

Think Pairs

AS a result of the unique way in which match-pointed pairs is scored, the tactics utilised when playing this form of the game should vary considerably from those used in rubber bridge, teams bridge, or Butler-scored pairs.

Unlike all the other forms of the game, the success or failure of the contract playing MP pairs is of no importance whatsoever. The only thing that matters is how many of the other pairs your score will beat. With that in mind, you must set a target when seeing dummy, and this will not be limited to merely 'making the contract'.

In order to arrive at this target, you need to ask yourself the following questions:


1. Am I in the same contract as 'the room'?
2. What is the 'par score' for this board?
3. Have I received a normal lead?

Only once you have a clear picture of what you are trying to achieve can you proceed sensibly.

Look at this ordinary board, which illustrates how you should be thinking at MP pairs:

Love All. Dealer South.

♠ 7 5
♥ A J 6 4
♦ K 9 6 2
♣ 8 7 2



♠ A 8 4
♥ K Q 7 5
♦ Q J 7
♣ J 10 4

As South you open 1NT and all pass.

The lead is the six of spades (fourth highest), won by East's king of spades; he returns the spade jack which you also duck, and then he plays the three of spades. How should you continue?

It is apparent that you have only five top tricks, which means that you will be two off for minus 100. You could try to sneak a

diamond trick before the opponents have had time to signal to each other, or you could just take your four heart tricks and accept two off. Which should you do?

In order to decide, you should try to answer the questions above:

1. Although your side has a 4-4 heart fit (where you would be likely to make eight tricks), many pairs use a 12-14 no-trump range, so your auction will not be uncommon.
2. Although the best result for N/S on this board would be +110 (2♥✓), the par score is very different. Look at what E/W could make in spades. At worst they would lose one spade, two hearts and two diamonds. It is quite likely that with almost half of the points between them, many E/W pairs will compete.
3. The opening lead appears to be quite normal.


Now that you have gone through the motions, you can make a sensible decision on how to play this hand. You know that the par score here is N/S minus 110 (from defending 2♠✓). You must try to beat that score, and that means cashing your five tricks, rather than trying to steal an extra trick which might result in going at least three off.

Minus 100 for two off will not be a bad score, as it will beat all the N/S pairs defending 2♠. Minus 150, however will be a disaster, and is likely to score very poorly.

Let us look at another example:

Game All. Dealer South.

♠ J 6
♥ Q 10 7 6 3
♦ J 5 2
♣ A 8 2



♠ Q 10 2
♥ A K 9 5 2
♦ A K 10
♣ K 5



Ed Scerri

This time you, South, are playing in 3NT and the defence starts with three rounds of spades, with your queen winning the third round. You need to set your target, so start by answering our three questions:

1. You are very far from being in the same contract as everyone else, as any sane pair will play in 4♥.
2. The par score for this hand will be +650 for N/S, as playing in 4♥ you would have time to draw trumps, and then establish the third spade to discard a diamond from dummy.
3. The lead is not a relevant factor on this occasion.

You have ten top tricks, and can take the diamond finesse, but if this fails, you may be defeated. This should not deter you, however, because taking your ten tricks will be worth only +630, which will be a 'bottom' anyway, so you might as well risk the contract in a desperate bid to recover the situation. If the finesse fails, you will score minus 100 or 200, but this will still be the same 'bottom' on the score sheet. If, however, it succeeds, then you will emerge with +660, and a very lucky 'top'.

The automatic reaction is to try to make the contract, or to go as few off as possible, but as can be seen from these examples, at pairs the essential thing is to set a target before embarking on a line of play. □

