

The Mental Game - Performance Evaluation

by Kim Frazer

In a previous article on Goal Setting, I covered the basic fundamentals of goal setting and performance evaluation for competitors. Achieving improvement in the early stages of your bridge career, as in all competition for most competitors, is relatively straightforward. It is easy to make progress when there are a lot of areas that need improvement and you will find that progress is rapid. The difficulty occurs when you become a more experienced player, and you have achieved a reasonable level of competence. Now improvement comes more slowly and is focussed in three primary areas:

- a) continued development of your skill as a player;
- b) incremental improvements to your system with your partner; and,
- c) development of your partnership harmony and understanding.

Elite athletes adopt a very structured and systematic approach to changes to "system" changes & improvements. For example an athlete may decide that they have maximised their skill level using a particular technical skill, and that to achieve improvement a change is required to a technical aspect of their sport. The implementation of the technical skill change is extremely well planned. Key characteristics of change are:

- the change happens in the off season;
- the athlete spends hours of practice to learn the change before it is used in an important competition; and,
- the athlete is usually confident that a change is required to achieve improvement - ie. their current technique is sub-optimal.

The reason for the highly structured approach to changes is that it is important athletes head into competition feeling confident that their technical skills are robust and will withstand the pressure of competition. This mental confidence in your skills is vital as any doubts in the mind will translate to "fear" in execution, and an increased likelihood of mistakes.

Similarly, in bridge, analysis of your existing system and skill level is necessary before you decide to make any changes. A key question to examine is whether the weaker performance is due to judgement errors or a deficiency in skill or a sub-optimal system or method. Just like tennis players often choose a highly risky shot at the wrong point in a match, rather than waiting for the correct moment, often bridge players will bid for a wildly optimistic game or slam when a part score or game is enough. If this is happening with you and your partner, then changing your methods or conventions will not really enable the performance improvement you are seeking. Similarly if your deficiencies are due to a lack of knowledge on card play techniques such as squeezes, finesses, or card combinations, then work in this area might be prudent before system changes are made.

If, after analysis, you decide that a change to your current methods is necessary, then you need to follow a very structured process to implementing that change. As an example:

- identify the "one" convention or method you want to change - for example changing from weak jump overcalls to intermediate jump overcalls;
- assess the frequency with which the "new" convention would be used, compared with your current convention or method;
- assess which convention or method will deliver the most consistent results, and so on.

You might decide to make the change and then you should do further analysis to see if the change makes you and your partner stronger or weaker as a pair by assessing your results on the hands where the method or convention applied compared with the result you probably would have achieved using a natural method and/or your old convention. With the availability of hand records for each session, and with some of the modern scoring programs to provide data, analysis of hands is relatively easy for you to perform, provided you are willing to spend the time. Using a data-based approach when making changes to your system or play will give you the confidence to believe in yourself when using those changes in competition.

When I gave this article to David Morgan for comment, he rightly identified the third aspect - building partnership understanding and harmony. This is something I really need to work on, so I am going to use David's comments which are: *"Working to get the best out of each other is an important goal for any serious partnership to have. There may be some people who respond well to being criticised after a hand but I don't think I've ever seen that happen at the table. Beyond working out when and how to discuss what happens when things go wrong, it's worthwhile to work on helping partner to play better. Maybe partner likes to be complimented after doing something well, even if it is routine: if so, compliment them. Maybe partner plays better when there's little discussion: save the chat for after play finishes. Maybe partner likes a smile to reassure them after they've made a mistake: smile. Maybe partner likes the suits laid out in a particular way when you're dummy: do it! Maybe partner really doesn't like it when you leave the table when you're dummy, except in an emergency: respect their wishes".*

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. However most importantly, the best competitors are those who believe in their own ability, and techniques.