Knock Out Teams Strategy

By Marty Nathan

The most popular tournament format is undoubtedly knockout teams. You cannot however compete successfully without changing your strategy. In pairs you want the best score on every hand. In team play, however, you want a reasonable plus score or, failing that, a small minus. A flyer that costs 1,100 points can no longer be written off as “it’s only one board”; it well may be the entire match.

You’ll find some of the following recommendations appear to be contradictory. For example, preempts are a great match point tool (3.e.) but you should be careful with your sacrifices (3.f.). Who ever said this game was easy!? That’s why the most important advice is in 10.a.

Of course in any form of bridge, being in tune with your partner is critical. I’ve therefore written this article in outline form to facilitate discussion with your favorite partner.

This article assumes you are familiar with International Match Point (IMP) scoring. If not, there is a fine summary in *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*.

1. Before you get there
	1. If you have an established partnership, don’t add anything new in the month before the tournament. Heed the words of National Open Pairs champion Patty Tucker, commenting on her long-standing partnership with Kevin Collins, “We don’t consider anything part of our system until we’ve each blown it at least once.” Practice at the club, not at the tournament.
	2. Try to pair up with an established partnership. They’ll make fewer mistakes. They are less likely to play a laydown slam in a part score contract. In a close match the team that makes the fewer mistakes usually wins.
	3. Arrive early, and have your teammates do the same. Don’t make your teammates worry about your not showing up. You all need some time to get your “game face” on.
	4. Arrive rested, and take a walk between sessions. Everyone’s game goes down when tired, but many do not realize it.
	5. Minimize post-mortems between sessions. They not only take mental energy best saved for the next match but also risk creating ill will among your teammates.
2. The numbers of bidding

Bidding games is vital in teams. You’ll probably do well not bidding the doubtful game in pairs. You’ll still be close to average even if it makes and you risk a bottom when you’re wrong. But most big swings in teams come on game hands. Here are some guidelines.

* 1. Bid games aggressively, especially vulnerable. Bid the vulnerable game if you judge it to be at least a 38% chance. The breakeven on nonvulnerable games is 45%. Amazingly, the odds are exactly the same for majors, minors and no trump!
	2. A small slam is a 50-50 proposition. You gain the 500/750 slam bonus; you stand to lose the same amount if you’re wrong. If you think your chances are better than 50%, bid it.
		+ Bid the small slam if it needs a finesse and there is a chance for a trick some-where else, say, establishing the 5th card or a 3-3 break in a side suit. The combined chances are much better than 50%.

 S W N E

1**♠** P 2N P

3**♥** P 3**♠** P

4**♦** P 5**♦** P

??

**♠** A Q 8 4 3

**♥** 7

**♦** A J 10 3 2

**♣** A 6

Hand A

In Hand A[[1]](#footnote-1) you know you have a heart loser. It appears the hands fit well. Partner must have the **♣**K or the **♠**K, if not both, to make a forward-going bid of 5**♦**. Maybe you can set up the diamond suit. At worst **♠**6 should depend on a finesse and may well be cold. Bid 6**♠**.

* + - Don’t bid a slam that you think will depend on a finesse in a key suit. There are often other things that may go wrong (e.g., bad breaks, duplication of values) that bring the probability below 50%.

 S W N E

1**♠** P 2**♥** P

3**♦** P 3**♠** P

4**♣** P 5**♣** P

??

Hand B

You hold the same hand as above but the bidding is now as shown in Hand B. Slam is now less assured. Partner has denied the **♥**A and the **♦**K. Unless partner has a running club suit, the contract at best depends on a diamond finesse. You face the added danger of a bad trump break (better than a 30% chance), making the slam less than a 50/50 proposition. Sign off with 5**♠**.

* 1. Grand slams require 55-57% odds to make them a good bet, based strictly on the IMP differential. (If you’re wrong, you lose the small slam bonus as well as the game bonus.) In practice you need much better odds. First, the opponents may not bid the small slam. Now your grand gets you only 4 more IMPs, while going down turns a +13 into –13. And don’t ask how they could miss the small slam. It happens. There is also the psychological factor; going down in a grand slam is bad for team morale. Bid the grand when only you can count 13 tricks.
	2. The essential element in all of the above decision-making is a realistic calculation of your chances. Figure that first. Don’t forget that bad breaks and the like do happen, and more often than most players suspect. There’s a frightening example below.
	3. See the Appendix for a detailed analysis of the above odds.
1. Common sense bidding
	1. Be cautious when pushing the opponents into game, especially a vulnerable one. They might make it. They get 620 when they were willing to settle for 170. That’s a 10-IMP swing.
		* There is the possibility that they have +140 and so do you. Not bidding 3**♠** over 3**♥** could cost you 7 IMPs. The keys are trump length/double fit (LOTT) and whether your hand(s) is offensive or defense oriented. If you do push to say 3**♠** on an offensive hand, you’ll probably need to go to 4**♠** over 4**♥**.

Hand C

Let’s say you’re faced with the bidding decision in Hand C in pairs, both vulnerable. The LOTT supports a 3**♠** bid. Nevertheless in teams you should pass. The opponents may bid 4**♥**, and they may make it. Partner promised two tricks with his opening bid, and you can only add one. You distribution is flat. You have the worst possible heart holding. You should not risk a 10 IMP swing.

**♠** K J 6 2

**♥** 6 2

**♦** A 7 3 2

**♣** 8 3 2

 S W N E

 1**♠** X

2**♠** 3**♥** P P

??

Hand D

Same bidding, but now you hold Hand D. Now 3**♠** is a good bid. You are willing to compete to 4**♠** should the opponents bid 4**♥**. (You might even have bid 4**♠** earlier.)

**♠** Q 10 6 3

**♥** 6

**♦** A 10 9 7 3 2

**♣** 3 2

* + This does **not** apply if you are sure you can defeat their game at least 2 tricks (and of course you will double them). Why 2 tricks? The push is risky enough that you want some margin for error.
	1. There is virtually no IMP benefit to 3NT over 4 of a major. While it may be right to play notrump rather than your 9-card major fit with 30 points at pairs (the strategy is that you can make overtricks on sheer power), stick with the major in teams. But just as in pairs, you might want to play that major fit in 3NT with poor shape and lots of queens and jacks.

Hand E

* 1. Be willing to play a part score contract in a minor rather 1NT. The extra points, critical in pairs, are not worth the risk. You are faced with that bidding decision in Hand E. In pairs you would probably pass, banking on the higher value of notrump tricks. In teams, you should bid 2**♦**. You certainly have a nine-card fit and the opponents have more than half the deck. Take the +90 or 110. Even if 1NT occasionally nets a +120, the safety of the minor is much more important than the occasional 1 IMP. You might even consider 2**♦** with only four trumps. (To be fair to the idea of passing 1NT, your 2**♦** bid might help the opponents find their spade fit. Even then, you should be able to safely compete to 3**♦**.)

**♠** 7 4

**♥** K 10 8 4

**♦** Q 10 7 5 2

**♣** 9 6

 N E S W

1**♦** P 1**♥** P

1N P ??

* 1. Consider five of a minor rather than 3NT. While this is an anathema to a pairs partnership, the minor suit contract will frequently offer more safety. This is particularly true when the bidding indicates one or both of you are short in a suit and/or only have one stopper in the suit. (See Hand H below.)

In pairs you may be reluctant to bypass 3NT to explore a possible minor suit slam. Team play gives you more flexibility. Stopping at five of a minor doesn’t produce a poor result (as long as you make it.).

* 1. There is a strong case for disciplined preempts in teams. I personally like the rule of 2-3-4. (Using losing trick count, bid 2 tricks more than you can make with unfavorable vulnerability, 3 tricks if equal, and 4 tricks if favorable.)
		+ This disciplined approach helps partner decide whether to bid game. You don’t want to miss games in teams.
		+ If your preempts deny two outside controls, partner can also judge well when to sacrifice. In Hand F, you know the opponents have a sure game, most likely a small slam and maybe even the grand. Bid 5**♦** against opponents not likely to find their slam. Against better opponents, try 6**♦**.

 N E S W

3**♦** Dbl ??

Hand F

Fav Vul

**♠** 9 5

**♥** 8

**♦** A 8 6 3

**♣** J 10 8 6 3 2

* 1. Notwithstanding hand F, be careful about sacrificing. Down 500 vs. 620 can earn you a top in pairs. But it’s only 3 IMPs in teams. But if they weren’t making their contract, you lose 12 IMPs.
		+ In addition, they are much more likely to double you than push to the 5-level in teams. They may have read 4.c. below and know to take the sure plus.
		+ If you are certain your maximum loss is 3 tricks at equal vulnerability, your sacrifice is less risky. You gamble –800 vs. –620 (-5 IMPs) against the hope of only –500 (+3 IMPs) or –200 (+9 IMPs). But –1,100 or worse is not good for team morale.
		+ Bear Bryant, former Alabama coach famed for his running offenses, noted that three things can happen when you pass a football, and two of them are bad. His brother Lion Bryant, the fictitious bridge coach, said the same thing about sacrificing. (Think about it.)
		+ If in doubt, opt for safety and don’t sacrifice
1. Rethink your doubling strategy.
	1. Do **not** double them into game unless you *know* you can beat them two tricks. Say you double 2**♠**. If you’re right, you can turn a +200 into +500. But if you’re wrong, you give them 670 rather than the 110 they were entitled to.
	2. On the other hand, there can be great rewards in doubling contracts below 2**♥** (always on a trump stack, preferably with a defensive oriented hand). Let’s change the above doubled contract to 2**♦**. You still can turn the 200 into 500. But if you’re wrong, you only lose 90. (The opponents would never get overtricks when you double a part score, right?)
	3. The old adage that “the five-level belongs to the opponents” has great merit in teams, especially when the opponents are clearly sacrificing. Say both sides are vulnerable. In pairs you can’t afford +500 on a hand where you can make five of major vulnerable. But the loss is only 4 IMPs in a team game. Find another defensive trick and you’re +4 IMPs. Find two more and you have a big swing. Remember the strategy in IMPs is to get a good plus score, not necessarily the best plus possible. (This is the flip side of 3.f. above.)
	4. The “matchpoint double” has no place in team games. There’s a reason for that name!
2. Competing at lower levels
	1. Many matches hinge on the battle for the part scores. Those 5- and 6-IMP swings add up. Try not to let them play in an 8-card fit at the two-level. Larry Cohen in *To Bid or Not to Bid: The Law of Total Tricks* makes this point much better than I ever could*.*
	2. Remember that as long as you have a good trump fit, they aren’t likely to be doubling you below game. That assumes they understand teams strategy! This allows you to compete vigorously for part scores.
3. Play of the hand

Your primary object is to MAKE THE CONTRACT. You get only an IMP or two for overtricks, but blowing a makeable game costs10 IMPs or more.

* 1. Safety plays are great. (A safety play is intentionally forgoing an overtrick(s) to ensure your contract or to increase your chances of making the contract.) Here’s the first hand in a recent regional team event.

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 Hand G

6**♠** by West (me). Opening lead – **♣**10.

**♠** A Q 10 7

**♥** K Q J 2

**♦** A 10 3

**♣** K 8 5

**♠** 9 8 6 5 2

**♥** A 7 4

**♦** 7

**♣** A Q 9 3

A great slam. All that can beat me is **♠**K and **♠**J on my right. I take the **♣**A and finesse the **♠**10, losing to the king. I big sigh of relief on my part. Until a club is returned and North ruffs with the **♠**J! Down 100!

I should have known that two finesses might be right for pairs but not for teams.[[2]](#footnote-2) All I need to do is play the **♠**A first, ruff a diamond and then lead towards the **♠**Q. I eliminate the possibility of a ruff and even guard against a doubleton **♠**KJ on my right. A baby safety play if there ever was one.

Our opponents didn’t bid the slam and got 750 and 13 IMPs. If I play it right, we get 780 and the 13 IMPs. That’s a 26 IMP swing.

* + Make sure that your safety play is not jeopardizing the contract! There are few comments more disheartening than hearing partner say, “Sorry I went down. I played it for safety.”
	1. Find a lie of the cards that will allow a bad contract to make, even at the cost of additional undertricks. The rewards for making the contract almost always offset the cost of an extra undertrick. Playing for down one may be good in pairs, but it rarely works in teams.

Hand H

In Hand H you find yourself in a nonvulnerable 3NT, and West leads the **♦**5. [You must have skipped over the part about playing in minors rather than doubtful no trump contracts (3.d). Or maybe you thought your combined 29 points would be enough.] You win East’s jack and take the club finesse. East takes her queen and returns the **♦**9. In pairs you would cash out for down 2, or maybe finesse the **♠**Q to beat those cashing out. In teams you should double finesse the spades. Yes, the odds are 3:1 against you, and you’ll probably go down three rather than two. But the extra undertrick only costs you 50 (perhaps 2 IMPs) while making the game nets you +500 for 11 IMPs. That’s more than enough to go for the game.

**♠** A Q 10

**♥** J 9 7 6

**♦** A 5

**♣** K 9 5 2

**♠** 5 3 2

**♥** A K Q

**♦** K Q

**♣** J 10 8 6 3 2

* + - But if you are doubled with a small chance (say, 15-20%) to make the contract versus down 3 or more, it is usually right to avoid the big number.  Let’s say East doubled 3NT (not lead directing) and you are faced with the same decision at trick 4. Now the extra undertrick costs you 200 while making it gets you 650. In addition the double by East undoubtedly means he has a spade honor if not both. Best now to cash out rather than risk 5 IMPs against long odds.
	1. Overtricks do matter (but not at the risk of the contract). More than a few matches are won by 1 or 2 points. Don’t give them up gratuitously. But don’t gamble the contract to make overtricks.
1. Defensive play

Your mission is to BEAT THE CONTRACT. One trick is usually enough. You beat even a nonvulnerable game and you pick up 10 IMPs. You don’t mind giving up an overtrick now and then to get that kind of return.

* 1. Opening leads
* Take reasonable risks to beat the contract, but you don’t want to give them the marginal game. Here are some considerations in favor of an aggressive lead [[3]](#footnote-3).
	+ They bid confidently to game, suggesting they may even have some extra values. A passive lead is better when they inch their way to game (e.g., 1**♥** - 2**♥**; 3**♥** - 4 **♥**).
	+ Key cards are favorably place for declarer.
	+ Key suits are breaking well for declarer.
	+ Dummy has a long suit that figures to be a source of tricks.
	+ They have a double fit.
	+ You know from the auction that partner has quite a few points.
	+ They are in a *non*-vulnerable game. (They are more likely to push for a vulnerable game, suggesting it may be close. In that case, don’t help them with an aggressive lead.)
* Lead of the king from Kx makes more sense here than in pairs, especially if the auction suggests an aggressive lead.
* A singleton is more likely to be the winning lead than in pairs.
* The lead of an ace against a suit slam may save a valuable overtrick in pairs, but holding them to 6 is *not* the objective in teams. It is somewhat less likely to get a good result in teams. Factors against cashing the ace include:
	+ Declarer is the stronger hand
	+ They cue bid their way to slam rather than rushing to 4NT. (When cue bidding, they are less likely to be off the AK in a suit)
	+ The hands are not particularly distributional, reducing the chance of a sluff in the suit you hold the ace
* Lead more cautiously if they are in a close game.
	1. Later plays
* Now you can better judge the likelihood the contract will make. If you are sure it’s making, almost any chance is reasonable.
* But don’t hope for the impossible. Give them enough +1’s and you may lose by that margin!

* 1. Your risky play, even if well-timed, will often lose 30 points, or 1 IMP. But when it works, you stand to gain 470 to 720, 10 or 12 IMPs, respectively. Just make sure you’re aggressive play doesn’t give them a contract that was going down. (Ugh, it’s too painful to compute that IMP cost.)
1. At the half
	1. If you’re behind by a lot, say 35-40+ points. You need some big swings. You often must “shoot for tops” to get them.

* + You won’t catch up by staying out of the marginal game where the opponents may go down. In part scores you can only pick up 6 IMPs or so. You must bid (and make) the game or slam they miss.

Hand I

* + Warning: for experienced partnerships only. Consider changing your systems to get results different than the other table. If your opponents at the other table play a weak notrump, think about changing to strong notrump. Or try regular Blackwood rather than keycard. You may get to a slam that depends on a finesse for the trump king. Just be sure you and your partner know the new system well enough. You certainly can’t afford bidding misunderstandings at this point.

**♠** J 10 9 6 2

**♥** 7

**♦** A Q 4 3 2

**♣** 10 9

 S W N E

 P P 1**♦** P

1**♠** P 2N P

3**♣** P 3**♠** P

4N P 5**♠** P

5N P 6**♦** P

6**♠**

**♠** A 7 3

**♥** A 4 3

**♦** K 9 7 2

**♣** A K 6

Let’s say you decided to switch to regular Blackwood. In Hand I few RKCB pairs will get to 6**♠**. After learning the partnership is off a key card and the **♠**Q, it’s hard for South to bid the 25-point slam. But South, playing straight Blackwood and needing a big swing, knows he has all the Aces and a double fit. At worst it’s probably a two-finesse slam. It turns out to be a great contract.

* + I suggested in 2.c that you bid only grand slams you are sure you’ll make. That ignores the actual percentages in the Appendix. If you think it’s somewhat better than an even chance, go for it.
	+ But this isn’t a license for crazy bidding.
	+ You can also get a big swing with an unusual lead, usually against notrump. For example, you might lead your broken 5-card suit rather top of a sequence of 4 cards. Or try to hit partner’s suit rather than from your length. As one top player put it, “I’m not making up 38 points leading 4th best.”
	+ Keep mental track of where you are. If you feel you’ve earned a few big swings to get back in, stop shooting for tops. You stand a much better chance of giving the big swings to them.
	1. If you’re way ahead
* Since you want flat, boring hands, some recommend shuffling the cards really well at your table. This creates hands close to normal distribution, meaning almost 2/3 of all hands have no singleton or void. I believe the opposite is true, that poor shuffling creates even flatter hands. In any event, I personally think it’s unethical to shuffle differently based on the score. It may be not in the same league as stacking the deck, but that doesn’t make it right.
* Be aware the opponents should be following the strategy in the above paragraph. If you think they’ll push on a hand, perhaps you should to. You can’t lose as long as you match the opponents’ results. (Once after my opening bid of 2NT, partner bid 3NT on xx, xxx, xxx, Qxxxx. She reasoned the opponents would bid it and she wanted to keep even with them. They didn’t bid it. Personally, I think it was a terrible bid. Unfortunately I did make three; a wonderful opportunity for learning was lost!)
* Remember shooting for tops is a losing strategy in the long run. It works because it’s just as bad to lose by 10 as it is by 60, and sometimes you’ll win. But most of the time you’ll lose by 60! So be careful in “keeping pace.” This is even less a license for crazy bidding.
1. Swiss teams
	1. The above has much relevance to Swiss teams, but not entirely.
	2. For example, one overtrick is much more likely to win a match of 6 or 7 boards than a 24-board match.
	3. Each overtrick in Swiss may move you up one level on the Victory Point conversion chart. There is no such benefit in KO’s.
	4. So be careful in applying all of the above to Swiss.
2. Summary
	1. View everything here as a guideline. Guidelines never replace thinking.
	2. Bid your vulnerable games aggressively
	3. Bid part scores aggressively, following the LAW, especially with good trumps.
	4. Find a way to make your contract, even at the cost of more undertricks.
	5. Find a way to beat their contract, but be careful that your aggressive play doesn’t let them score an unmakeable one.
	6. Double them in part scores only with trump tricks and when you can see defensive tricks.
	7. Preempt a little more aggressively, especially when you are not vulnerable but always base the level on the LAW.
	8. Most of all, avoid the big disaster. The team that makes the fewer mistakes usually wins.

Did I miss anything? Or worse, did I get something wrong? Let me know at mjaynathan@gmail.com and I’ll make the needed corrections.

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This article can be found on the Mid-Atlantic Bridge Conference web site at

<http://www.mabcbridge.org/mabc350/index.html> . Select [KO Team Strategy for Intermediate Players](http://www.mabcbridge.org/mabc350/377_KOteamStrategy.htm).

1. In deference to journalistic convention, you are always South in these hands. Unless otherwise noted, you are playing 2/1 and Roman Key Card Blackwood. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Actually I was wrong on that too. According to *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge*, the right pairs play is a first-round finesse for the queen, then play the ace. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An “aggressive lead” is one that might set up a trick, especially one that could disappear. It is rarely the standard lead. The contrasting “passive lead” is designed to avoid giving up a trick that declarer couldn’t get on his own. Leading from KJx is an example of an aggressive lead. In pairs you are generally less aggressive because any extra trick given declarer may create a bottom board; you only want to make plays that have a better than 50% chance of working. In teams the only trick that really matters is the one that makes or sets the contract. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)