

WINNING AT MATCHPOINTS



BILL TREBLE

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FOREWORD

In writing this book, I'm treading in the footsteps of several renowned players. The most well-known of them are Marshall Miles, author of *How to Win at Duplicate Bridge*, and Kit Woolsey. Woolsey, like Miles, has won several major pairs events and divulged the secrets of his success in *Matchpoints*.

Since Woolsey's fine treatise on the subject was first published, however, the typical pairs game has undergone many changes. Rather than Standard, 2/1 has become by far the most popular bidding system. In contrast to the 1980s, when strong notrumps were used by a healthy majority of players, nowadays you'll likely see weak notrumps just as often. Moreover, the tactic of getting in the opponents' faces with preemptive action is growing by leaps and bounds. Several of the chapters in this book focus on those trends.

Partnerships at all levels have more specific agreements nowadays, so they aren't flying by the seat of their pants so much. Even in a local club game, the scores will not be all over the place as they might have been in the past. In higher-level events, there is even greater uniformity in the results.

Once I have covered the various aspects of pairs strategy, I'll conclude with a chapter of problems focusing on matchpoint decisions. All the deals are from real life — club games, sectionals and regionals. They will be presented in groups of three, as you'd encounter them in a nine-round pairs game. Each troika will be presented in a quiz format, followed by the analysis of bidding and play.

I'd like to thank my editor, Ray Lee, my ever-supportive wife Sue, and several players who helped me select the deals for this book — most notably Keith Balcombe of Whitby, Ontario and Andy Anderson of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Keith has represented Canada in international competition on several occasions, and they both played in the finals of their respective events at Canada Bridge Week 2019 (Keith in the Canadian National Teams Championships, Andy in the Canadian Mixed Teams Championships).

Bill Treble
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Is Pairs a Whole Different Ball Game?

During my forty-plus years of playing bridge, I've often heard duplicate pairs spoken of in less than glowing terms. It's random, people say. There's too much luck involved. It rewards unsound bidding and play. Well, it may occasionally seem that way, but it's a very rich and fascinating variation of the game. It's very much a test of skill, mettle and character.

In rubber or social bridge, of course, everything is decided at your table since there are just the four people involved. In a team game, you and your partner will have to match or exceed the results of your opponents at the other table to claim victory. At matchpoints, a large number of pairs hold the same hands you and your partner do. In bridge parlance, your opposition in a pairs game is referred to as 'the field'. You might know some of those players very well, and have a passing acquaintance with others, while there may be a few that you've never run into before. What are they going to do on your cards?

A widely-held assumption is that, in this form of the game, you need to be bolder and take more chances, both in the bidding and the play. In general, that is true in declarer play and competitive bidding, but not so much in defense and constructive bidding.

Let's start by examining some of the decisions that you might be faced with in a typical matchpoint session. We're going to look at eight deals from actual play, identifying the key decision points, and seeing what the results of different actions turned out to be. Declarer play will take center stage on the first two.

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

Contract: 3NT by South

Opening Lead: ♥4

The play to the first trick here hinges on the form of the game. Playing matchpoints, with nine easy tricks and a lot of potential for extra winners in both pointed suits, declarer should aim for multiple overtricks and put in dummy's ♥Q. There is a good chance that it will hold, and now he can work on either diamonds or, more likely, spades.

At teams, a farsighted declarer will think before playing to the first trick and consider how the contract might possibly go down. The worst-case scenario would be if he finessed the queen and lost to the king on his right. Now, if hearts are 5-2 with LHO also having the ♦A, the defense will have five tricks before he has nine. The way to a virtually guaranteed nine tricks is to play low from dummy at Trick 1. RHO will surely win the trick, but he can't do anything damaging and two diamond winners can be established for the game-going tricks.

In a pairs game, though, declarer can't afford the super-safe line of play; he should have loftier ambitions than just nine tricks, as 3NT is a normal contract that will be bid at almost every table. He'll want to score more tricks than other declarers and will duly call for the queen at Trick 1. On this deal, the queen holds, as the entire layout is:

	♠ Q 10 8 5 3										
	♥ A Q 7										
	♦ K 3										
	♣ K 10 9										
♠ J 4	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ K 7 6 2
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ K J 5 4 2		♥ 10 9									
♦ 10 9 8 4		♦ A 6 5 2									
♣ 7 4		♣ 5 3 2									
	♠ A 9										
	♥ 8 6 3										
	♦ Q J 7										
	♣ A Q J 8 6										

Let's look at the other results from the board to see how the various Souths fared:

North-South	+660	7 pairs
	+630	3 pairs
	+620	2 pairs
	+170	1 pair*

Save for the three pairs that landed in a spade contract, everyone got to 3NT. The declarers who finessed in hearts at Trick 1 ended up with eleven tricks, likely playing on spades at Trick 2 and developing four winners in that suit. While ducking the first trick is the right play at IMPs, it costs big-time here, as South will lose a diamond and spade in addition to a heart, and get a paltry 3 out of 12 matchpoints.

Taking the first-round finesse seemed like a natural thing to do on this deal, but in our next example, the stakes are much higher:

♠	4
♥	K 8 4
♦	J 10 8 5 3
♣	K J 10 7
	<input type="text"/>
♠	A 9 8 3
♥	A 10
♦	A K 6
♣	A Q 3 2

Contract: 3NT by South

Opening lead: ♠6

It was a quick auction with a 2NT opening being raised to game. Since the opponents are playing fourth-best leads and there are lower spades out, West could well have led from a five-card or longer suit.

Compare this to the first deal. This time you already have enough winners on top to make the contract. However, as in the previous example, there is the potential for additional tricks, here in the diamond suit. If the queen is doubleton in either hand, the diamonds will produce five tricks. Alternatively, you can cross to dummy and run the jack, finessing East for the queen.

There are a fascinating number of variables on this deal, of which the play in the diamond suit is only one. For example, you'll notice that 6♣ is a very good contract here. Will there be any pairs in the minor-suit slam? That will depend on what opening bid South chooses. In a club game, you can expect 2NT to be the norm although some players will upgrade the hand

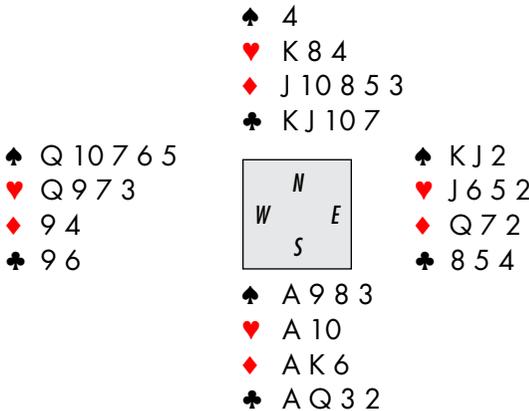
* Sometimes in this book I report the scores from when the deal was actually played. Since the examples were gathered from many different events, there are varying numbers of results depending on the exact table count.

because of the wealth of aces and kings and opt for 2♣ followed by 2NT. Responder is not going to try for a marginal slam opposite a 2NT opening, but might look for one after a strong 2♣. Even then, however, he might take the low road.

You, though, are in 3NT. You cannot outscore anyone who bids 6♣ (assuming they make it), so your real opponents are those who like you are in the notrump game. How is that contract going to be played by the other declarers? How many times will they hold off on taking the ♠A? How will they play the diamond suit? One option is to try for overtricks by finessing RHO for the queen, although that risks going down. The other is to plunk down the ace and king, which will result in nine tricks most of the time as the missing honor is unlikely to fall. If it does, though, you'll have five winners in the diamond suit.

Although it goes against the grain of what you've been taught to do in books on play of the hand, you should only duck one round of spades regardless of what you intend to do in diamonds. Whichever line of play you subsequently choose, the diamond finesse or cashing your winners, twelve tricks could be available if the cards lie favorably.

The entire layout is:



In this case, you'd have twelve tricks by finessing in diamonds, but if you switched East's queen with West's nine, that honor would drop upon the play of the two top honors and you would be losing overtricks by ducking a second round of spades. This is another example of matchpoints requiring a different kind of thinking than teams.

Here is the list of scores for the deal:

North-South	+690	6 pairs
	+660	2 pairs
	+600	3 pairs

You'll notice that all the North-South scores were +690 (the intrepid declarers who crossed to dummy and finessed in diamonds), +600 (those Souths who were unwilling to take the risk and simply cashed out), and +660.

I can tell you what might have happened with the declarers who made eleven tricks instead of twelve. They ducked both the first and second spades, winning the third round. They intended to plunk down the ♦AK and take whatever number of tricks were available. However, the West hand, after following to one high diamond, pitched his second card in the suit on the run of the clubs. This was enough to convince South to change horses in midstream and take the diamond finesse after all.

The opening leader may have felt it was necessary to keep all his spades and at least three hearts. However, it's never a good idea to discard from a worthless holding in a suit dummy has length and strength in, because it gives declarer more information than he is entitled to. Here, it turned a near-top (-600) into an average result.

For our next exhibit, you're faced with a decision on whether to try for slam. As East, you've picked up:

♠ A K 10 9 6 3 ♥ 7 ♦ A Q 8 2 ♣ 8 5

The auction so far has gone:

West	North	East	South
			pass
1♠	2♥	4♥*	pass
4♠	pass	?	

After making the splinter raise of 4♥, should you respect partner's sign-off or make one further attempt?

We can assume that opener has a minimum hand and/or wasted values in our singleton. However, that does not preclude East-West from having a slam. What would West have done with one of these hands?

♠ Q x x x x ♥ J x x ♦ K x ♣ A K x
 ♠ J x x x x ♥ Q x x ♦ K x ♣ A K x
 ♠ J x x x x ♥ K 10 x ♦ K J x ♣ A x
 ♠ Q x x x x ♥ K J x x ♦ K x ♣ A x

With the first example, there's an argument to be made for cuebidding over 4♥, even with the minimum point-count. Opener might not cooperate with the second hand because of the weak spade suit, as partner could easily have just four of his spades rather than wonderful six-card support. Neither of the final two hands would encourage opener to think seriously of bigger things.

It's quite reasonable, therefore, for East to continue with 5♦ and find out if opener is willing to cooperate, as he should with any of the above hands. Also, you don't expect a five-level contract to be in any jeopardy.

Over a 5♦ cuebid, opener actually bids 5♥, at which point responder can't go any further than 5♠ without a club control. Opener passes, and they've nicely investigated for slam and stopped at the brink, as the entire deal is:

♠ Q J 8 7 4	♠ —	♠ A K 10 9 6 3									
♥ A K 8 2	♥ Q J 10 6 5 4	♥ 7									
♦ K 3	♦ J 9 6	♦ A Q 8 2									
♣ 6 3	♣ K J 10 2	♣ 8 5									
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">N</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">W</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">E</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">S</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		
	N										
W		E									
	S										
	♠ 5 2										
	♥ 9 3										
	♦ 10 7 5 4										
	♣ A Q 9 7 4										

North, however, has been paying attention to the bidding and knows by now why the other side hasn't taken the plunge. He leads a club against 5♠ and they cash the first two tricks, after which declarer has the rest.

If the contract had been 4♠, North might have just led a top heart, even with partner not having doubled East's 4♥. A minor-suit lead could be more productive, but it's tough to know which one and a club might easily be giving away a trick.

Once again, let's look at the various scores for the deal:

EVERY DECISION COUNTS

Most players would agree that matchpoints is harder than IMPs — it's certainly different. Yet many players approach the two forms of scoring in the same way. In this book, the author explains the differences in approach, the whys and wherefores of the right way to bid, play and defend at matchpoint scoring for optimum results.



BILL TREBLE (Winnipeg, Canada) is the author of three previous books, including the award-winning *Defending at Bridge: A first course*. He has won the Canadian Open Pairs championship on two occasions.

