

TEAM TACTICS – TEN TIPS FOR YORKSHIRE LEAGUE PLAYERS

1. Understand the scoring method generally used in teams events – that is to say, International Match Points or IMPs.

Most club bridge is match-pointed pairs, where the object is to beat or equal the score achieved by other pairs playing in the same direction. In other words to gain tops or avoid bottoms. In match pointed pairs you will gain a top by scoring =430 for 3NT making ten tricks, if the rest of the room is also in 3NT but make only nine tricks. In IMP scoring you will gain precisely 1 IMP for this achievement. To bid and make a vulnerable slam scoring +1430 will also be a top when the room goes one down in the same contract. In a teams game you will gain 13 IMPs.

2. Understand the scoring method used in the Yorkshire League.

Each match is scored in IMPs converted to Victory Points or VPs. There are 20 VPs at stake in each match, so the margin of victory can be anything from 11-9 to 20-0. A win by 100 IMPs converts to 20-0 in VPs. 20-0 victories are quite rare, and nearly always there is something at stake going into the final 8 boards of the match. So if your team is apparently having a bad day, you shouldn't give up because you are trailing by 60 IMPs after 24 boards. It's unlikely you will win the match, but a solid last set might convert a 16-4 defeat into, say, 14-6. Those extra 2 VPs might at the end of the season, be enough to gain your team promotion to the next division or avoid relegation. It's best to treat the season as one long match of 228 boards played over seven separate sessions against different opponents.

3. Bid games especially when vulnerable.

This is best tactics because of the IMP scoring.

Consider that at game all the bidding begins 1S-2S, partner makes a game try with 3C and you have a close decision. If you stop in 3S and it makes spot on, and your opponents bid game and go one down, you score +240 (+140 for 3S making and +100 for 4S down one). This is worth 6 IMPs. However if 10 tricks are made in both rooms you lose -450 or 10 IMPs (+170 for 3S up one but minus 620 for the vulnerable game bid and made by opponents).

So it is worth bidding game if you judge the odds of it making are round about 2 to 1 against. In addition, most players play the hand better than they defend. Many contracts that theoretically could be defeated, in practice make, because of an unfortunate opening lead or a mis-defence later on.

4. Be conservative in the slam zone

In principle 50% slams are worth bidding. However, players love to bid slams and in practice, there are more bad slams bid and fail than good slams missed. Contracts that are said to depend on a finesse, or a 2-2 split in trumps, are often worse than that – for example, they need a side suit to behave, or could go down on a singleton lead. Beware in particular of the mis-fitting 6NT on a combined 31 or 32 count, and the 6 of a suit with all the side suits under control but two losers in the trump suit.

Grand slams are worth bidding at odds of 2 to 1 on. But in practice bid only the obvious ones, or those where you can count 13 virtually certain tricks.

5. Be cautious about doubling part score contracts

You can certainly double these if you know trumps are dividing badly, and each side has approximately equal number of high cards in the side suits. The danger lies in doubling "on principle" because our side has 23 high card points to their 17. Opponents will doubtless have extra length in their main suits to compensate for their lack of high cards. Remember the scoring method – 2 spades vulnerable, doubled and making scores 670 compared with 170 undoubled. One down doubled is only 200 compared with 100 undoubled.

Look out for opportunities to double game contracts. For example, when opponents are stretching (one has limited his hand and then accepted a game invitation) and you expect the hand to play badly (length and strength in a suit bid by right hand opponent; small cards in a suit bid by left hand opponent).

6. Develop judgement in highly competitive auctions

Let's say, all four players are bidding and the auction has reached the four or five level, How can you tell whether to bid on, pass or double? There are a few general rules that help:

- When in doubt, bid one more
- The five level is for the opponents (if they have bid game freely and you successfully push them one level higher, let them play there).

- If your hand is suitable for a sacrifice, bid to the limit at the first opportunity and let the opponents take the final guess.
- If our side has bid freely to game, pass is forcing. In other words, we won't let them play undoubled – we'll either bid on or double them. You have to judge if your hand – in the context of the auction to date - is offensively orientated, defensively orientated, or somewhere in the middle. In the first case, you bid one more, in the second case you double, and in the third case you pass the decision to partner.
- In a teams game, it's OK to take the money. At game all, a safe 500 for 4 spades 2 off doubled is a better bet than a 50/50 chance of +650 for 5 hearts making, which might prove to be -100 / 200 for 5 hearts one off.

7. Play safe to ensure a contract.

The following is a classic example. You are playing in 3NT and require at least five tricks from the following combination.

Dummy: AKQ1075
 Declarer: 84

You can afford to lose the lead once, but have no side entry to dummy. Playing match point pairs everyone would play the suit from the top and would be right to do so. Seven times out of ten the whole suit comes in and you make an overtrick. Three times out of ten an opponent holds Jxxx and you go down.

At teams you should take a first round finesse of the ten. When West holds J, Jx or Jxx this makes no difference. When East has a similar holding you lose a trick unnecessarily – but it is worth paying this premium of 1IMP. The safety play safeguards the contract whenever the suit splits 4-1. You will flatten the board when the opponents know their safety plays, and gain 10 or 13 IMPs, depending on vulnerability, when they don't.

8. Take risks to make dubious contracts

For example, you need a side suit of AQ109x opposite xxx to produce five tricks. This is no better than 25% as you need left hand opponent to hold both missing honours. It is nevertheless a chance worth taking even if it costs an undertrick or two at 50 or 100 a time.

(The odds change when doubled as the extra undertrick will cost 200 or 300)

9. When defending, play safe to ensure the defeat of a contract

Let's say you are on lead and considering leading a suit in which you hold the ace and dummy the KJ. Partner might or might not hold the queen. At match point pairs you might take a risk of underleading the ace, hoping declarer will misguess. Most of the time it will not cost even if declarer guesses correctly, but occasionally it will allow a contract to make. This may be a risk worth taking at matchpointed pairs but not at teams. So cash the ace, if it is the setting trick.

10. When defending, take risks to defeat the contract

At matchpointed pairs, players quite correctly take percentage lines all the time regardless of whether or not the chosen line will lead to the defeat of the contract. It sounds obvious, but at teams you should always be aware of how many tricks your side has made and how many more are needed to make or defeat the contract.

For example if the only realistic chance seems to be ace and another in a side suit, hoping partner has a singleton, it's worth a try. But don't take it to extremes, and remember the bidding and play to date. It would be pointless playing partner for AK in a suit if this would leave declarer (who has opened the bidding) with only an 8 count. If there are six cards missing in a side suit and declarer has already shown up with 9 cards in two other suits, you can dismiss the possibility of partner having a singleton in the key suit.