoid 2 trump losers. If you make the “normal” play, you would go down if Q10xx is behind the AJxxx. So the question is whether there is a play that will give the best chance of 4 tricks. The answer is yes: Cash the Ace and lead toward the K9, playing low if LHO follows suit. If LHO shows out on the second round, win the K and lead toward the J. This guarantees four tricks against any 4-1 split. Note that if RHO has Q10x, you will only win 4 tricks while the “normal” play would have won 5. However, in IMPs scoring, your priority is to make your contract, not to make overtricks.

A source such as The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge shows the proper play for hundreds of card combinations, showing the play to win the most tricks and well as the safety play to guarantee a specified lesser number of tricks. This is not to suggest that it's reasonable for beginning or intermediate players to try to memorize all these plays (even many really good players don't know scores of them). However, spending time going through them would provide a better understanding of the general principles involved. If you understand these principles, you may be able to figure out the correct play when the situation arises. Consider the example above. Suppose you didn't know the safety play. One general principle is to ask yourself what bad can happen. Q10xx behind the AJxxx would be bad. Next assume that's the case. What can you do? You could lead low to K9x and play the 9. But what if that loses to the singleton 10. Now you still have to lose to the Q. That suggests that you cash the A first to protect against the singleton 10, then lead to the K9. That works. Now ask yourself, does it still work if LHO shows out on the second round. Yes: you go up with the K and lead to the J. In general, safety plays involve leading low to intermediate cards such as the J, 10, or 9, sometimes preceded by cashing a high honor, sometimes not.

Some other common situations include:

1. AKxxx Jxx Cash A; lead low to J. Protects against Q10xx offside.
2. AKxxxx Jx Low to J. Protects against Q10xx offside.
3. AK9xx Jxx Cash A; low to J. Protects against Q10xx in either hand.
4. AJxxxxx K9 Low to 9. Protects against Q10xx offside.
5. KQxxx* Axx Duck the first round entirely. Protects against 4-1 Or AKQxx* xx splits. Missing 5 cards, 3-2 happens 68%. Second *(no outside entry) case: Missing 6 cards, 3-3 happens only 36%.

6. AQxxx xxx Cash A; return to dummy; low toward Q. Protects against singleton K offside.