

BRIDGEWORKS

NEGATIVE THINKING AT MATCHPOINTS

DON'TS WIN MORE

BY JEFF RUBENS

You play a lot of duplicate: perhaps local club games, perhaps sectional jousts, perhaps an occasional regional or national event. We all want to win, but sometimes we are willing to settle for a bit less. Our game is always improving, but our results sometimes are not. We study books and magazines, yet poor results, the causes of which are not obvious, keep cropping up. What are we doing wrong?

Let's concentrate on a limited objective. Fine points and big trophies can wait. We want to know how to score above average consistently, to be "in the money" in our section frequently, to expect confidently to qualify for the final round of an open pair game. Throughout this series, keep in mind that the goal is not to discover how to rack up a 70-percent game but to provide the best chance of consistently making a satisfactory score and perhaps notching some high finishes now and then.

The Value of Negative Thinking

The answer to the question "What are we doing wrong?" is that we are too positive-oriented. When faced with a critical situation, we too often wonder "What should I do now?" Instead, I recommend thinking more along negative lines. Focus on avoiding serious mistakes. Bridge tournaments are

generally lost, not won. I will try to identify common error-types and suggest things that one should *not* do. For examples, I have deliberately chosen unlikely situations, because (1) you should not try to remember the situation but rather the method of reasoning; (2) these instances, some slightly modified to make the points clearer, came up at my table—I know what all the winning actions were and can therefore make believe that I understand what was going on.

Taking Positions

1. *DON'T* try to guess the optimal contract.

If you can't reach a logical conclusion about the top spot, don't try. Instead, aim at the surest plus, or the surest game, etc.

Neither side vul. You, South, hold:

♠ 7 5 2 ♥ K 6 ♦ J 10 6 4 ♣ 9 8 5 3

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	—	—	Pass
Pass	1 ♠	Double	3 ♠
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
?			

Should you take a stab at four of a minor suit? Perhaps if you bid three notrump, partner will choose a minor (he won't; unless you have a special agreement). Clearly, you are in some difficulty. Partner's second double—still basically for takeout—shows a strong hand, and your side might be

able to make 10 tricks in its best combined fit. But where is that fit? There is no way to find out. Infuriating!

So don't take a wild stab. Pass three spades doubled, and take your chances. You say that East-West might make their contract, and you'll get a zero or near-zero? Quite true. However, the percentages clearly favor defeating three spades. Of the choices available, defense is the best chance for a plus.

What might the outcome be? Suppose you beat three spades one trick doubled, 100 points. This won't outscore a makable four-level contract. However, getting a better result implies that you can make something, can get there (*and can stay there*—sometimes, if you can make, say, four clubs, partner will bid five). Consequently, even if this decision proves wrong, it does not necessarily follow that your matchpoint score will be bad. Perhaps you can beat three spades one trick and can make four of one minor but not the other; plus 100 won't be a bottom. Some pairs will be down in four of the wrong minor; some pairs will bid five of the right minor (or three notrump) and go down; perhaps some pairs will sell out to three spades undoubled.

Failing to obtain the best possible result is not necessarily a disaster in the matchpoint column. When faced with a tough decision, don't guess for a top; aim at average-plus.

Mistake-avoidance tactics have their bright sides as well. Every so often, it will turn out that you couldn't have made anything; plus 100 turns out to be an 80-percent score, or better. Furthermore, you might occasionally collect 300. West, who opened in third position, may have a substandard hand;

East, who preempted, may have taken a mild chance to crowd the auction (which is not such a bad idea) or have been overdepending on the Law of Total Tricks when holding unsatisfactory nonspade distribution.

Mental Overspecification

2. DON'T make assumptions.

It is very impressive to hear an expert explain a brilliant call. After three rounds of bidding, he deduced each player's essential holding and knew that his partner had three clubs to the jack. Seeing that a double squeeze would develop at trick ten in the play of three hearts, he bravely . . .

Yes, that's exaggerated, but it is the sort of spectacular reasoning that sometimes makes the difference between first and second. Those of us with lesser ambitions don't want to get murdered (in the matchpoint column, that is) when partner shows up with three clubs to the *ten*, or doesn't play the dummy as well as he might have. So, instead of making assumptions, just bid your own 13 cards.

East-West vul. You, South, hold:

♠ 8 6	♥ Q 7 6 2	♦ Q J 4 2	♣ K 8 6
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	1 ♠	Pass	Pass
?			

Your first instinct is (presumably) to pass. You think to yourself: "If that X#*%! expects me to protect on this cheese, . . ." Then you start wondering about the deal. This is an especially weak hand to hold in this situation. East can't have much, and West didn't open with a strong bid. Partner is marked with a strong hand, and he didn't take any action over one spade, so he must be strong in spades.

Aha! The opp partner must have we had better can double—no for a reopening probably leave : trick set will be a our defensive str and one notrump better. How do v double and one n

I trust that y True, reopening shaded, sometime I don't doubt tha players who wou But this hand is and good when p what if he has a n a double, and dex tract. Or, if partn but weak spots, a constructively, he side overboard, shorter spades or no aces and one k imaginative, but it tricks, partner (wh at least 10 points a virtually sure to tr

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Homework can practice, but it sh tive where possib ages you to learn the simplest yet th all: *DON'T follow*

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Diversification

Make assumptions.

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2 ♠ Q J 4 2 ♣ K 8 6
NORTH EAST
Pass Pass

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Aha! The opponents are vulnerable; partner must have been trapping! Maybe we had better reopen after all. We can double—no one expects too much for a reopening double—partner will probably leave it in, and even a one-trick set will be a fine score. Or perhaps our defensive strength is a little weak, and one notrump would be a shade better. How do we decide between the double and one notrump?

I trust that you weren't taken in. True, reopening actions should be shaded, sometimes considerably. And I don't doubt that there are successful players who would act on these cards. But this hand is pure junk. All well and good when partner is loaded, but what if he has a normal penalty pass of a double, and declarer makes the contract. Or, if partner has a lot of spades but weak spots, and he chooses to bid constructively, he will likely get your side overboard, because he expects shorter spades or more strength than no aces and one king. One notrump is imaginative, but if you can make seven tricks, partner (who will place you with at least 10 points and a spade honor) is virtually sure to try for at least eight.

Don't mastermind. Don't assume that partner has this or that or anything else. If the hand doesn't meet your requirements for a reopening double, pass. Leave the far-out positions for the winners (and losers).

Quiz

Homework can profitably provide practice, but it should also be instructive where possible. This quiz encourages you to learn another Don't rule, the simplest yet the most important of all: *DON'T follow (other) rules blindly.*

1. East-West vul. You, South, hold:
♠ 9 7 3 ♥ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
— — 4 ♥ 4 ♠
Pass Pass Double Pass
?

What call do you make?

2. East-West vul. You, South, hold:
♠ 9 7 3 ♥ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
Pass Pass 4 ♥ 4 ♠
Pass Pass Double Pass
?

What call do you make?

3. East-West vul. You, South, hold:
♠ 9 7 3 ♥ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
— — 1 NT* Pass
Pass 2 ♥ Pass Pass
2 NT Pass Pass 3 ♥
Pass Pass 3 NT Pass
?

*15-17 HCP

What call do you make?

4. North-South vul. You, South, hold:
♠ A Q 10 8 6 4 ♥ A 9 7 3 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 3
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
— — 1 NT* 4 ♣
?
*15-17 HCP

What call do you make?

5. North-South vul. You, South, hold:
♠ A Q 10 8 6 4 ♥ A 9 7 3 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 3
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
— 3 NT* Double 4 ♣†
?

*solid seven-card-minor; little outside

†pass-or-correct

What call do you make?

6. North-South vul. You, South, hold:
♠ A Q 10 8 6 4 ♥ A 9 7 3 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 3
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
1 ♠ Pass 2 ♣ 2 ♦
?
What call do you make?

(Solutions overleaf.)

In the first three problems, partner has done something unexpected. What does that madman want from us?

1. East-West vul. You, South, hold:

♠ 9 7 3 ♥ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	—	4 ♥	4 ♠
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
?			

Had the preempt been in third or fourth position, the double would show a strong hand with the distribution for a four-bid and values to support whatever decision you might make.

However, when the preempt is in first or second position, expert opinion is divided over whether the double shows (a) a spade stack or (b) a reasonably-normal preempt with which opener is aching to bid again (thus extra playing strength) but wants to provide the option to defend. I'm in the (b) camp, because I don't want my partner opening irregular preempts in an early position—maybe he ensnared East this time, but he'd be more likely to get to double four spades if he let the opponents enter the auction at a low level.

Assuming (b), North must have enough playing strength to suggest that five hearts will be a profitable save, but he doesn't want to act unilaterally. Since he must have some defensive strength to offer four spades doubled as a contract (if we could beat four spades alone, we would have doubled), he presumably has the ace of hearts. We know that there is no heart ruff coming, and our hand is not strong enough defensively to think that four spades will often be defeated. Therefore, sacrifice in five hearts.

2. East-West vul. You, South, hold:

♠ 9 7 3 ♥ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
Pass	Pass	4 ♥	4 ♠
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
?			

This double says that partner stepped out with a tactical move and now must consult about what to do. You have excellent defense in context, so pass and hope for a satisfactory penalty.

3. East-West vul. You, South, hold:

♠ 9 7 3 ♥ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	—	1 NT*	Pass
Pass	2 ♥	Pass	Pass
2 NT	Pass	Pass	3 ♥
Pass	Pass	3 NT	Pass
?			

*15-17 HCP

Both partners have said that three notrump looks like the wrong spot, so why is North bidding it? He has no right to try it either as an attempted make or for a sacrifice. He knows that you have cards in the minor suits (because you passed up two chances to show spades), and his hand is presumably suitable for minor-suit play (he has honors in the minors). But he can't guess the right spot with his 3=2=4=4; you can—bid four clubs.

4. North-South vul. You, South, hold:

♠ A Q 10 8 6 4 ♥ A 9 7 3 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 3

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	—	1 NT*	4 ♣
?			

*15-17 HCP

East's preemptive has proved effective. You would have made a slam-try in an uncontested auction but cannot do so now without reaching a dangerously high level. So settle for your "sure" plus in four spades. The deal may well belong in slam, but you just can't find

out. (Bear in mind that partner has a four-cl

5. North-South vul.

♠ A Q 10 8 6

SOUTH WEST

— 3 NT

?

*solid seven-c

†pass-or-corre

Here, partner has not empowered you with the risk of getting into a position that you expect to win honors in. The assumption is that the auction—

Problem A

Rubber bridge
South dealer
Neither side vulnerable

SOUTH WEST
1 ♥ Pass
3 NT Pass

West leads

Plan the

LD

West vul. You, South, hold:
 ♠ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3
 WEST NORTH EAST
 Pass 4 ♥ 4 ♠
 Pass Double Pass

Double says that partner stepped a tactical move and now must about what to do. You have ex- offense in context, so pass and a satisfactory penalty.

West vul. You, South, hold:
 ♠ 6 2 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 8 6 4 3
 WEST NORTH EAST
 — 1 NT* Pass
 2 ♥ Pass Pass
 Pass Pass 3 ♥
 Pass 3 NT Pass

Partners have said that three looks like the wrong spot, is North bidding it? He has no try it either as an attempted for a sacrifice. He knows that cards in the minor suits (be- u passed up two chances to des), and his hand is presum- able for minor-suit play (he s in the minors). But he can't right spot with his 3=2=4=4; -bid four clubs.

West vul. You, South, hold:
 ♠ 8 6 4 ♥ A 9 7 3 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 3
 WEST NORTH EAST
 — 1 NT* 4 ♣

Preemptive has proved effec- would have made a slam-try ntested auction but cannot do thout reaching a dangerously l. So settle for your "sure" ur spades. The deal may well slam, but you just can't find

out. (Bear in mind that suits may not split in the best possible way when East has a four-club bid.)

5. North-South vul. You, South, hold:
 ♠ A Q 10 8 6 4 ♥ A 9 7 3 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 3

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	3 NT*	Double	4 ♣†
?			

*solid seven-card-minor; little outside
 †pass-or-correct

Here, partner is unlimited; you are not empowered to act for the partner- ship, so you must decide whether the risk of getting too high justifies show- ing that you have a strong hand. When you expect partner to have no high honors in clubs—this is not an ass- sumption but a valid deduction from the auction—four spades is not enough

of an effort. Instead, bid five clubs, planning to convert five of either red suit to five spades (offering a choice of contracts at a high level).

6. North-South vul. You, South, hold:

♠ A Q 10 8 6 4 ♥ A 9 7 3 ♦ Q 4 ♣ 3

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 ♠	Pass	2 ♣	2 ♦
?			

Should you rebid spades or hearts? Don't bother thinking about it. You have an ideal hand for defense against two diamonds doubled, and the only sensible way you can get there is to pass. This is a forcing situation; partner must act, and if he does not double two diamonds, his bid will likely give you a clue as to how to proceed.

IMPROVE YOUR PLAY

Problem A

Rubber bridge
 South dealer
 Neither side vulnerable

NORTH
 ♠ 4 3
 ♥ 8 6 2
 ♦ K Q J 7 5
 ♣ A 10 9

SOUTH
 ♠ A K
 ♥ A K Q J 10 7
 ♦ 6 4 2
 ♣ J 6

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 ♥	Pass	1 NT	Pass
3 NT	Pass	6 ♥	(All Pass)

West leads the spade queen.

Plan the play.

Problem B

Rubber bridge
 South dealer
 Both sides vulnerable

NORTH
 ♠ 7 3
 ♥ Q
 ♦ A J 10 9 7 4
 ♣ 9 7 4 3

SOUTH
 ♠ Q 9 6 2
 ♥ A 10 9
 ♦ K 5
 ♣ A Q 6 2

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 NT	Pass	3 NT	(All Pass)

Heart five, queen, king, ?

Plan the play.

(Solutions on page 37.)