

FAULT SIGNS

By Mary Smith

How to make fewer mistakes and elevate your bridge game.

1 Playing too fast.

Solution: Slow down. Many errors, such as winning the opening lead in your hand when you should have won it in the dummy, can be prevented by just slowing down.

Whether you're declaring or defending, you are entitled to think for a few seconds, especially at trick one. You might say something like, "I am studying the hand."

If you're the declarer, make a plan. It can be a simple plan, such as "finesse for the king of trumps, draw the remaining trumps, knock out the ace of your side suit, claim." So if you're planning to take an immediate finesse for the king of trumps by leading the queen from dummy, try to win the first trick in dummy!

2 Cashing tricks, especially aces, too early.

Solution: Planning ahead is good for defenders, too. Aces should capture kings and queens, not 2s and 3s. When the dummy, on your left, tables a suit such as K-J-5-4, decide ahead of time that when declarer leads toward that suit, you will duck smoothly. You will

Years ago, I was fortunate to play occasionally with some big names among them Steve Landen, Fred Hamilton, Larry Mori, Chuck Saito, Petra Hamman and the late Ron Andersen. My regular partners now include some of the best active players in Michigan, as well as students at all levels. What's the common thread? We all make mistakes! When we make a mistake, it's human nature to feel disappointed, but we shouldn't be surprised and certainly never devastated. After all, it's part of the game.

What distinguishes experts from good players and good players from average players is the frequency of mistakes. The best players I've had the privilege of playing with made fewer errors than my regular partners, who in turn, made fewer errors than most of the field.

"It is not the handling of difficult hands that makes the winning player. There aren't enough of them. It is the ability to avoid messing up the easy ones." — Alan Sontag

There are two general categories of mistakes: mental errors, which can be anything from forgetting to pull the last trump to winning the first trick in the wrong hand, and the mechanical (physical) kind, such as revoking or pulling the wrong bid out of the bidding box.

Here are 10 common errors and solutions to help avoid them:

lose your ace once in a while, but when your partner has the queen, she will score it most of the time. Try to establish extra tricks, not just cash the ones you were dealt.

This principle applies to declarer also. Don't be in a hurry to cash your aces and other obvious winners too quickly. You can often develop extra tricks by establishing long suits — by knocking out high cards or by ruffing some of the low cards.

"It's not enough to win the tricks that belong to you. Try also for some that belong to the opponents."

— Alfred Sheinwold

3 Trump mismanagement.

a) Getting your winners ruffed because you didn't pull trumps.

Solution: If your hand or the dummy is going to be full of good tricks after you knock out one of the opponents' high cards, or take a finesse or two, then you should usually pull all the trumps so your winners won't be ruffed.

b) Pulling too many trumps.

Solution: When you're planning a crossruff, or simply need to ruff losers

in your hand or the dummy, do pull trumps, or at least not enough to thwart your plan.

4 Bad bidding — part 1.

Missing games and part scores because of inappropriate responses to takeout doubles or one-level suit openers.

Solution: Tell your partner what you've got instead of making her guess. Here is what I play after an opening one-bid on my left, doubled by my partner, pass:

- ❖ With game values — that is, the equivalent of an opening hand — bid game or cuebid their suit.
- ❖ Jump one level with about 10 dummy points. This is invitational but not forcing.
- ❖ Jump two levels to show length but not much strength, perhaps a seven-card suit and 5–6 mechanism points (mostly queens and jacks).
- ❖ Bid a suit at the lowest level to show a bust up to about 9 points. But with 6–9 points, you can rebid again if you get the chance. A free bid, which means you weren't forced to bid because the opener's partner took a pass, shows about the same, 6–9

If your hand seems suitable for notrump, bid 1NT with 7–10 HCP, 2NT with 11–12 and 3NT with 13–15. All three, of course, show stoppers in opener's suit.

5 Misusing conventions.

There are thousands of conventions, about 50 of which are popular in my neighborhood. Sometimes people misuse a convention, but more often, they agree to play a convention without knowing the follow-ups.

Solution: Learn the convention and the continuations. For example:

a) The unusual notrump and Michaels cuebid were designed to show two-suiters with one bid. Many people use them without appropriate values. You need a few high-card points and decent suits. Not vulnerable against vulnerable, you might have a hand such as:

♠K J 10 4 3 ♥Q J 10 7 6 ♦5 3 ♣8

for a Michaels cuebid (2♣ over 1♣ or 2♦ over 1♦).

If you are vulnerable, your hand should have more strength. Having good distribution is not a license to bid recklessly.

b) Blackwood and Gerber were invented to keep you out of slam off two aces, not one. If you bid Blackwood and find you are off an ace, you should bid six, expecting to make it. If you sign off at the five level, you probably did not have your Blackwood bid.

c) Most people probably think they know Stayman. It was one of the first conventions they learned. They fill out a convention card, agree to play a convention such as Stayman, then later have a misunderstanding. Many conventions have been "modified" and/or various partnerships play the continuations differently. Consider this auction, in which the opponents are silent:

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
1NT	2♣
2♦/♥/♠	3♣/3♦

2♣ is Stayman, asking for a four-card major

If responder now bids a minor suit at the three-level, after partner has answered the Stayman inquiry, is it forcing, invitational or describing a bust? All three treatments are playable, but discuss follow-ups like this with your regular partner, and don't forget to discuss if conventions are on or off in competition.

6 Bad Penalty doubles.

Doubles based on high-card points alone.

Solution: Don't double for penalty just because you have a strong hand. You need tricks and, usually, some trump tricks. Here is an actual deal from a recent team game:

Dlr: North ♠ K 5
 Vul: None ♥ A K Q 7 6
 ♦ 5 4
 ♣ A K J 10

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

♠ J
 ♥ J 10 9 4
 ♦ Q J 10 7
 ♣ Q 8 6 4

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1♥	2♥	3♥
Pass	4♥	Pass	Pass
4♠	Dbl	All Pass	

I was East, and my 2♥ bid was a Michaels cuebid, showing five spades and at least five of an unspecified minor. After the opponents confidently bid 4♥, my partner "sacrificed" by bidding 4♠. She knew we would be doubled but hoped to go down only one or two tricks. Not this time — the contract was cold. North doubled with 20 HCP, but the defense had no trump tricks. We made 4♠ doubled with only 13 HCP between us.

7 Captaincy issues.

Failure to establish captaincy, resulting in overbidding and underbidding. A good example is making a Michaels

cuebid for the majors (1♣ – 2♣ or 1♦ – 2♦, showing at least 5–5 in the majors), and when partner takes a preference, bidding again in competition without any extra points or distribution.

Solution: Simple! When you have basically described your hand, leave the competitive decisions up to partner. Assume your partner is the boss any time you open the bidding or overcall. Why? Consider auctions that begin with 1NT openers. Responder adds her points to yours. It's usually easy to decide if you belong in a part score, or if you are in game range or slam range. Auctions that start with a suit are similar. The opener describes her hand and usually narrows her point range on her second bid, so responder can often place the final contract.

8 Telling the same story twice.

Solution: Resolve to stop rebidding five-card suits if there is a reasonable alternative.

a) For example: Playing five-card majors, your hand is:

♠K Q J 8 3 ♥6 ♦A Q 7 4 ♣9 8 7.

You open 1♠ and partner responds 1NT. Rebid 2♦, not 2♠.

b) One of the most common mistakes by intermediate players in my local duplicate club is this: After using the Jacoby Transfer in response to partner's 1NT opener, they rebid the major with only a five-card suit. Rebidding the known five-card suit should promise six!

Here are two invitational sequences using Jacoby transfers.

You have as East:

♠Q J 10 5 4 3 ♥9 ♦K 5 4 3 ♣7 2.

Partner opens 1NT (15–17).

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
1NT	2♥
2♠	3♠

Your 3♠ shows six spades and is invitational to 4♠ if partner likes her hand in support of spades. Now you have:

♠Q J 10 5 4 ♥9 3 ♦K 5 4 ♣Q 7 2. ➤

Partner again opens 1NT.

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
1NT	2♥
2♠	2NT

This auction shows five spades and invitational values. Partner may pass 2NT, bid 3NT, sign off in 3♠ or bid 4♠, depending on her hand. Remember, with exactly five spades and invitational values, rebid 2NT, not 3♠.

Note: If you don't play Jacoby transfers, Michaels cuebids or unusual notrump, e-mail me and I'll try to convince you to add them to your arsenal.

9 Bad bidding — part 2.

Missing games and part scores because you didn't respond to partner's overcall.

Solution: This is one of the most basic tenets of bridge: Support with support. More than 30 years ago, my mother told, "Treat an overcall as if it were an opening bid until you find out differently." So, even with modest values, raise if you can at your first chance or bid 1NT. With a little more strength, introduce a new suit. I hope your agreement is that bidding a new suit is constructive but not forcing. You'll be well-placed to compete intelligently for part scores or sometimes reach good games just by telling partner, "Hey, I'm not broke!"

Example: Recently, my partner, a student, raised my overcall, and we bid and made a game missed at other tables. I was not surprised considering that we had a total of 13 HCP.

Partner held:

♠ K J 7 6 ♥ 5 ♦ 7 6 5 4 ♣ 5 4 3 2.

I had:

♠ Q 10 8 5 3 2 ♥ 8 7 6 ♦ A K 9 8 ♣ —.

West	North	East	South
	<i>Partner</i>		<i>Me</i>
		1♥	1♠
2♥	3♠	4♥	4♠
All Pass			

Partner's 3♠ was weak (showing at least four-card trump support). That is the best way to play that bid,

especially in competition. With a traditional limit raise, you should cuebid.

10 Physical or mechanical errors.

This type of error seems to increase as we get older, but can be drastically reduced by slowing down and concentrating on what you're doing.

a) Pulling the wrong card out of

your hand and/or revoking.

Solution: Before playing to any trick, take a quick glance at the table left to right. If you are following to a trick, look to see what has already been played. If you are leading to a trick, make sure you are on lead. Then, as you pull your card out, check again that it's the one you meant to play. In the Detroit area, we have started to experiment with four-color decks to minimize revokes. They look a little different but seem to do the job. If you are interested in trying them in your area, e-mail me

Boy Scout Bridge — Be Prepared!

By Mark Horton

Having watched the last day of the Masters in Augusta, I have often thought how scoring in golf reflects that in bridge. Why is it that a player can shoot 65 one day and 75 the next? How can you score 67% one day and 47% the next? If only a player could bring his best game to the course or table every time it was needed!

Well, there are ways to give you a much better chance of getting your best game to the table. Next time you are due to play, try following this game plan.

- ✓ Don't eat a big meal before game time and don't drink! In his book, "At the Table," Bob Hamman describes how the Aces lost a match where they had a big lead because they wined and dined between sessions.
- ✓ Never arrive at the table in a rush. Always allow yourself plenty of time, especially if any degree of traveling is involved.
- ✓ If you can, walk to the venue — the fresh air will clear your mind.
- ✓ Well before play is due to begin, take a look at your system, just to remind yourself about the key points. You will feel comfortable, especially if you need to employ a relatively rare agreement. You don't think this is necessary? In a recent national teams semifinal, the Rabbi (Leonard Helman) and I missed a slam because of a mixup over the responses to Roman Key Card Blackwood — I couldn't remember if we were playing 1430 or 0314!
- ✓ Arrive at the table a few minutes before game time and settle down. Check your bidding box to make sure you have all the bids. The idea is to get into a cocoon of concentration.
- ✓ When you are dummy — relax! Apart from making sure partner does not commit a mechanical error, this is the chance to take a breather and get ready for the next deal.
- ✓ Never discuss a deal with partner or the opponents until the session is complete. Even if you want to discuss a bidding situation, the best time to do it is at the end of the session. Don't even think about a discussion during the hospitality break.
- ✓ As soon as a deal has been completed, erase it from your memory. There is nothing you can do to change the result, and the most important thing is the new deal you are about to play. In a team game, there is always a chance that your other partner will cover for you. I recall an occasion when my partner and I bid to the worst of all possible grand slams and conceded minus 50. When we scored up the deal, teammates announced, "Plus fifty." "Oh, they were one down in seven diamond well?" "No, they were one down in two spades." (Ask me next time you see me)
- ✓ In a pairs game, assume that during the session you will have four terrible boards — either because of your own mistakes or through the skill (and sometimes luck) of your opponents. That way, you won't get upset by a bad result — you have already allowed for it. I once had a session when the first four boards were zeros. With that out of the way the rest was a breeze!