

## Dealing with Opening Round Nerves

By Kim Frazer

Bridge is a game with many facets. To be successful, a player needs to achieve a high degree of skill in each of these facets which include:

- technical ability;
- partnership understanding or agreements;
- concentration
- logic and clear thinking;
- match fitness and stamina in a long tournament, and
- all the other factors which go into being a good bridge player.

I believe having strong mental skills is simply one of these facets.

In elite level sport it is now widely recognised that being technically good is not enough to win at the highest level – a champion athlete also has to be mentally strong to win.

Many players will be familiar with opening round nerves – whether it is in bridge or giving a speech in front of an audience or making a presentation to your boss at work. It is quite normal to feel anxious or to have a slightly elevated heart rate or experience ‘sweaty palms’ in these circumstances. Problems arise when this anxiety elevates to the point of panic which prevents you as a player from thinking clearly and focussing properly on the board you are playing.

On this hand, both sides were guilty of first round nerves. Our opponents sitting E-W made an error in defence that gave my partner at North a chance to make the contract. My partner North was also suffering from early round nerves and failed to capitalise on this gift.

Dealer: South

Vulnerable: Nil

	♠ QJ9742	
	♥ A	
	♦ Q	
	♣ AK753	
♠ AK10		♠ 865
♥ J86		♥ 10754
♦ AJ98754		♦ 102
♣		♣ 10982
	♠ 3	
	♥ KQ932	
	♦ K63	
	♣ QJ64	

South became declarer in five clubs after the following auction with both pairs playing Standard American.

West      North      East      South

			1♥
2♦	2♠	Pass	3♣
3♦	5♣	All pass	

West on lead kicked off with the ace of spades and continued with the ace of diamonds. After much thought she continued with a low spade won in dummy with the queen of spades. Game is now easily made assuming spades are 3-3 by ruffing a spade to hand (establishing the whole suit) before drawing trumps. My partner took a line that failed when she continued at trick four by unblocking the ace of hearts and drawing three rounds of trumps by playing ace of clubs, then three of clubs to declarer's queen, followed by the jack of clubs. Having failed to set up the spades, Declarer tried valiantly to recover but the contract was now doomed.

I suspect that had either pair been dealt this hand in their local club they would have got the defence/play right every time. So what can a player do to overcome these early round nerves? One tactic which will assist here is to be ready to play by warming up before bridge.

Anyone who has watched any international or national sport will have seen athletes preparing for play by warming up before their match. Yet most bridge players go straight from the bedroom to breakfast and to the playing area without doing anything. We would all like the first few boards we play to be technically easy, but more often than not the first board out of the slot might be tricky. In these cases, having warmed up before play will help your mind be ready for the challenge.

Warming up comprises two aspects:

Firstly - warm up the central nervous system: This isn't especially difficult and involves a little bit of physical activity to get the blood flowing. This physical activity may include walking, yoga or stretching in your hotel room, a swim or similar activity. You can do more vigorous exercise if you are younger and/or fitter, but for many bridge players a 15-20 minute walk before or after breakfast is enough to help wake up the body and get ready for action. Participating in physical activity also has a lasting effect after its conclusion, especially if it is performed regularly.

Secondly – wake up the mind: Waking up the mind for bridge is about doing some mental activity to be ready mentally to play. My partner and I sometimes do a few hands on BBO for about 20 minutes to get ready for play, but here are some other ideas on waking up your mind before your first session.

- Have a hand record(s) from a recent competition and plan your bidding and/or play on about half a dozen hands.
- Play a few hands of bridge, if you can find some other willing participants, or online/against the computer if you can't. Remember this is a warm-up designed to get your mind in gear, so a few hands is enough!
- Do a few problems from a bridge book suitable for your skill level.

One of the effects of this mental wake-up routine will be that you can make a mistake in your hotel room before play, cost-free, rather than at the table in the first match!

There is no simple solution to getting off to a good start. Each of us is different, and each of us must test what will work best for us by trial and error. The key is to try a variety of different things and once you have identified the best approach for you, stick to it.

Good preparation is a key part of mental management. Utilising the above techniques will assist in getting you ready to play so you overcome any opening round jitters you may experience and get off to a good start at your next tournament.

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