

# **Six Ways to Boost Your Matchpoint Scores**

by Steve Wood

Matchpoint scoring and IMP scoring are quite different – so it stands to reason that we might want to adopt somewhat different approaches, depending on the form of scoring.

Here are six ways to improve your chances of achieving good scores at matchpoints.

## **#1 – Defense, Defense, Defense!!**

We all love to bid..... but remember, you and your partner are going to be defending on about half of the hands. If you want to score well, your partnership must avoid letting declarer get away with extra tricks.

The most important way to play strong defense is for both partners to be very clear about what your carding agreements are. It's beyond the scope of today's talk to cover all of these details, but here are three keys to better partnership defense:

- Make sure that you and your partner both know what your defensive agreements are.
- Be a reliable partner by applying those agreements consistently (except in the rare case when it's more important to fool declarer than to inform partner).
- Remember that "Aces were made to take Kings."

Let's say you have the A in a side suit (diamonds, for example), and dummy comes down with one of the following holdings in diamonds:

Case 1: Kxxx

Case 2: KQxx

Case 3: KJxx

When declarer leads a low diamond toward one of these holding in dummy, are we going to play our A or not?

Experienced players know that “Aces were made to take Kings.” Unless there is a clear reason to lead or play an ace, it’s usually best to wait and capture an honor with your A.

Case 1: It’s better to play low, unless declarer has a singleton. Maybe he has something like Qx and is trying to hustle you into playing your A too soon. If declarer does have a singleton, though, it is not necessarily fatal to duck your A. Even if you had taken your A, declarer would have been able to use the K of diamonds for a discard – so you miss out on one trick but get the trick back later in another suit.

Case 2: Again, playing low is better, unless declarer has a singleton. Even if he has a singleton, playing your A gives him two discards for the future. So missing out on your A actually may save you from facing two winners later.

Case 3: Declarer appears to be facing a guess in diamonds. If you play your A, you have made the guess for him. If you play low, he may guess wrong (in fact, he is likely to play the J on the assumption that you don’t have the A because you didn’t play it). Even if declarer has a singleton and guesses to play the K, you may be breaking even (see Case 1).

What conclusion can we draw?

In general, defenders should refrain from playing the A in these situations..... because they gain or at least break even. Our “default” choice should be to play low.

That said, a smart defender will be thinking ahead. When dummy comes down with one of those holdings (Cases 1-3) and we hold the A, we know that the evil day will come when declarer will lead toward dummy. Why wait till that moment to decide whether to play the A? Give it some thought ahead of time, so you can play in tempo when the time comes.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> By the way, if you don’t have the A, it is unethical to hem and haw before playing low, trying to fool declarer. That is extremely bad form, and the rules allow the director to adjust the score.

If you think and think and think some more, then finally play low, you have given the show away..... and now you might as well play the A. To duck an A successfully, it is essential to do it smoothly and in tempo.

For similar reasons, avoid laying down an A on opening lead against a suit contract. Again, “aces were made to take kings.” If the bidding is not screaming for a lead in a suit where you have the A (it usually isn’t!), then don’t lead your A! If you do, you can bet that dummy will have Kxx and declarer will have Qxx..... and you have just given away a trick. Better to make a normal lead and save your A to capture an honor.<sup>2</sup>

## **#2 – “Stay with the field”**

A typical session of bridge involves many hands where you are called upon to make tough decisions. What do I bid? What should I lead? How do I play this hand?

Often, it will not be clear what to do. In those situations, it usually pays to “stay with the field.” This means figuring out the most normal, middle-of-the-road bid or play that you can make..... and then doing that. In other words, avoid making pure guesses.

Why does this strategy pay off? Because other players probably are facing a similar decision in the same tough spot..... and if you do what you expect they will do, you are going to have a lot of company. Even if your decision doesn’t “work” this time, you are going to have the same score as many other pairs..... maybe 40%.... maybe 30%..... maybe even 50% on a good day..... but certainly not a zero.

What if you decide to make a dangerous guess (instead of “staying with the field”)? If it works, you are in clover, and you will get a good score. But much more often, you will get a terrible score. If you get one top and two bottoms in three hands, that is a 33% game. You really can’t put together a winning score playing top-and-bottom bridge. When in doubt, “stay with the field” on most hands, and go for a top only when you think you have the hand figured out. When you are confident you have the odds in your favor, go for it!

---

<sup>2</sup> Even if you have bid the suit and your partner has raised it, you should be reluctant to just lay down the A from a holding like Axxxx or AJxxx. Partner may or may not have the K, and when he doesn’t, the A lead will cost you a trick. If at all possible, find a side-suit lead and save your A for the right moment.

If you “stay with the field,” this gives you the opportunity to win the board later with a sharp bid or play. This is the opposite of making an impatient guess under pressure that will cost you the board when it’s wrong (which will be a lot more than 50% of the time).

### **#3 – Stop jumping to game with good hands!**

All too often, players make the mistake of jumping to game with a good hand in situations where that jump bid is weak, preemptive, or a signoff.

Unfortunately, partner might have a good hand, too, but will be fooled into giving up on a potential slam. Or the opponents might bid, and your partnership will have no idea whether to compete higher or double for penalty.

If the bidding goes 1♥-4♥, that shows a distributional hand with 4-5 hearts and very limited HCP. It does not show an opening hand with 3-card heart support (or some similar game-going hand).

Why does it matter? You are in game, right?

It matters because partner may have a strong or very strong opening hand, and if your jump to game could be weak, strong, or something in-between, how can partner know whether to try for slam or put on the brakes in 4♥? Or, if the opponents now bid 4♠ over 4♥, how will you know whether to pass, compete to 5♥, or double?

Similarly, if the auction starts 1♥-2♣, 2♦ and responder has an opening hand with 3-card heart support, there is no reason to jump to 4♥. Just show your heart support via 2♥ or 3♥ and give partner room to try for slam, if she wants. You are playing 2-over-1, and nobody is going to pass below game. The only time to jump to game in these situations is when responder barely, barely, barely scraped up the initial 2-over-1 bid in the first place..... and the jump to game sends the message that responder is very minimum.

One more example. You are playing Jacoby 2NT, and the bidding starts 1♥-2NT, 3♣ (showing a singleton). How many points does opener have? It could be anything from a good 11 HCP (with a singleton club) to 19 HCP (with a singleton club). So it’s a bad idea for responder to take up a bunch of

bidding space by jumping to 4♥. If opener has a strong hand, she has to guess what to do over 4♥. As responder, you should reserve the jump to 4♥ to show a very minimum 2NT bid (having even 13 HCP is usually too strong to jam the bidding with a jump to 4♥). Again, nobody is going to stop short of 4♥ in a game-forcing auction..... so there is no reason to panic and jump to game (unless you are very minimum).

By the way, did you know that the auction 1♠-1NT, 4♠ does not show a strong hand? That 4♠ bid shows a very long suit and a willingness to gamble on putting together 10 tricks. With long spades and a very strong hand (almost good enough to open 2♣), opener jump shifts in a side suit, planning to bid 4♠. What is the difference? The second-round jump to 4♠ is not a strong bid (slam is out of the question), but the jump-shift-then-4♠ sequence shows power and gives partner a chance to try for slam.

#### **#4 – Be smart about overcalling**

Many players think that it's a winning strategy to overcall as often as possible – and besides that, it makes them feel good to bid. So, after an opponent opens 1♣, they would overcall 1♠ on a hand like this:

♠ Q8742  
♥ K94  
♦ Q8  
♣ J75

What is the purpose of this type of overcall (other than to make the overcaller feel “active”)?

You don't have any real values. You don't particularly want partner to lead a spade; in fact, it is fine with you if he leads either red suit. You are in trouble if partner gets excited and tries for game. And you will be in big, big trouble if the auction gets to a high level quickly and partner decides to bid 4♠. Whether he is competing, trying for game, or making the opening lead, your hand is going to be a disappointment. So don't do it!

In his excellent book on overcalls<sup>3</sup>, Mike Lawrence describes the three main purposes for making an overcall:

- To tell your partner you have real values.
- To show your partner a good opening lead.
- To take up space and make it harder for the opponents to bid.

Lawrence's guideline is that you should consider overcalling only when your bid will accomplish at least two of these purposes.

The example hand above does not qualify. Yes, it takes up space, but you don't have any real values worth showing, and you aren't showing partner a good opening lead. Better to pass and not mislead partner into thinking you have something worthwhile. Or, stated differently, better to pass so that when you do overcall on a later hand, partner will know she can count on you.

Try these examples (your RHO deals and opens 1♦):

1. ♠ AQJ42 ♥ KT8 ♦ 943 ♣ K7
2. ♠ A42 ♥ J9643 ♦ J73 ♣ K8
3. ♠ A8 ♥ K63 ♦ K8 ♣ KT8543
4. ♠ J74 ♥ Q8 ♦ Q92 ♣ AQJ85
5. ♠ J9732 ♥ A98 ♦ A6 ♣ KQ8

Hand 1 – A perfect 1♠ overcall. You have values, you really want a spade lead, and you are taking up space in case the opponents have most of the points. This hand checks all of the boxes.

Hand 2 – Pass. You only have 9 HCP, you definitely don't want a heart lead (and would be fine if partner leads either unbid suit), and you would take up little bidding room by overcalling 1♥. Resist temptation and save your overcalls for hands where they really make sense.

---

<sup>3</sup> [The Complete Book on Overcalls in Contract Bridge](#), Mike Lawrence (1980). Still readily available (Amazon, etc.) and just as useful now as when Lawrence wrote it 40+ years ago. Written in a relaxed style with lots of examples, this book is a must-read for beginner and intermediate players (and also many more advanced players who have developed bad habits).

Hand 3 – Overcall 2♣. You have values, and your 2♣ bid over 1♦ can make life very difficult for your opponents. You would like to have a better suit (especially if vulnerable), but it's OK to suggest a club lead.

Hand 4 – Overcall 2♣. Your values are very questionable for a 2-level overcall. But you are showing an excellent lead, and you are throwing a monkey wrench into the opponents' bidding. (Note: You would not do this at IMPs, where partner is motivated to push for game and very likely would get you too high).

Hand 5 – Overcall 1♠. Yes, the suit is terrible, and you don't want a spade lead. But you have very good values – if you don't show them now, when will you be able to? And the 1♠ overcall takes up space. The overcall could backfire if the opponents win the bid and partner leads a spade, but that's a risk worth taking here, because 1♠ has so many ways to win (for example, the bidding could go 1♦-1♠-2♦-pass, pass, and you will be able to double to show HCP and support for the other two suits).

One more example. This time, your RHO opens 1♠, and you hold Hand 4 above. In this scenario, you wouldn't dream of overcalling 2♣. You don't really have the values for a 2-level overcall (sorry, 12 moth-eaten HCP isn't enough), and a 2♣ overcall will have little effect on the opponents, who already have been able to show their five-card major. Suggesting a club lead is of questionable value, given that you will be on lead against a likely spade contract. Consider also that you have the "death holding" in spades – if LHO is short in spades, guess what she will lead against 2♣ (or higher, if partner raises)? Pass and save your overcall for a hand where you really mean it.

Players have a tendency to remember only the few good boards they got from questionable overcalls..... and they tend to forget the many bad boards caused by partner's disastrous opening lead resulting from a junky overcall on a mediocre suit.

## **#5 – Open light only if you are showing partner a good lead**

Everybody loves to open light. The auction starts pass-pass, you are in third chair, and it feels like you have free rein to open on any hand you want. How many times have you seen a third-chair 1♣ opening on a hand like ♠ Q54 ♥ K653 ♦ A54 ♣ J72? The 1♣ bidder feels very proud of himself

for the “aggressive” opening bid. “The opponents aren’t going to have a free run of bidding against me,” he thinks proudly.

Let’s take a closer look.

Does the 1♣ opening make it harder for the opponents to bid? No! It is not difficult to find a good bid over a measly 1♣ opening. Oddly, it is actually easier to bid over 1♣, because now the next opponent can overcall comfortably at the 1-level on hands that she might not have been able to open.

Meanwhile, there is a big danger in opening 1♣ on hands like this. If the opponents play the hand – which is likely, because partner is a passed hand and you only have 10 HCP -- partner often will be on lead, and guess what she will do? That’s right, she will lead your “suit” (a club!), frequently costing your side a trick or two on defense.

Remember, this is matchpoints. If your partnership blows a trick or two because of a crummy opening lead, guess what score you are going to make on this board? A very poor one, maybe even a cold zero.

Players who bid this way never seem to remember the many hands where their light opening boomeranged into a bad board. Don’t be fooled.

Making the right decision about whether to open light hinges on these two points:

- Open light when you can suggest a good opening lead.
- Opening light in a minor doesn’t disrupt the opponents much but opening light in a major does.<sup>4</sup>

It’s fine to open light on the right hands..... but it’s a losing proposition to open light without any real purpose.

Let’s say the auction has started pass-pass, and you hold the following hands:

---

<sup>4</sup> Because a light 1♥ or 1♠ opening can be very effective, it’s smart to play Drury, a convention that allows partner to find out whether you opened light or with a real opening hand.

1. ♠ J932 ♥ KQ7 ♦ J854 ♣ K4
2. ♠ J932 ♥ K95 ♦ J4 ♣ KQT6
3. ♠ J4 ♥ QJ52 ♦ KJT7 ♣ Q84
4. ♠ AQTx ♥ 74 ♦ Q73 ♣ J852
5. ♠ K843 ♥ KQTx ♦ Q94 ♣ J3

Hand 1 – Pass. If you open 1♦, what are you accomplishing? You don't have any values, and you don't want a diamond lead. Do you think the opponents are so helpless that they can't handle a 1♦ opening? Resist the urge to get busy for no real reason. Just pass – it only will hurt for a moment!

Hand 2 – Open 1♣. Now we're talking! You have an excellent club lead to suggest, and if partner responds in a major, you can pass. This is a classic example of an effective light opening.

Hand 3 – Pass! Even though you have a good diamond lead to suggest, you can't afford to bid here. What are you going to do in the very likely event that partner responds 1♠? You're not going to drop partner in 1♠ on Jx, are you? And rebidding 1NT promises a full opening hand.

Hand 4 – Open 1♠. Again, you really want a spade lead.... with the added bonus that you are forcing your opponents to start bidding their suits at the 2-level. Partner is aware that you can open 1♥ or 1♠ in third chair on hands like this with good 4-card suits, and your partnership plays Drury (or should learn it) to give partner a chance to check whether you opened light.

Hand 5 – Open 1♥. A great lead to suggest, and an easy pass of partner's 1♠ or 1NT response (2♣ is Drury). If you open light in 1♦, you can pass 1♥ or 1♠..... but you aren't showing partner the best lead, and you aren't taking much bidding space away from the opponents.

One key skill at matchpoints is making sure your partnership doesn't give away extra tricks on defense. Opening light only with a purpose – to show partner a good opening lead – enables your side to defend accurately and hold the opponents to their minimum number of tricks.

**#6 – If the opponents have stopped at the 2-level in a “fit” auction, it doesn’t pay to let them play it there**

Notice that we are not saying, “Don’t let the opponents play at the 2-level.” You’ll hear players say that sometimes, but that statement is much too broad..... and actually, it’s quite dangerous.

Let’s say the opponents have stopped in 2♥, and you have to decide whether to compete or let them play there. The first thing to think about is whether the opponents’ bidding shows that they have an 8+-card fit with each of them having at least three trumps. If their bidding shows that, then it is a “fit” auction – otherwise, it isn’t.

Here are some possible auctions ending in 2♥. In each case, judge whether it was a “fit” auction.

- 1♥-P-2♥-P, P..... Yes
- 1♥-P-1NT-P, 2♣-P-2♥-P, P..... No
- 1♥-P-1NT-P, 2♥-P-P..... No
- 1♦-P-1♥-P, 2♦-P-2♥-P, P.....No
- 1♦-P-1♥, 2♣-P-2♦-P, 2♥-P-P.....No

Why is it important to know whether the opponents have had a “fit” auction? When the opponents are known to have a fit, then it is very, very likely that we also have a fit. That means it is quite safe for our side to get into the auction at the last minute – not for the purpose of reaching a game contract or anything like that, but merely to compete and bump the opponents out of their comfy low-level contract.

So, let’s say your RHO starts the bidding with 1♠, LHO raises to 2♠, and that is passed around to you. Both sides are vulnerable at matchpoints, and you hold -- ♠ 84 ♥ QT43 ♦ K94 ♣ QJ32. What do you do now?

It is 100% clear to double. The opponents have had a “fit” auction, which means your side also has a fit. They have stopped in 2♠, which marks

partner with some HCP. You have support for all of the other suits, so you should double to find partner's best suit and nudge them out of 2♠.<sup>5</sup>

Are you thinking "it's too risky to double!?!?" Think again.

If you let them play 2♠ to score +110 without breaking a sweat, experience shows that you can expect a matchpoint score of 15% to 40% on that board. Therefore, since you are headed for a below-average board or worse, it's not very risky to take action and try to improve your position. If it fails, you have lost very little. But if it works – such as by pushing the opponents to 3♠ down one – you will have turned a poor board into gold.

By the way, did you notice that, in this particular situation, partner's response to your double will give you new information? That new information may enable you to make a better lead against 3♠ than you would have been able to make blind against 2♠.

Let's try another example situation. At matchpoints, your RHO starts the bidding with 1♣, your RHO responds 1♥, and your LHO raises to 2♥..... and this is passed around to you. They are vulnerable and you are not, and you hold – ♠ KQ7 ♥ J3 ♦ KJ643 ♣ T83. What action, if any, do you take?

It would be a clear error at matchpoints to let the opponents play in 2♥ after a fit auction. If they score +110 against you, then you will get a bad board..... so why not try to do something about it? Because they have a fit, it is highly likely that your side does, too. Therefore, the percentage action is to "double" and let partner pick the contract. Then the opponents will have a problem – do they let you play 2♠ or 3♦ (or maybe even 3♣, if partner has long clubs behind a short club opening), or do they press on to 3♥ and run the risk of going down? Do you see how much better your position has become because you had the courage to act? Now it's the opponents who are worried, not you!

Let's take a quick look at a few more auctions to see whether the opponents have shown a "fit."

---

<sup>5</sup> Typical ways to compete after they stop in a 2-level fit are: (1) bid a long suit; (2) make a takeout double; and (3) bid 2NT to show two suits, usually the minors. The important thing is to use common sense and stay flexible. Your goal is to reach a reasonably safe contract and force the opponents to either let you play there or increase their bid to the 3-level.

- 1♦-P-1NT-P, 2♣-P-P..... Yes!
- 1♣-P-1NT-P, 2♣-P-P..... Yes
- 1♥-P-1♠-P, 1NT-P-2♥-P, P.....Yes
- 1♦-P-1♠-P, 2♣-P-2♦-P, P-P..... Probably

The first three examples are “fit” auctions because the 1NT responder – who has denied a 4-card major and therefore must have at least seven cards in the minors – is almost sure to have a real fit for opener’s long minor.

One last thing to keep in mind. When we are bumping the opponents this way, our only goal is to push them up one level and then try to set them. Don’t get greedy and start thinking about bidding game or competing to the 4-level. Bidding that high is almost never justified – and you don’t want to punish partner for being aggressive at the right time. Be satisfied with getting them to the 3-level..... then go out and try to set them!<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> One of the world’s greatest players – Zia Mahmood – says that the most fun thing in bridge is to bump the opponents to the 3-level and then set them one trick. It is hard to argue with him!