

I played the hand carefully and made three for +140. That seemed to be another seemingly innocuous board, yet it turned out not to be. Had I passed, the opponents would have gone +110 in 2♦ and we would have lost six IMPs on the board, thus losing the match by three! As it was, with a push at 140, we won the match by—three IMPs.

Don't give up. Don't ever give up.

Chapter 22

Don't Order The Salmon (Larry Cohen Doesn't, You Shouldn't Either)

One of the thrills of gambling is winning the big one. It doesn't matter whether it is craps, blackjack, the ponies (my more-than-occasional walk on the wild side), backgammon (yeah, I do that, too) or the current craze—poker, Texas Hold'em style. I've also dabbled in that a little and it's sort of fun—especially when you win. Being the studious type, I went out and bought a couple of how-to poker books and read what they had to say. Oh, sure, there are specific techniques to learn, but the most compelling thing they tell you is something I already knew and you should know, too.

It's all about the odds. Over and over again the authors of these books tell you don't do this, or don't do that or do do this or that—because they believe that in the long run the odds are on your side and you'll come out a winner. On any one hand, you might well lose, but in the end, you'll come out a winner.

Even backgammon books talk about this, telling you when or when not to “accept a double” (continue playing on at twice the stakes instead of folding at the current stakes and conceding defeat right away). Sometimes, they correctly tell you, you should accept a double even though you're a big favorite to lose! Why? Because in doing so, the books teach, you'll cut your long-run losses.

Ever buy a stock? Almost all of us have and most of us own some today. Ever have one go down in price? Of course. Even as astute an investor as you or your spouse has picked a clunker once in a while. But wise investors know that “living to fight another day” is good investor strategy.

So, cut your losses, but let your profits run.

Well, Mel, what does this have to do with bridge?

My answer: **everything.**

Whenever we make a bid or play, we want that bid or play to give us the best chance of getting the most matchpoints or IMPs from a particular hand. But sometimes, you can't do both—go after both the “most likely to gain” and the “gain the most” with one bid or play. Something has to give. The reason is that in order to achieve the most, there is almost always risk.

You have to take a chance—occasionally a big one. Sometimes that chance is justified, and sometimes it's just foolhardy. Doing what is most likely to work sacrifices the chance for a bonanza but reaching for the brass ring might result in you falling off the horse. It's the difference between betting on the favorite and betting on the long shot.

Playing bridge is very much like gambling or investing in that it's all about *risk management*. What does a particular bid or play risk? What do I get if I'm right, what do I lose when (if) I'm wrong?

Most of the time, taking big chances at the bridge table—meaning making a bid or play that is against the odds, maybe even big-time—is very much losing strategy. If you do that consistently, you'll come out way behind, like betting the long-shot horse every race. Once in a while you're a big shot because you get lucky, but most of the time you go broke.

Have you ever seen those scenes on the nature shows on TV of the salmon swimming upstream, trying to return to their spawning grounds? I have, too. Do you know what happens to the salmon, in real life?

Before they reach the spawning grounds, most of them die.

Going against the tide doesn't work for most of the salmon most of the time and it won't work for you if you try to do it at the bridge table. Your approach at bridge should be to do the tried and true. Do things that the odds tell you will work most of the time. Don't buck the tide like the salmon, or, in the end, your fate will be like theirs:

Morte!

So do yourself a favor:

Don't Be the Salmon

Swim with the tide, not against it.
Don't make plays and bids that are
against the odds.

Learn From the Best

Larry Cohen is just about the best matchpoint player in the country. He has won numerous Nationals: the prestigious Blue Ribbon Pairs four times, the Life Master Pairs twice, the National Silodor Open Pairs playing with David Berkowitz at the 2006 Nationals in Dallas. And that's just a partial list. The point is that Larry knows what he's doin'.

Now, let's see Larry's response to a poll question from the December 2005 *Bridge World* magazine: He explains why he rejects passing partner's double of 2♠ even though such a decision could have worked out very well:

"Pass[ing 2♠ doubled] is probably the long run winner, with the highest expected value. However 2♠ will...[occasionally] make and that gives me a zero. *My philosophy is at all costs to try to avoid zeros* [emphasis added—MC] and to win the matchpoints on some other boards."

You may not have noticed, but Larry did something very subtle in his answer. He translated his potential bridge scores or expectations into matchpoint expectations. By not passing his partner's double—he bid 2NT instead—he was keeping "the ball in play." In other words, by avoiding a potential zero if the opponents were able to make 2♠ doubled, he bid 2NT, which certainly did not prevent him from getting an above-average or near top. Maybe Larry would play the cards well (it would be a shock if he didn't!) and maybe the defense would slip. Bidding 2NT may have lessened his chance of getting a top, but it avoided, almost for sure, a bottom.

Another analogy that some of you might be familiar with comes from golf. In my mind I can hear the golf announcer saying that Tiger (Woods) or Phil (Michelson) or whoever "will go for the center of the green, aiming well right of the pin because it takes the looming water hazard out of play and eliminates the chance of a double [bogey]." In whispered tones: "He has a good lie and this shouldn't be a problem. Oh no, he went for the pin, but it's hooking, hooking—plop! I can't believe he did that... What in the world made him go for the pin? I'm so surprised. Now he has to scramble well to lose only two shots on the hole..."

But, you might say, I don't play golf on Sunday for a million dollar purse and I don't play the cards like Larry Cohen (not many do) and I never will. So I can't think about things the way they do. But Mel says you can and you should.

Back To Your World

Suppose you're playing at your local club and your partner makes a game-invitational bid and you have to decide whether to carry on, say, to 4♠, or to pass 3♠. So you think about it a while and come to the conclusion that you don't really have a great hand and that you should pass. But, you are also aware that you are playing against your club's patsies, and you know they don't defend very well. So you decide to carry on to 4♠, when you know in your heart that you shouldn't, but you figure Mr. and Mrs. Patsie are sure to give you a trick.

Perhaps this is the layout:

		<u>Partner</u>		
		♠ Q75		
		♥ J3		
		♦ AQ873		
		♣ Q84		
<u>Mr. Patsie</u>			<u>Mrs. Patsie</u>	
♠ 1086			♠ J5	
♥ AK84			♥ 109652	
♦ 92			♦ J105	
♣ J1095			♣ AK6	
		<u>You</u>		
		♠ AK932		
		♥ Q7		
		♦ K64		
		♣ 732		

<u>Mr.</u>	<u>Partner</u>	<u>Mrs.</u>	<u>You</u>
—	—	—	1♠
P	1NT*	P	2♦
P	3♠**	P	4♠***
P	P	P	

* 1NT (forcing)

** 3♠ (three-trump limit raise)

***4♠ (your "patsy-induced" overbid)

Even Mr. Patsie, who has been playing at the club for 45 years and who plays as well now as he did when he started, knew enough to lead the ♥A. He also knew enough to cash his ♥K—Mrs. Patsie hates when he doesn't

take his winners, so Mr. Patsie was never not going to take that King. After looking at the dummy, Mr. Patsie had various "words of wisdom" running through his head, including "lead through the strength of the dummy." "Left-Heft" some half-knowing teachers preach to their students*.

But Mr. Patsie had another thought go through his mind (two thoughts per day were about Mr. Patsy's limit and it was somewhat unlucky for you that they both came on this one hand): "Top of a sequence." Mr. Patsie was surprisingly good at remembering those aphorisms. So, though he toyed with shifting to a diamond ("Left-Heft"), he correctly shifted to the ♣J and even the Patsies couldn't help but take three club tricks. When the smoke cleared, 4♠ was down two, though the Patsies, in their perpetual fog, insisted that you had made your four, and only after ten minutes of discussion did all parties agree on down two.

The scoresheet was opened, and this being the last board of a three-board-a-round movement, North entered the score and saw what everyone else had done: (you and your partner were pair three north-south and the Patsies were pair six east-west).

NS#	Contract	Made	N/S Plus	E/W Plus	NS MP	EW#	EW MP
1	3♠ S	3	140		7	8	0
2	3♠ S	-1		50	4	7	3
3	4♠ S	-2		100	.5	6	6.5
4	3♠ S	-1		50	4	5	3
5	3♠ S	-1		50	4	4	3
6	3♠ S	-1		50	4	3	3
7	4♠ S	-2		100	.5	2	6.5
8	3♠ S	-1		50	4	1	3

* It is rare that it is necessary to lead through the dummy's long, strong suit, something that "Left-Heft" encourages players to do. Instead, I encourage defenders to "pick on the little guy"—in other words lead through dummy's shorter AQx and not dummy's longer AQJxx.

So, your over-exuberance got you exactly one-half of a matchpoint out of seven. Great! And against the Mr. and Mrs. Patsie! It's almost unbearable!

"But," you might say, "suppose the East-West cards were arranged differently and that the Patsies' did mess up the defense badly as they often do, and they did allow your hopeless 4♠ contract to make? Wouldn't that get us a top?"

Well, you'd probably be right. The scoresheet would have looked something like this, with you still pair three north-south:

NS#	Contract		Made	N/S Plus	E/W Plus	NS MP	EW#	EW MP
1	3♠	S	3	140		3.5	8	3.5
2	3♠	S	3	140		3.5	7	3.5
3	4♠	S	4	620		7	6	0
4	3♠	S	3	140		3.5	5	3.5
5	3♠	S	3	140		3.5	4	3.5
6	3♠	S	3	140		3.5	3	3.5
7	4♠	S	-1		100	0	2	7
8	3♠	S	3	140		3.5	1	3.5

Your +620 would indeed have gotten you your top all right—seven matchpoints out of a possible seven—and you would have felt justified in your assessment of The Patsies' defensive ability. But it would have been **you** who screwed up badly! Actually, you would have been the Patsie!

"Me?! How can that be?"

Well, in our two examples, your silly 4♠ (over) bid got you either half a matchpoint, or seven matchpoints, depending on the cards and Mr. and Mrs. Patsie. You'd be generating what we used to call in the old days a "pajama game"—all tops and bottoms. But the real issue is what would have happened if you had bid more sensibly and passed 3♠?

Against proper defense, you would have been down one in 3♠ like everybody else and would have received 3½* matchpoints. If on the other hand, the Patsies screwed up the defense, you would have scored +170 and received the same top! At no risk! So by bidding sensibly, you'd get a 3½ or a 7, but by bidding recklessly you'd get a ½ or a 7. The point is you don't necessarily have to go +620 to get a top.

It's all about risk management and the odds—in this case it's the matchpoints odds, not the odds of making an overly-ambitious contract. Remember this:

The goal of duplicate bridge is not to bid games and slams, it's to get more matchpoints than the other pairs.

In the Patsie story, the 4♠ bidder took an unnecessary risk—a foolish one. It was foolish because it had almost nothing to gain and everything to lose—it was very poor risk management.

But there's something in the prelude to the Patsie story that is important. It was when we were talking about Larry Cohen and his philosophy avoiding zeros at all costs. Not everyone can do that. Larry can because his technical skills and bridge judgment are so good that he can just "sit there" and do nothing special and he is on his way to a 60% game. That's part of every expert's advantage. He avoids making wild bids or plays. He just wants to avoid digging a hole for himself with unnecessary zeros. Larry does this, I do this, and so should you.

The trick is to take risks when the matchpoint or IMP odds are well in your favor. When I was discussing Mel's Rule of 2 (Chapter 3), I explained that aggressive balancing after a 15-17 INT opener under the right circumstances will earn you (in the long run) about 65% of the matchpoints, though on any single hand, you might get a poor score, even a zero. That's an example of risk taking when you're swimming downstream—the tide and the bridge odds are with you.

But bidding 4♠ against Mr. and Mrs. Patsie is "Ordering" the *Salmon*—a prescription for swimming upstream.

*The -50 score would have to have been shared by one extra pair—you--so the -50 would have been reduced from 4 matchpoints to 3½.

Now, let me give you one example of something that you should avoid, because it goes so much against the tide:

Never sacrifice vulnerable versus not. I mean never! The scoring table is so much against you. A vulnerable versus non-vulnerable sacrifice will only pay off if you hold your doubled contract to down one **and** the opponents were making their game. If it's a partscore hand, -200 is "the death number"—it loses to all partscores. Such a tiny target zone! Who can be so smart enough to predict that a sacrifice will be down only one? You can't, I can't. And, if you're down two, that's -500 versus the 420 or 430 or so the opponents can get in four of a major or 3NT. Down three (-800) is an IMP disaster, but even down two (-500) at matchpoints is a likely zero. Who needs zeros?

**Play the Cards Better
(On Offense and Defense)**