



Billy's How-To List

These tips from Billy Miller could help improve your game.

Most players, be they experts or beginners, find that on some days bridge seems amazingly easy. On other days, they find it's a complete mystery. For many less experienced players, one particular aspect of the game is more difficult than others.

An informal poll uncovered the following list of challenges for bridge players. Read closely as Billy Miller, *Bridge Bulletin* contributor and professional player, offers advice about how to do better in 10 different areas.

1 Opening Leads

Ah, the opening lead. This topic is enormous, and I will offer just one new idea.

Since most players have learned so many bad habits, let's try to think differently. Here is how I go about finding my opening lead.

Put your hand away. Yes, fold it up and for the moment forget what you hold. Now review the auction — not once but twice.

Assemble as much information as you can about declarer's hand. Are we defending notrump or a suit contract? Did declarer open 1♠? Did he rebid 2♥? Did partner overcall? Did dummy raise? Did dummy bid his own suit? Has anyone shown a singleton?

Get the idea? I ask myself a million questions. I am arranging the pieces of this puzzle in my head as best as I can before seeing the dummy. So often, the opening lead will make or break the defense. Make a bad lead — too late. Make a good one — you win.

Most players look at their hands and lead from a sequence, no matter what was bid. I listen to the auction, ask myself questions and only at the bitter end do I consult my actual holdings to help me decide what to lead.

If I can figure out that the auction demands a trump lead, I don't really care what my hand is, I will lead a trump. If the auction screams for the lead of the unbid suit, that's the one. Lead what the auction calls for, not what's appealing based on your hand. When was the last time your partner said, "Nice lead," to you?

2 Maintaining Concentration for a Full Session

Most of us are full of excitement before the session begins. We are already burning off some mental energy and rightfully so. Coming into a session two minutes after waking up from a nap is not a good idea.

The problem comes when we start to get tired after a couple of hours. We might begin to play on autopilot. Before we know it, we have blown a board and then another one. Oops, we just blew the session or the match. What can we do about this?

Since many events are won or lost on the last few boards, we must fight fatigue to achieve our greatest results. Think about the fact that everyone else is getting tired. When I am playing with a less experienced player, I will often take the time — usually with about eight boards to go — to deliver a brief pep talk.

Okay, let's bear down. Perhaps get some coffee. Throw some cold water on your face. Make an effort to literally tell yourself that you need to wake up and concentrate harder. This is not the time to start shooting for big results. It is the time to play tough, count and watch partner's cards. I like to announce to my partner in private, "This is winning time." This works. It becomes routine, and now I simply do these things myself. I make an effort to remind myself there are only a few boards left and to work my hardest. Try it.

3 Putting That Bad Result in the Past

Bridge will always be full of bad results. You make a mistake. Your partner makes a mistake. The opponents do something brilliant that works out well. The opponents stumble into a great contract. You discover that your system has a flaw. There are so many ways to get a bad board.

The way in which you recover from a bad result has a great impact on your future boards. Never forget that the only board that matters is the *next* one.

With that in mind, here's what happened to Curtis Cheek, my frequent partner, and me at a recent regional.

We sat down to play against two young Turks, who looked very confident. On the first board I picked up:

♠K ♥2 ♦K J 9 7 ♣A Q 10 8 6 5 2.

I opened 1♣. My left-hand opponent doubled and partner bid 1♠. My right-hand opponent made a snappy 4♥ call and I — without enough thought — bid 5♣. LHO whipped out another double card. (That one was for penalty.)

After a heart to the ace and a diamond through my king-jack, a diamond ruff and the ♠A, I finally got in. As I cashed the ace of trumps, LHO plopped his hand on the table and announced, "Three more to me." I stared at his ♣K J 9. The damage was a cool 1700.

We calmly put back our cards. We wrote down the score (in small numbers). On to the next board

without even taking a deep breath.

One kibitzer remarked after the match that we were so nonchalant about the whole thing, he thought we must go for 1700 on a regular basis.

Lo and behold, two boards later the same opponent who cracked me in 5♣ doubled Curtis in 3NT. The opening leader erred and Curtis made his contract with an over-trick. They started fussing at each other immediately. Guess what? The first board was about the only one they scored well on. We went on to win the match by a bundle.

Did we always handle ourselves this way? Absolutely not. It takes practice, discussion and discipline. It also takes the recognition that staying cool in the face of disaster is a tool that you can use to win matches.

Although each pair had a disastrous result, the pair that stayed the calmest won the match. This is a skill that does not require counting. It does not require remembering a system. It works best when both partners are capable of pulling it off.

Nothing is worse than knowing that your partner will slump into his chair, throw his cards into the air or, worse, start crying after a bad result.

Nothing is better than knowing that partner is not going to blink an eye when disaster occurs and that we are going to play the rest of the match to win. Learn this skill. Practice it. Believe me, you will have the opportunity.



Overcoming the Fear of Experts

Playing against experts can be very exciting.

Some of my most memorable experiences have come when competing against the best. Playing against average players or new players is more likely to be a ho-hum event. Nothing gets the juices flowing more than sitting down to play against a well-known player. Of course, doing well is better.

Some people are so afraid that they become paralyzed with fear and self-destruct. Thus, that fear becomes reality and the cycle of nerves and

failure continues. Break it.

Think of two things before you sit down to play. First: tell yourself that this will be an enjoyable experience if you can make it through the round by bidding and playing normally. That is a reasonable goal. Don't sit down and try to impress your opponents. You will most likely do something you wish you could take back. They will be impressed if you don't fold. If you can attain anywhere near average against a top player, haven't you done well?

Second: if your opponents do well on a particular board through good judgment, good systemic bidding or good defense, treat it like a free lesson.

Wow, if I could learn something from every two, three or 12 boards I play, my game would soar. Good learning does not happen playing against average or weak players. Only bad habits develop when you get away with murder against weak opposition. Quality learning occurs only from playing against better players and from the best players.

Savor the experience. What other sport allows this to happen? The player who folds up the tent and blacks out has missed one of the greatest upsides in the game. The ones who relish these meetings will be the top players of tomorrow.

I still remember playing against Michael Gottlieb, Life Master #9, at my local bridge club when I first started to play. Sure, he nailed me often, but I became a much better player because of those encounters. Guess what? He even played a few games with me.



Playing with Multiple Partners

As a new player, you will learn there are two sides to this coin. The first side is that having a regular partner is a major advantage. Your bidding will develop faster, because you will be on the same wavelength more often. You will gain confidence on defense as you learn to watch and trust each other's signals. Your enjoyment will increase as you will

feel more relaxed each time you play, because you won't have the feeling that you are starting from scratch with each session.

Now for the other side: the value of "playing up" — of playing with players who have more experience than you do — is immeasurable.

Playing with your peer group will hold you back in terms of learning and development, so overcome any fears of embarrassment about "playing up" because the rewards will be great. Other than taking formal lessons, there is no greater path to improvement than playing with better players. A good way to find these better players is to play with many new partners. Sure, some will turn out to be duds, but it will be worth it to find a few gems along the way.

One last thought on this subject. Consider kibitzing a player you're hoping to play with. You can learn a great deal by watching good players. It's free, and most players are flattered by having someone watch them. Often good players will be willing to answer a few questions at the end of the session or during a break. Who knows, they may even ask you to play.



Learning to Count

Learning to count will not start until you come to terms with the fact that this skill is not only the cornerstone of winning bridge, but that counting requires a steady, diligent and constant amount of hard work to master.

When you are truly counting, you are no longer playing cards; you are becoming a bridge player. There are no experts who do not count.

When you learn to count, you can safely endplay your opponents, a skill that is enjoyable to execute at the table, but one which can't be attempted without knowing the count. How nice it is to stuff your opponent in to make that extra trick and have it be totally safe as well.

An endplay is elegant. It creates an air of sophistication. It is also a technical play that has merit. No counting, however, no endplays.

The first thing we all learn to count are our high-card points. After that, we move to keeping track of the trump suit. Then, the breakdown occurs. There are so many things to count.

What did they bid? Who has shown out of what? How many points has that opening bidder shown up with? What has that opponent who never bid shown up with? An expert counts everything there is to count.

I make most of my defensive errors when I fail to do my work and fail to count some aspect of the hand. So often the clues to defending properly are at your fingertips — if you only slow down to do the work.

Sorry to say that brilliant defensive plays are often made by adding points and shapes. That key ducking play may look daring but is usually completely safe because you can figure that declarer has another one and nowhere to put it.

When you realize that the greatest plays on offense and defense are due to old-fashioned hard work, you will be on your way to the bank.

7 Finding That Extra Trick

As declarer, you know that trick is there, but too often it eludes you. One of the reasons you often get the feeling that the extra trick you were looking for was so close but yet so far was because it was right under your nose. The reason that you will often go down when the better players make the contract is not because of some miraculous skill, but simply because you failed to count your tricks.

The most common declarer error is made at trick one. I've seen many players start to play too quickly. Many declarers like to ruff things as soon as possible. It gives them a feeling of power, and for the moment, they feel they are "in control."

Often they have lost control by tapping themselves out. How did this happen? They failed to slow down long enough to count the actual tricks they started with.

They failed to make a plan.

Another blind spot that can plague a player for many years is the uncontrollable desire to set up his hand, when setting up the dummy is better. It's a psychological situation that needs to be recognized before it can be overcome. Some newer (and even experienced) players have trouble getting beyond this trap. Do you?

8 Hand Evaluation and Re-evaluation

When you pick up a hand, total your high-card points and proceed. Do not add in points for distribution until later rounds of the bidding. Here is an example:

♠A Q 9 7 3 ♥6 ♦K Q 10 3 ♣Q 5 2

How many points do you have? 13 HCPs is correct. Did you add in 2 for your singleton? If you did, why?

If you open the bidding 1♠ and your partner responds 2♥, has your hand gone up in value? The answer is no.

If partner responds 2♦, however, your singleton heart is now worth a juicy upgrade. When a fit is established, you may add in your shape points more accurately.

If your partner opens the bidding 1♥ and this is your hand, are you worth more than 13 HCPs? No, because your singleton is partner's suit. That is a downgrade.

On the other hand, if partner opens 1♠, you would do a double-take and should immediately start to think your hand is worth 16 points or more. The fit does it.

Many of us get carried away too soon. It's best to start out at face value, then add or subtract, based on the development of the auction.

9 When to Compete and when not

Most players start out being timid. Since bridge is a bidder's game, we all must learn to come out of our shells and risk our necks on a regular basis in order to compete effectively.

The only way to develop accurate judgment — that is, neither too

conservative nor too aggressive — is to bid too much. That's right — you have permission to overbid until you have gone too far. Only then will you hone in on that fine line. If you never overbid, you will never know the feeling of when is too much, which types of hands are good to compete with and which ones to lay low on.

As a way to test out this theory, one of my mentors, Bernie Chazen, suggested we never let the opponents play below 2NT. He argued that the scores we receive when we defend at the one and two levels are so poor that we are really not risking much to push the opponents higher. This is not a rule to live by, but one that stresses a valid theory.

Bernie's rule was to keep bidding until you go for 1100. In fact, our local bridge center had buttons made up that said, "I went for 1100 at the San Mateo Bridge Center." We wore them with pride. Believe me, by trying this out you will develop a feel for competitive bidding, and you will go for 1100 sooner or later. If you don't go for an occasional number, you are not bidding aggressively enough. The player who never goes for a number will be a longtime losing player.

10 Recognizing Misfit Hands

Here's the goal of recognizing a misfit hand. The earlier you see it, the faster you can stop bidding. We've all seen the following auction: 1♠ – 2♥; 2♠ – 3♥; 3♠ – 4♥; 4♠.

This is a misfit. Hands that don't fit well usually take fewer tricks than hands that do fit. The average share of HCPs will produce less without a fit than they will with one. The thing to do is to adjust your thinking by getting out cheaply wherever possible.

The stubborn player does not do well on misfit hands. The player who falls in love with a hand is also one who fares poorly with the misfit. Fall in love at the bar, not at the bridge table. □