



BE A DIFFICULT MATCHPOINT OPPONENT

David Bird
&
Marc Smith

An Honors eBook from
Master Point Press

Text © 2025 David Bird & Marc Smith

All rights reserved.

Honors eBooks is an imprint of Master Point Press. All contents, editing and design (excluding cover design) are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Master Point Press
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
(647) 956-4933

info@masterpointpress.com

www.masterpointpress.com
www.bridgeblogging.com
www.teachbridge.com
www.ebooksbridge.com

ISBN: 978-1-77140-380-1

Cover Design: Sally Sparrow
Cover Image: Andrei Tsalko/stock.adobe.com

1 2 3 4 5 6 28 27 26 25

Contents

Introduction & Acknowledgement	4
Part I Be Difficult in Uncontested Auctions	
1. General Concepts	6
2. Game or Partscore?	16
3. Choosing the Right Game	23
4. Slam Bidding	31
Part II Be a Difficult Matchpoint Declarer	
5. Assessing the Contract	46
6. Playing Partscores	51
7. Playing No-trump Games	60
8. Playing Suit Games	68
9. Playing Slams	78
10. Making Overtricks	92
11. Deceptive Play	99
Part III Be Difficult in Contested Auctions	
12. Law of Total Tricks	110
13. Getting in First	120
14. Low-level Interference	135
15. Competing the Partscore	142
16. High-level Decisions	151
17. Sacrificing	165
18. Matchpoint Doubles	182
Part IV Be a Difficult Matchpoint Defender	
19. Find a Lead	192
20. Defending Partscores	202
21. Defending No-trump Game	211
22. Defending Suit Games	221
23. Defending Slams	232
24. Deceptive Defense	240
<i>Other books from Master Point Press</i>	248

Introduction

Whether you play at a club or primarily online, most of your bridge will be at matchpoints. Those who do not vary their strategy to the form of scoring may do well enough, but they will never excel.

Playing matchpoints, you must doggedly contest partscore deals, occasionally taking risks that would be unthinkable at IMPs. You will also need to penalize your opponents if they step out of line, sometimes risking doubling them into game, which you would be wary of doing at IMPs. Your tactics for sacrifice bidding and slam bidding will also vary.

As declarer, you must assess the contract. Are you in the same place that most other pairs are likely to reach? Does the opening lead look normal? You will sometimes need to risk your contract in the quest for a valuable overtrick, something you would never do at IMPs.

This book contains over 200 deals, mostly from world championship matchpoint play. You will learn from giants of the game how to finish at the top of the field. The deals are brought to life with some 80 photographs of the world-class players in action.

Adopting the tactics and mindset outlined in this book will not only help you win consistently, it will also make the game a lot more fun!

David and Marc

Acknowledgement

Many thanks are due to our proofreader supreme, Bill Lide from Vancouver, Washington. He reported a good number of errors, large and small, in what we had fondly imagined was a perfect MS.

Photo Credits

The photographs in this book came from the following sources:

Ron Tacchi: pp. 7, 12, 15, 66, 75, 134, 156, 167, 180, 188, 225, 228, 239.

Marc Smith: pp. 16, 29, 42, 43, 67, 77, 86, 118, 140, 157, 172, 177, 203, 227, 231, 232, 233, 246.

Francesca Canali: pp. 24, 26, 55, 72, 95, 149, 212, 243.

Arianna Testa: pp. 138, 150, 184, 205.

John Steinberg: pp. 115, 141, 174, 183, 208, 213.

Claudio Fossati: pp. 41, 91, 126, 197, 198, 218, 223. Paula Zoltowski: pp. 48, 74.

Elizabeth van Ettinger: pp. 96, 153. E.B.L.: p. 104

WBF: pp. 20, 22, 35, 50, 52, 53, 56, 61, 81, 98, 101, 116, 162, 170, 178, 179, 244.

Photographs not listed above are from our subjects' private collections.

Part I

Be Difficult in

Uncontested Auctions

1

General Concepts

Matchpoint pairs is an exciting variant of bridge, more different from the IMPs game than many players realize. At IMPs, you have some big-stake contracts, games and slams, where large swings are possible. Partscore deals, with only smaller swings at to be earned, cause some players to sit back and relax.

No such luxury awaits in the matchpoint arena. A full top is up for grabs on every board. Consequently, players take bigger risks and fight more tenaciously than they would in at IMPs. Let's see an example, from the 1990 World Continuous Pairs.

Nil Vul	♠ 9 7 6 3
Dlr: West	♥ 10 8 5
	♦ A 9 8
	♣ A K 6
♠ K Q 8	♠ A J 5 2
♥ A K 9	♥ 6 3
♦ J 10 6 5 2	♦ 4 3
♣ 10 4	♣ Q 9 7 5 3
	♠ 10 4
	♥ Q J 7 4 2
	♦ K Q 7
	♣ J 8 2

West	North	East	South
<i>Wright</i>		<i>Mayer</i>	
1NT	pass	pass	2♥
pass	pass	dble	all pass

New Zealand's Lionel Wright opened with a 12-14 1NT, followed by two passes. Are you thinking: 'This looks like a dull deal'? Maybe at IMPs, yes. With a balanced hand and primarily defensive values, South would probably choose to defend.

Playing in 1NT is often a comfortable spot for declarer. Even if dummy is weak, West's non-vulnerable pay-out would be only one or

two 50s. Playing matchpoints, South therefore took the risk of competing with 2♥.



Lionel Wright

After two passes, it was East's turn to feel uncomfortable. Conceding -110 would not score well. Neither would picking up +50, if 2♥ went one down and E/W had a making contract in a black suit. Malcolm Mayer contested with a takeout double, which might have been considered too risky at IMPs.

He didn't find a black-suit fit, and his partner took the view to pass. Now they would have to fight for a huge stake, as almost a full top would depend on whether or not this contract made.

West led the ♠K and, when that held, switched to the ♣10, won by dummy's ace. A heart went to the jack and king, and West continued clubs. After winning with the ♣K, declarer then made a critical error. She needed to reach her hand with a diamond to lead towards dummy's ♥10 – there would then be no defense. Instead, she led low to the ♥Q.

Wright won with the ♥A and led a spade to Mayer's ace. When East cashed the ♣Q, Wright discarded the ♠Q. East played a third round of spades and Wright scored the setting trick by overruffing with the ♥9. That was one down and, in the blink of an eye, all the matchpoints had swung from one side to the other!

A session of matchpoint pairs is often filled with such pivotal moments. So, buckle your seatbelts and join us for what promises to be an exciting ride.

Bidding a slam is always exhilarating. Playing IMPs, if you can safely make your twelve tricks, there is no question that you should do so. You would never risk turning +1430 into -100 in order to increase your score to +1460 by making an overtrick. The potential reward is insignificant, even if the risk is relatively small. Not so at matchpoints. Take a look at this deal.

Taking the finesse and scoring +1460 will probably earn around 90% of the matchpoints, whilst -100 will leave you with less than 10%. What are the odds that West will hold the $\heartsuit Q$? With the suit breaking 6-2, West rates to hold the queen 75% of the time, so the mathematics clearly favor taking the finesse at matchpoints. You will score 90% three times and 10% once, which is clearly better than just scoring 55% four times. Yes, there will be highs and lows, but do you want to have a chance of winning the event, or consistently place just above average?

Similar situations occur in the bidding. Suppose LHO opens $4\spadesuit$ with neither side vulnerable. After two passes, you are looking at:

$\spadesuit 4 / \heartsuit A K 10 6 3 2 / \diamond 9 3 / \clubsuit A Q 6 3$

Do you pass or do you back in with $5\heartsuit$?

Bidding carries considerable risks. You may get doubled for -500 or more when the opponents were going to make only 420 in their game. Partner may also have enough defensive values to beat $4\spadesuit$, in which case bidding will turn a plus score into a minus.

At IMPs, bidding could easily produce a double-digit swing in the minus column. The upside is that you might gain a few IMPs by getting out for -100 or -300 against their 420. Yes, partner will sometimes have the right hand so that you can make $5\heartsuit$, but not often.

What if your opponents can make only ten tricks? Now you might push them into $5\spadesuit$ and go plus on the board. Maybe you do not even need to go plus. Perhaps partner's normal opening lead will let the opponents make eleven or twelve tricks, but your bid will get him off to a lead that saves an overtrick. Is it worth the risk of losing a big penalty when the reward may be to limit the opponents to +450 rather than +480? At IMPs, certainly not. At matchpoints, that could easily be a risk worth taking.

At matchpoints, it is not the size of the swing that matters, but the frequency. Bidding is a much better proposition. It may go wrong, but you only need to be right half of the time.

IMP is a relatively simple game. Playing matchpoints, you will have to consider many additional factors. Look at this remarkable deal from the final of the Women's Pairs at the 1990 world championships in Geneva.

N/S Vul ♠ A K Q
 Dir: South ♥ J 10 9 8 6
 ♦ J 8 7 6
 ♣ A

♠ 10 9 8 6 5 4 ♥ Q 2 ♦ 9 5 4 2 ♣ 7	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">N</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">W</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">E</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">S</div> </div>	♠ J 7 2 ♥ 7 3 ♦ K Q 3 ♣ Q 10 8 4 2	
---	---	---	--

♠ 3
 ♥ A K 5 4
 ♦ A 10
 ♣ K J 9 6 5 3

West <i>Radin</i>	North <i>Mayer</i>	East <i>Wei</i>	South <i>de l'Epine</i>
			1♣
3♠	dble	pass	4♥
pass	4♠	pass	4NT
pass	5♥	pass	5NT
pass	6♦	dble	redble
pass	6♥	pass	7♥
all pass			



Judi Radin

Kathie Wei and Judi Radin won the inaugural World Women's Pairs, in 1978, and would finish second here in Geneva. Radin has also won the World Team Olympiad, the Venice Cup and the McConnell Cup.

Her audacious 3♠ bid robbed the French of valuable bidding space. These were also the days before RKCB was universally played, so Anne Claude de l'Epine could not find out if her partner held the ♥Q. She eventually had to guess the final contract, knowing only that her partner held heart support along with two aces and one king. Despite East's double of

6♦ (showing QJ10xxx perhaps?), de l'Epine surely expected the ♦K rather than all those spade values opposite.

7♥ was not hopeless. Declarer won the diamond lead, cashed the ♥A, then played ♠A-K to pitch her diamond loser. With West ‘known’ to hold six non-spades to her partner’s eleven, can you blame declarer for running the ♥J and going down? E/W +100 was worth 29/34 MPs.

Describing your hand accurately to help partner judge what to do is admirable, and to be recommended most of the time. However, it cannot hurt to also have something that may surprise your opponents. Zia has long been an exponent of making a takeout double when holding Q-x in the opponent’s suit. Is this perhaps a variation on the same theme?

If Radin’s 3♠ overcall was imaginative, how would you describe the extravagant effort by China’s Yalan Zhang on the same deal?

West	North	East	South
Zhang	Shuman	Gu	McCallum
			1♣
pass	1♥	pass	3♦*
pass	3♠	pass	4♥*
pass	4NT	pass	5♣
pass	5♦	pass	5♥
pass	6♥	pass	pass
6♠	6NT	all pass	

Kate McCallum’s 3♦ showed a game-forcing heart raise. Kerri Shuman’s 3♠ asked, and 4♥ showed a spade shortage. The Americans were playing RKCB, so Shuman found out that the ♥Q was missing and stopped in 6♥. Then Zhang decided to save at the six-level.

The scoring for non-vulnerable penalties had only recently been changed, after Jeff Meckstroth had done something similar at a previous world championship, much to the chagrin of the powers that be.

Knowing that she could draw dummy’s trumps, Shuman surely should have doubled 6♠, as the penalty was likely to be even more than her vulnerable slam was worth. At IMPs, you would never turn down +1400 to get +1440 if there was even the smallest chance you would go down in slam. At matchpoints, though, +1400 could be a dreadful board if nearly everyone is making +1430.

On this deal, declarer in 6♠-doubled can make only four tricks, three trumps and a diamond. Seven down would have been +1700. When I featured Kerri as one of the ‘All-Time Greats’ in *World Class – 21st Century*, she gave me this hand as her most memorable disaster. She said that, in the heat of the moment, she had forgotten about the change

West	North	East	South
<i>Asulin</i>	<i>Senior</i>	<i>Levi</i>	<i>Brown</i>
2♣*	pass	2♥	1♣
pass	2NT	pass	pass
all pass			3♣

For the Israelis, who would leave Wroclaw with gold medals, Adi Asulin entered on the West hand with a Michaels cue bid, showing both majors. Hila Levi gave simple preference to hearts, which was passed back to Nevena Senior in the North seat.

It looks like your opponents have majors, so is it not likely that your side has a fit in one of the minors? The best scenario is that you score +110 rather than -110. At IMPs, this represents only a modest swing, while there are potential, much larger, downsides. Many players would therefore pass and defend. At matchpoints, almost no one would do so. Senior backed in with 2NT, asking her partner to choose a minor, as most experts would.

The best thing that can be said about 3♣ is that, mercifully, no one doubled. Declarer ended with just five tricks. You may think that -400 would be a disaster for the English pair, but it was actually exactly average: both sides scored 8/16 MPs on the deal.

Let's see what happened in the Open Pairs, with the joint winners of the gold medals holding the E/W cards...

West	North	East	South
<i>Bach</i>		<i>Cornell</i>	
1♠*	1NT	pass	1♣
2♥*	pass	pass	pass
pass	3♦	dble	dble
			all pass

West's 1♠ overcall showed either diamonds or both majors, hence North's strange-looking 1NT without a spade stopper. When Ashley Bach came again with 2♥, that confirmed both majors. This time, it was South in the pass-out seat. Looking at 4-4 in the majors, it is far more dangerous to balance here. We suspect that many would give up, but not our intrepid South.

North innocently bid his longer minor in response to his partner's double, and Michael Cornell closed the auction with a red card.

The defense began with two top hearts and a spade switch, Bach taking two winners in that suit. Coming from ‘Down Under’, Cornell is used to Christmas in the summer, and here he was with four tricks already in the bag, and they hadn’t even gotten to his K-10-8-x-x-x in the trump suit. However, you can never afford to take your eye off the ball playing matchpoints. Perhaps a little too ecstatic about how well things were going, East allowed declarer one more trick than he was due. But that was okay, as +800 would be a great board anyway, wouldn’t it?

Actually, it was worth 45/50 MPs, whereas +1100 would have been 50/50. After just a few more boards, they ended up in a tie for the gold medals. Every matchpoint counts!

Bob Hamman won the World Open Pairs 1974, and he has continued to win major events for more than half a century. The chattering classes might not approve of his bidding on this deal from the Mixed Pairs at the 2006 world championships, but we know whose judgement we would back.

N/S Vul	♠ Q 9 6 5							
Dlr: East	♥ 3							
	♦ 8 7 2							
	♣ Q J 9 8 2							
♠ J 8 3		♠ A 7 4						
♥ 10 9 7		♥ 8 4 2						
♦ A 10 6 4	<table style="margin: 0 auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">W</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">N</td><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">S</td><td></td><td></td></tr> </table>	W	N	E	S			♦ Q 3
W	N	E						
S								
♣ 5 4 3		♣ A K 10 7 6						
	♠ K 10 2							
	♥ A K Q J 6 5							
	♦ K J 9 5							
	♣ —							

West	North	East	South
<i>Feitelson</i>	<i>Granovetter</i>	<i>Pszczola</i>	<i>Hamman</i>
		1♣	4♥
all pass			

With a hand playable in three suits, some players would worry that Hamman’s approach risks ending in the wrong game or missing a slam.



Bob Hamman

The great man would argue that, with the emphasis on making an extra trick, matchpoints is not a game for slow, descriptive auctions that tell the opponents how to defend.

Candice Feitelson led a club, covered by jack and king. Hamman ruffed, drew trumps in three rounds, and advanced the ♠K. When that won, he ran the ♠10, which also held. A third round of spades then left Jacek Pszczola without recourse.

Exiting with the ♣K is no good. Declarer ruffs and leads the ♦K. (He knows the ace is on his left as East did not open a strong 1NT.) He would lose just two diamonds and the ♠A.

Seeing this, Pszczola exited with the ♦Q, hoping for slightly stronger diamonds opposite. Hamman covered with the king, so West won with the ♦A and played a club through dummy. Hamman ruffed and led a low diamond. West thought about this for a while but eventually played low, so dummy's ♦8 won. The ♦9 now disappeared on dummy's spade winner.

Pszczola could have saved his partner the problem by switching to his low diamond, rather than the queen. The upshot, though, was N/S +650 and most of the matchpoints.

Other books from Master Point Press

by David Bird & Marc Smith

BRIDGE CARDPLAY AN EASY GUIDE (10 books)

BRIDGE TECHNIQUE SERIES (12 books)

BE A DIFFICULT BRIDGE OPPONENT

by David Bird

BRIDGE ENDPLAYS FOR EVERYONE

BRIDGE ENTRY TECHNIQUES

CLEVER PLAYS IN THE TRUMP SUIT

ON THE OTHER HAND (2 books with Larry Cohen)

ROBIN HOOD'S HOLD-UP (bridge fiction)

TEST YOUR BRIDGE TECHNIQUE (12 books with Tim Bourke)

THE ABBOT'S SENIOR MOMENT (bridge fiction)

TRICK ONE

TWELVE IMPORTANT BRIDGE LESSONS (3 books)

WINNING DUPLICATE TACTICS

WINNING NOTRUMP LEADS (with Taf Anthias)

WINNING SUIT CONTRACT LEADS (with Taf Anthias)

by Marc Smith

COUNTDOWN TO WINNING BRIDGE (with Tim Bourke)

ENTERPRISING BRIDGE TALES (bridge fiction, 2 books)

SHOULD I OR SHOULDN'T I?

WIN THE BERMUDA BOWL WITH ME (with Jeff Meckstroth)

WORLD CLASS: Conversations with the Bridge Masters

WORLD CLASS – 21st Century European Bridge Stars

WORLD CLASS – 21st Century USA and the rest of the world

by Marc Smith & Barbara Seagram

25 BRIDGE CONVENTIONS YOU SHOULD KNOW

25 WAYS TO COMPETE IN THE BIDDING

IT PAYS TO BE DIFFICULT

Whether you play at a club or primarily online, most of your bridge will be at matchpoints. Those who do not vary their strategy to this form of scoring may do well enough, but they will never excel. This book contains over 200 deals, mostly from world championship matchpoint play. You will learn from giants of the game how to finish at the top of the field. The deals are brought to life with some 80 photographs of the world-class players in action. Adopting the tactics and mindset outlined in this book will not only help you win consistently, it will also make the game a lot more fun!



DAVID BIRD (Southampton, UK) is the world's most prolific bridge writer, with 166 bridge books to his name. Known for the clarity of his writing and explanations, he has won the American Bridge Teachers' Association 'Book of the Year' a record 12 times. His celebrated humorous fiction, featuring the cantankerous Abbot, has run for nearly 50 years. Both he and Marc commentate and write reports on the major championships around the world.



MARC SMITH (Southampton, UK) is co-author, with Barbara Seagram, of the world's best-selling bridge book, *25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know*. He has written many other bridge books and enjoyed countless tournament wins, ranging from the 1984 Junior European Union Championship to the 2025 Premier Grandmaster Pairs. He is a popular bridge teacher on the internet, conducting classes at all levels of play.



An Honors eBook from
Master Point Press