



Ian Payn

# Teams is the best form of bridge

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at [elena@ebu.co.uk](mailto:elena@ebu.co.uk)

ALL across the land, every night of the week at clubs grand and modest, tens of thousands of players sit down to play match-pointed pairs. Twenty-four boards of cut-and-thrust and then the travellers are gathered (for the sake of imagery I'm going back in time about twenty years), the designated scorer puts a lot of 2s, 1s and 0s down the side, transfers these to a recapitulation sheet and hurrah! A winner is announced, and master points awarded, along with a modest prize, perhaps. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with that at all. It just isn't bridge. Or isn't really.

When you play teams, doing the right thing is all-important. Bidding carefully to the right contract, and once in it, playing safely. This is not true of match-pointed pairs. Take this example.

Playing with a new partner (funny, the old ones don't seem to return my phone calls), I picked up a good hand (West in the diagram below):

♠ J 10 9		♠ A 8 7 6 5
♥ K 8 7		♥ Q 3
♦ A K Q J 9		♦ 10 8 7 6 2
♣ A Q		♣ 5

West	North	East	South
			1♣
Dble	3♣	3♠	Pass
3NT	All Pass		

A club was led, and dummy went down. I viewed the future with some alarm. I could make the contact trivially enough by setting up a heart trick (five diamonds, two clubs, a heart and a spade) but this wasn't going to be good enough. Even if

two spade tricks were lost, 4♠ was likely to make. So, I had to play on spades to make ten tricks in no-trumps by taking the double finesse, risking the contract if RHO had K-Q (-x) (-x). What happened at the table was that when I placed the spade jack on the table, we had a little wobble from LHO, so we were all right, and made five diamond tricks, four spades and two clubs. Eleven tricks. This was a complete top, and the opponents were furious, so all was well with the world. Except it was madness. I'd bid poorly – I should have trusted partner for a five-card spade suit and didn't. Then, despite having landed in a cast-iron contract, I was forced to play unsafely to do well. As a result of these two idiotic positions, I'd got all the match-points in my pocket. This is all very well for a pairs game down at the club, but it really won't do in a serious game. *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas le pont.*

A more accurate test of playing ability on the night is teams of four. The team that plays better will win. That's not to decry luck, or punting, or good judgement as it's known when it comes off – one might find oneself in a team that's a bit down in a match which, on form, could go either way. If a flat set is of no use, then generating a swing may be the only way to win. Personally, I rarely have any idea how a set is going: all those magazine articles that describe experts knowing that they'd got 2 IMPs back because they went one off in 3♦ baffle me. However, most of us could work out that if the first seven boards of a set have gone 1NT–3NT with nine cold tricks on any lead, then we need a plus score on the last board. I suspect that most readers of *English Bridge* are somewhere between these two extremes when it

comes to working out how a set in a match is going, which is fair enough. If you divine correctly what's needed on a particular occasion, then you've done the right thing, haven't you? So you deserve to win. (By the way, it's always better to claim afterwards that any 'tactical' effort was based on a cold calculation of what was needed. It's so much better for the image than saying: 'I was a bit bored and fancied a punt.')

The major knock-out competitions in this country are popular for the reason that to win them you have to have beaten everybody that you played, and to do that you had to be better on the day. As these campaigns reach their later stages, and the matches get longer, better players know that if the lesser opponents got lucky in the first set it won't matter. Sooner or later better play will prevail. The 12 IMPs lost on a dodgy slam will be recovered by better judgement on three part-score deals. This has to happen before the music stops and a chair is taken away, but it normally will.

If you want a convenient game of bridge any day of the week, and are prepared to take your chances and have a bit of fun, then pairs is the game for you, but if you want a true test of skill, enter a few knock-out teams competitions. I speak as someone whose finest performance in the Gold Cup involved an overnight stay in Manchester prior to a sixth-round match. After an early start, my team finally got an IMP on the score-card just prior to the tea and biscuits being wheeled out. But I recognised the quality of the opponents, and wasn't in the slightest bit bitter. I wouldn't say that I didn't whinge a mite on the drive home afterwards, but I'd stopped by Watford. And with teams, there are more people making up the captive audience in the car . . . □

# Match-pointed pairs is the best form of bridge



Frances Hinden

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR).  
Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

ALL across the land, every night of the week at clubs grand and modest, tens of thousands of players sit down to play match-pointed pairs. Considerably fewer people will be playing teams, and yet the 'Test Your Play' or 'Test Your Defence' problems in *English Bridge* are always at rubber or teams scoring, never pairs. The same is true of most of the hands you see written up by various bridge columnists in the daily papers. Is that because match-point scoring is less important or perhaps less interesting? Or because it's less commonly played worldwide? No, it's because pairs is a far harder game.

At teams, defence is simple: beat the contract if you can. At pairs, you don't know when choosing your opening lead if you are trying to stop the second overtrick or ensure the vital second undertrick. Similarly, in a teams match it doesn't matter whether you play in four of a major or 3NT if both contacts are making ten tricks – but at match-points those ten points are the difference between a top and a bottom.

Here is a deal from the 2007 National Pairs final, with partner and me North-South:

♠ Q J 8 6 2	♠ A 10 9 7 3
♥ A J	♥ K 5 2
♦ A K	♦ J 6 5 3
♣ A K 8 3	♣ 9

West	East
2♣	2♦
2NT	3♥ <sup>1</sup>
4♣ <sup>2</sup>	4♥ <sup>2</sup>
4NT <sup>3</sup>	5♦
6♠	All Pass

<sup>1</sup> Transfer to spades

<sup>2</sup> Cue-bid

<sup>3</sup> Roman Key-card Blackwood

The 2♣ opening was either a strong or a weak hand with diamonds, so East could not make an immediate positive response of 2♠.

North led the seven of diamonds which went to declarer's king. Declarer played the queen of spades and North followed low. At pairs this is a difficult problem because declarer has to decide whether it is right to play for an overtrick by taking the spade finesse – risking a possible diamond ruff – or to ensure the contract by playing ace and another trump. How likely is it that the lead was a singleton, given that South did not double 2♦ or 5♦? Will the rest of the field be in the same contract, or will some people have stopped in game or bid a grand slam? How many will play in a slam by East after a 2♠ response to a 2♣ opening? Will everyone else get a diamond lead and face the same problem? This is all part of the fascination of match-points, while at teams this is a dull hand: you lead a spade to the ace at trick two and ensure the contract, with an overtrick if the king is singleton.

Pairs is also fairer, because every hand counts equally. Last year my team lost the final of a national teams knock-out by less than the swing on one board when the opposition bid a grand slam that depended on a finesse. The other hands in the final set turned out to be virtually irrelevant compared to that one 50% decision to bid a grand slam. At match-points it doesn't matter whether the contract is 7NT redoubled or 1♣. You can't stop concentra-

ting just because the contract is a part-score. That's also what makes match-points more fun: because small score differences are so important, there is always much more bidding on part-score hands, and wild pre-empt, delicate doubled contracts and large penalties are seen more often.

It is often said that teams of four is the purest and most skillful form of the game, while pairs is 'imperfect' and 'random'. Well, if you have good enough team-mates, you can sometimes get away with playing less than your best, as their good results will cover for you. Or you can always blame them for your bad results. At pairs, however, it is all down to your partnership. It's true that over twenty-four boards in a one-session pairs event the best pair will win rather less often than the best team would win a short multiple teams, because it makes a big difference if the cards go your way or not. However, once you start playing a lot of deals that factor disappears. Look at the winners of previous World Open Pairs and you will see the world's top players (such as Fantoni and Nunes, or Meckstroth and Rodwell). They clearly think these events are worth playing in, even without a sponsor at the other table paying their wages.

I enjoy every form of bridge, whether it is a rubber with my parents, a county league match, simultaneous pairs events at the club, a national teams knock-out or even the occasional international event. They are all challenging in different ways. There would be less variety and much less fun if we had to stop playing match-points because it's deemed an inferior form of the game. □