

The Mental Game - Maintaining Focus

When I competed in my first Commonwealth Games in 1994, I walked into the shooting range on the practice day, and right behind my shooting bay was a TV camera. Well some sports people experience TV cameras all the time, but in shooting this was an anomaly. In fact it would be fair to say that I had never competed anywhere previously that there had been TV coverage. It was fortunate that I had anticipated this type of scenario during my pre-event preparations, and was able to maintain my focus during the match the next day rather than being distracted by the idea of being on TV.

At bridge players know that there are going to be all kinds of distractions such as:

- noisy playing areas;
- other players talking about hands;
- bad play;
- bad defence;
- director calls;
- and so on.

Players often allow these distractions or incidents to interfere with their play. Many players will dwell on an incident from their round such as a director ruling, play of a hand, a bidding sequence or poor defence instead of focussing on the current hand. In fact some players become so upset by these distractions, that they misplay or misbid hands because they don't have a means of focussing on the task at hand and blotting out the other stuff. Being able to re-focus on the task at hand is a key mental tool that will enhance your overall performance, and having a plan for what you will do when distractions occur is an integral part of this plan.

Whilst some players are fortunate and could maintain focus during an earthquake, many are not so lucky. Let's consider these distractions as two types.

Type 1 distractions are external to you and are predictable events which happen in nearly every tournament. They include things like:

- director calls to tables nearby;
- someone falling ill;
- loud noises, things being dropped, etc.

Type 1 distractions are those you can and should plan for and work out what you are going to do when they occur. For example the players at the next table spill a drink all over the cards and start creating a ruckus which is distracting for your table. You may wish to plan that you will stop play until the activity at the next table calms down, rather than trying to play and lose concentration and going off in a game you should make because you cannot concentrate with all the peripheral noise.

I recommend you make a list of all these types of distractions and have a plan for how you are going to manage them. So where something has happened at an adjacent table, planning to say something to the other players at your table like "I'm sorry, but I just can't concentrate with all this going on at the next table. Would you mind if we just wait a moment until things calm down?" is a nice way of letting the opponents know that you want to have a short pause in play. After you make

your list of distractions, rehearse in your mind what you will do if each of them occur. Get your partner on side with your strategy too. The idea here is to be prepared so when something does happen you know how to deal with it and it doesn't throw you off your game.

Type 2 distractions are internal to you and include those areas where:

- you have made an error, or perceive you have made an error; or
- your partner has made an error which is on your mind; or
- the opponents have made a contract you "think" you should have defeated; etc.

It is very hard for some players to make their mind let go of these issues, but it is important to be able to do this to play at your optimal level. Some players deal with Type 2 distractions by making a note to about the issue, so that they can consider it later. Making a note can have the effect of "giving yourself permission" to let the incident go and act as a reminder to discuss it later. If this doesn't work for you, and you cannot let an incident go, consider excusing yourself for a bathroom break, to get a drink or some other time-out, so you have a short pause to get over the incident. Each match has ample time for each round, especially at major events, so unless you are exceptionally slow players, there is plenty of time to have a little break to get over a stuff up.

In shooting I had a list of stuff that I had prepared identifying what could go wrong or happen during the event and I mentally rehearsed what I was going to do if such and such happened in competition for each item on it. In my opinion, when considering your pre-match preparation in bridge, there are five key questions to ask yourself:

- What can go wrong before I leave home?
- What can go wrong at the event?
- What can go wrong during play?
- How will I react?
- What can I do to limit the potential damage?

Developing strategies to properly manage the answers to these questions will help you to play at your optimal level, and ensure you don't give away imps inadvertently. Working on proper match preparation is a critical part of ensuring your success in competition bridge.