

The Mental Game - Getting Started with Goal Setting & Performance Evaluation

by Kim Frazer

Whether one competes for fun, social or competitive reasons, most of us like to do well at our game. Having goals is an important part of managing your mental approach to the game as it helps you manage your expectations. Knowing that your plan is working, that you are on track against your goals and measuring your performance assists with your self-belief and helps prevent doubt and negative thinking in competition. The more competitive amongst us usually have some goals in competition - perhaps finishing in the top 10, beating a particular pair at the local club, getting over 60%, building our masterpoints or similar. Others might just like to play for fun and enjoy a social day out at the club without worrying too much about their results. As an international competitor in shooting, I always had goals in my training and competitions. When I was competing in shooting, I would target particular competitions that I wanted to win, and set other events as preparation events, where other factors were the goals for the particular event. When I started playing more regularly in bridge competitions, I set myself some specific measurable goals such as finishing in top 10 in a percentage of congress events, achieving over a particular percentage in club duplicate and so on. Whilst score based goals are an assessment of how well you are playing, they do not necessarily provide you with the information you require to improve your overall performance. They are an indicator of progress. In this article I would like to set out a basic approach to performance evaluation which will help you do the best you can with your goals in bridge - whatever they may be.

As a first step, identify some specific parameters that you will evaluate to determine both where your errors are occurring, and how you are tracking against those parameters. Analysis of specific metrics (e.g. defensive errors, lead errors, play errors, bidding errors, etc) and tracking your performance against those metrics can help you to understand your current weaknesses and target your training towards improving in those areas. This will also help you determine whether you need to make changes to your system (e.g. not reaching the right contract) or whether you simply need to improve your skills as a player (not making the required number of tricks or defeating contracts). Metrics also help you make informed decisions on your performance, rather than deciding something is or isn't working based on a feeling, or worse blaming your partner for your results.

Every sportsperson periodically goes through a detailed evaluation of their performance in competition and training. The evaluation considers a few factors such as:

- are my goals being met?
- is my competition plan effective?
- what can I change to help me achieve my goals?

Keeping a record of your performance and results is important in order to enable a data-based analysis of your results. I recall reading an article by Bill Jacobs a few years ago where he spoke about his analysis of his partnership's use of Fantunes and how he had compared the results they achieved using Fantunes with the results they might have achieved bidding using their traditional methods for a two year period! In my shooting training I used to record everything I tried and

assessed all changes for their effectiveness using detailed performance analysis. I feel it is equally important to do this for bridge. As an example, keeping a record of your competition results is great with respect to determining whether you are getting better results as a player, but not very helpful in analysing performance. A more useful analysis would be to go through every hand you play in competition with your partner and identify hands where you or your partner made:

- a bidding or system error
- a judgement error (for example over/under- valued your hand and overbid/underbid)
- a declarer play error
- a defensive error
- a poor lead

Get your partner to do the same assessment & compare notes. Be as objective as you possibly can and unless you are really advanced players don't worry too much if you cannot categorise the marginal hands - they probably aren't the ones costing you results. Also I suggest you eliminate hands where you have a choice of lines of play such as whether to finesse one way or the other - even top players often choose the wrong way in these circumstances. When you identify the area(s) in which you make the most errors, you can analyse that area in more detail, and then try to come up with a plan to improve in that area. For example you might find you always fail in contracts where you are declarer in 1NT. Or you may find you struggle to make contracts which involve cross-ruffing. Develop a plan for how you will improve that aspect. Work on it, until you no longer have that as a problem, then move on to the next area you identify for improvement. Over time you will reduce your errors, and you will know your plan is working because you will have the data to support your analysis.

To some this might seem like a lot of work, but gaining incremental improvement is hard once the basics are understood and learned. Like champion sportspeople, the players who are the most successful, are those who make the fewest errors, and who also work the hardest at improving their game. Thanks always to David Morgan for great insights on this article.