

IMP Strategy (for Swiss teams, knockout teams, and IMP pairs)

By Steven Gaynor

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In a matchpoint event, we are always looking for that extra trick or playing in a risky major suit or notrump rather than a poorer-scoring, but safer, minor suit. Why? Because it pays off big time when it works. We may even risk our contract to make a play for an overtrick. On defense we strive not to blow a trick rather than beat a contract.

In IMP scoring, however, the considerations change drastically. Now just making or beating a contract can give us a big score, but extra tricks are chump change. (OK, I know we have all won or lost a match by 1 IMP.)

Winning IMP strategies include:

- Make your contract. Do not worry about overtricks or undertricks. If you are in the right spot, things will usually work out in your favor.
- Trust your bidding system. Even at pairs, you will be a winner if you are in the right suit at the right level despite blowing an overtrick once in a while.
- Stretch to bid a game. If vulnerable, game should be bid even if it is as low as a 40% chance. If not vulnerable, it should be a 50% prospect.
- If you bid three vulnerable games that your opponents do not bid and you make only one of them, you break even. If you are in an auction and the decision is now in your hands whether to bid game or not — if you have to think about it, bid game.
- Do not double their partial. You better have them down two in your own hand before you chance a double of a bid below game. And “down two in your own hand” means you have a fistful of trump tricks. Do not count on your partner for many of these tricks.
- Do not go for numbers. Don’t make some wild, preemptive bid just because you have six or seven (or more) cards in one suit. It is not worth it. Your competitive bidding should be more constructive at IMP scoring. Upgrade your overcalls by at least a queen. This means that if you would overcall with 8 points at pairs, overcall with 10 or more at IMPs.
- Play your safest contract. If in the bidding you find you have a better fit in a minor than a major, play in the minor, especially at a partial. You want to make whatever contract you bid. Plus 110 is only a bit worse than plus 140 and it may not even make any difference sometimes. This also applies to game and slam bidding. If partner opens 1NT and you have a four-card major with at least invitational values, bid Stayman. Plus 620 and plus 630 are the same at IMPs.
- Do not stretch to bid slams. Bid slams only when they have at least 75% probability of success.
- Do not stretch to bid slams. Oh, is this a repeat? Well, good. The point needs extra emphasis.

You have partners at the other table. Don’t make a risky bid or play because you think you are down in a match.

Once, in a seven-board match, we bid a slam down two vulnerable for minus 200, bid 3NT with a combined 21 high-card points after a bidding misunderstanding — which my partner played well for down one and minus 100 — and doubled them in 4♥, making five for minus 990. We thought we were slaughtered. Wrong. We won IMPs on all three boards and blitzed the other team.

Don’t be a hero. Do not make a confusing bid that (1) may be passed when it is forcing or (2) shows extra values that you don’t have. Make the call that shows your strength.

“Take out insurance.” In every team game, there will be a hand where both sides can make game. Usually, it is a wild hand with lots of distribution, doubles fits and long suits. It is usually right to bid one more (called “taking out insurance”) – unless you are sure they are going down and you cannot make your bid.

On defense, strive at all costs to beat the contract when it means giving up an overtrick. You may take risks that you would never dream of at matchpoints – such as leading the king from K-x, hoping to find your partner with the ace of suit or the queen and a quick entry in trumps. Sometimes you give up an overtrick, so you lose 1 IMP. If your bold play sets a contract just one time in 10, you are ahead. If it's hard for you, it's hard for them. The player sitting in your seat at the other table is holding the same cards you are. This guiding principle will help you on several of the points already listed.

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