

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR CHANCES OF WINNING

by Karen Thomas McCallum

The following are some suggestions for ensuring that you and your team are playing at your best (i.e., winning). They've worked well for me and for others in the past.

PARTNERSHIP

TAKE CARE OF YOUR PARTNER. Nothing is more important to winning. Your partner is your best friend, at and away from the table. He's trying as hard as you are to play his best, but he will make some mistakes (and so will you). Don't forget that you can't win without him, so be understanding when he makes an error. He feels worse than you do. And cater to his whims, however silly and irritating you may find them. If he likes to sort his cards d-e-l-I-b-e-r-a-t-e-l-y, or to claim at trick two, or to have his breakfast while hanging from the ceiling, then leave him alone and let him do it his way if you want him to play his best. Whether he requires a lot of support and discussion, or mostly privacy and quiet - respect his needs so that he too can play his best. If you find that you cannot bring yourself to give this sort of support to your partner, you're probably playing with the wrong partner.

PLAY BY GENERAL PRINCIPLES. Make sure that you've developed good comprehensive general principles that you can fall back on when you encounter a new situation at the table (we'll discuss this in detail this week). Know your principles, and follow them.

SYSTEM NOTES. You undoubtedly have them, but they may need some work. I'll be providing Partnership Questionnaires that will help you with this task. If you haven't done so already, this is the time for you and partner to get things up to date - particularly in the two critical areas of handling competition and unusual situations that don't come up often or haven't been discussed. The questionnaires will pose some of those less frequent problems, giving you the opportunity to make some general agreements that will get you through those sticky areas. Even the sketchiest of notes are fine, so long as they are accurate and cover the partnership's general principles. They don't need to be complete. My notes with Kerri Sanborn are nearly 1200 pages (Meckwell's are longer), Paul Marston's are 5 pages. It doesn't really matter, so long as you and your partner are comfortable with what you have. You can add to your notes, or cut them down as needed, as you go along.

PLAY WITHIN YOUR PARTNERSHIP. Follow your partnership agreements at the table at all times. Even if the agreement seems silly to both of you at the time. You can change the notes later.

IF IT'S NOT IN THE NOTES, WE DON'T PLAY IT! Following this simple rule is worth it's weight in gold (or, more importantly, IMPs). If it saves you even one accident in a long match, that may be the difference between winning and losing the match. Even if both of you know that your agreement is not a good one, it's best to follow it at the table and change the notes later.

TEAM SPIRIT

Playing as a team is the only possible way to win consistently. Be on side with one another and you'll undoubtedly improve your results. If you're going to win each and every pair has to be playing well. Work as a unit and you'll get the best out of every member of the team. So, try to eat many of your meals together, spend time after the session socializing and drinking together, go sightseeing together. You are representing your country as a team. Make the most of this opportunity.

Have faith in your teammates - they're all fine players or they wouldn't be here now. And remember that they're all doing the best they can. Each and every one of them wants to win as badly as you do. Trust your teammates when you're sitting out.

You are a team. If you lose, you ALL lose. It's not one person's fault, and it's not one person's loss - it belongs to all of you. So don't cast blame. Instead, use your energy looking for ways to improve your own results, or your own behaviour as a teammate.

Don't forget to have sympathy for your teammates bad results. You will have many bad boards - each and every one of you (you too). Accept them and never, ever criticize. Celebrate the good moments, and let the bad ones go. There will be time enough later for discussion and improvement. If you have a weaker player or pair on your team, you're not going to teach them how to play better in the middle of the event - so criticism can only cost you and your team - there's no upside.

RESPECT YOUR CAPTAIN.

During an event, your captain is your "God." He's there to make decisions that you are not prepared to make. You are there to play.

You, or your organization, chose him as your captain because you trust his ability to be objective and make important decisions. Respect those decisions even when you disagree with him. There may be things going on that affect his decision that you don't know about. If you have issues you'd like to discuss about his decisions, do so before the event or after the event. If you find that you must consult with him during the event, about any of his decisions, do so privately.

Your captain is there to win too. Have faith in him - he won't let you down.

HAVE A COACH

You'll need someone onsite to research the opponents' systems and help to prepare last minute defenses, copy convention cards, run out for missing notes, defenses, coffee, pens, lend a willing ear and a broad shoulder when things go badly, make dinner reservations, etc.

It's best if this entire job does NOT fall to your captain. He will have his hands full with meetings, committees, conditions of contest, determining which pairs will play best against which opponents, deciding who can defend best against the opponents' systems, keeping up with who is playing well or fading, who is fresh and who needs to rest, etc. I have found from first-hand experience on both sides of the fence that an NPC works harder than a player. If you want to win, help your captain to do his best job by providing the extra support of a "coach" or even a "go-fer," as we say in the USA.

The more support you and your teammates have in these trivial, but important, areas, the freer you will be to focus on doing your job - playing well and winning.

This person may be your captain, a coach, a husband or wife - anyone who is competent and knowledgeable, and is on your side and will want to do a good job for you. Obviously, this person needs to be a knowledgeable player if he's going to be involved in defenses to opponents' conventions. But, perhaps your captain can handle that himself (depending upon other circumstances), and will need only some non-professional assistance. That's an individual choice and your captain is probably the one who is best equipped to make the decision. In any case, it's most important that this "coach" be someone who is upbeat, one who inspires confidence and generates a positive environment for everyone on the team. For example, don't choose a spouse if that choice will minimize another member of the team. The best way to choose a coach is for everyone to make a few suggestions of plausible people and then have the members of your team vote on it.

PREPARATION

YOU'RE GOING TO THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS!

- o **Be sure that you know your notes.** 100%.
There is no room for partnership



- misunderstanding = there are too many other errors to be made without worrying about ones you can easily eliminate. Go over the areas where you might be a little shaky, and review those obscure sequences which don't come up often.
- o Develop good solid partnership principles to fall back on in the heat of the battle. Be sure they're clear and that you both know them well. (We'll be discussing this in detail during the training period.)
 - o Practice bidding hands. Focus on areas where your partnership is weakest, and where you've had problems in the past. Also on areas where you've changed your system.
 - o Do the Partnership Questionnaires with your partner. Don't worry if you don't finish them all. Just plod along and do what you feel you need or want to do.
 - o Fine-tune your system - look for weaknesses and gaps in your methods, and try to find solutions. (Bidding hands helps a lot with this. So will doing the questionnaires. I'm willing to help if you need suggestions.)
 - o Focus some serious energy on slam-bidding, there are a lot of IMPs at stake. (I've provided 1000 hands - if you need more, you're working too hard.)
 - o Develop strategies with your partner and your team (when to be aggressive/conservative, when to swing, your general approach to slam bidding, pushy game-bidding, competing for part-scores, and when to change your normal approach. (Eric Kokish has some good advice in this area which I'll be providing for you.)
 - o **Be sure that you have good, simple defenses to the opponents conventions, and a sound general strategy for dealing with those systems/conventions which you might not have prepared for.** (We'll be discussing this in detail) I will make available some ideas and strategies for developing your own consistent defenses and principles, as well as some specific defenses I've developed myself, if your partnership needs help in this area.
 - o Play practice matches with your team, followed by friendly, constructive team discussion and analysis of swings. Do NOT use these sessions to cast blame. If someone wants to admit to an error, fine. The idea is to analyze why the team lost IMPs, with an eye to improving and avoiding. Everyone benefits unless you allow these sessions to turn into "bashing" in which case, no one gains.

THE LAST WEEK

- o As the time for the big event draws near, your best preparation is to relax and unwind. Get a lot of sleep.

Consider taking a holiday from bridge and work for the last day or so before you leave. Or make it part of your journey to the World Championships.

- o Don't Play Bridge.
- o Read prior World Championship books to get a headstart on getting your mind into the right gear for tough play.
- o Browse a good play book by Reese or Kelsey, to help ratchet your thinking back up to expert level.
- o Get there early, get settled in and acclimated to the time change, change in diet, etc. Do not arrive the day the event begins. It will cost you if you do.
- o Review your notes, in a relaxed and leisurely manner. Don't stress.
- o Whatever you do, don't revise the system.

CONSERVE YOUR ENERGY.

It's not party time. Of course, you want to have a good time - it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But, remember that you are there to win. Save the heavy partying for the victory banquet.

It's not work time anymore. Your system is what it is. Don't study, don't change it, don't clarify it any further. Let it be.

Eliminate all outside distractions. Clear the decks of all business and personal matters before you arrive at the tournament so that you are free to focus on the bridge. Don't bring your work with you.

Don't allow yourself to become involved in rulings and committees and "incidents." That's your captain's job. Your job is to play. If the conditions of play are not to your liking, live with it. You can't change it, but you can cost yourself important energy. Focus your energy where it belongs - you will need it.

Take care of yourself. Get some exercise whenever you can - take a walk when you're sitting out. And don't eat big meals or drink more than a small amount of alcohol, even at the end of the day's play. The effect is cumulative when you are trying to perform at your best for two weeks straight. Take care of yourself - it's worth a lot of IMPs. And try to sleep. (Yes, I know. Who sleeps?)

Don't discuss the hands with your partner, unless there is a system confusion which needs to be sorted out immediately, of course. It's a long event - you'll need every ounce of energy you have in

the later rounds of the KO. Don't waste it playing the hands twice.

QUALIFY

Don't try to win the event in the Round Robin. If you play your normal steady game, remembering that you are playing against the rest of the field at this stage, not just against the team you are facing at the moment, you will almost certainly qualify for the KO stages. The teams that try to win big risk losing. Those who sit tight and hang on will usually make it in.

THE WEAK LINK

Your team is only as good as its weakest link. He may be a weaker player, or perhaps he's just not as tough as the rest of the team, or perhaps he's less experienced. Take care of him. Get the best out of him. Support him.

Never make any member of your team feel unwelcome in any way. Do not treat any member of your team badly for any reason. You are throwing IMPs out the window when you do.

MORALE & MISTAKES

Don't allow yourself to be demoralized by a terrible result, a big loss - or even (god forbid) a blitz. Everyone has bad sets. The eventual winners will get blitzed somewhere along the line. And everyone has a few really silly, awful, embarrassing (on-vugraph-for-the-world-to-see) results. If it was your teammates today, it may be you tomorrow - or your opponents (they aren't perfect either).

Don't forget that everyone has great sets too. Take it one hand at a time - it's a long event.

The team on the podium at the end of the event will not be the team that played perfectly. It will be the team that made the fewest mistakes. When you fall from grace, remind yourselves that with a little luck, and the right attitude, you will make fewer mistakes than the other guys.

IT'S A CARD GAME.

Don't forget that, when all is said and done, bridge is a "game." Winning isn't everything. Win or lose, you will never forget the

moments when you represent your country in a World Championship.
Enjoy them.

Observation

Necessary Qualities

Slam bidding