

## The Mental Game - The Kick Off

*by Kim Frazer*

Often in sport, we see very good athletes lose a match after an error made in the early stages of their competition. This is particularly true in the "target" sports like shooting, golf, archery and so on, but other events like cycling, swimming, athletics, gymnastics and so on are not immune. A number of factors can contribute to this phenomenon but the most obvious is anxiety which affects the athlete's ability to perform at their normal level. The athlete afflicted by anxiety at the beginning of an event, or indeed during an event, often makes a costly mistake from which recovery is impossible. They finish below their best pondering what might have been if they hadn't messed up their match.

I have also observed this quite often in bridge where an otherwise competent player will completely misplay or misbid a board(s) in their tournament, particularly early in the event, turning a potential win into a loss. It is possible to recover from an early loss in the tournament, but it is better if you don't have to. Whilst there are many techniques to help athletes relax and deal with nervous tension and match anxiety, a good first step is to be ready to go at the kick-off with good match preparation, and I would like to focus on some techniques to assist with this in this article.

In sport you know what to expect at the start of the match or race, and it is possible to make practicing starts very close to the reality. Athletes spend many hours practicing this aspect to ensure a good start to competition. In training for my shooting events, practicing starting matches included a pre-match warm-up and preparation before every training session and match. It is therefore surprising to me that many bridge players enter the competition "cold" in sporting terms. Many of us will have experienced starting a tournament with a complicated hand at board 1. If you aren't prepared and haven't got your mind into gear, before you know it you've gone off, or failed to bid, a game or slam you could have made! It is impossible to predict the hand you will get on board one, but it is possible to manage all the other aspects, and to ensure you are prepared for "the kick-off".

To play well from the outset, I feel bridge players could improve their chances by doing a warm up - both mentally and physically in the same way that professional athletes warm up before their events. It is hard to imagine a professional athlete walking out onto the field of play without having done a warm-up. Waking up the mind and body before you start your bridge tournament can also help with the early match nerves that some players experience. If you walk in for the first round having warmed up properly, then you are more likely to play at your desired level, than if you are mentally "cold".

Waking up the central nervous system is quite simple really - walking, some yoga or stretching in your hotel room, a swim or similar activity is enough to get the blood flowing, and physically wake up the body. Your brain needs oxygen to function properly so activating your body physically will help to wake up the central nervous system. 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. It is also worth considering a walk during the lunch break before the afternoon session as well.

Waking up the mind may be managed in many ways. Experiment to find out what works best for you and your partner/teammates, but the point is to become mentally alert before the first round. Juggling is often used by athletes - both for waking up the mind and the eye-hand co-ordination. This might also be effective for bridge players but not everyone has the dexterity to manage it, so here are a few other more "bridgey" 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 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.

Finally at the tournament, it is important to have a routine before play as this gets your mind into its "bridge" zone. Doing the same thing every time ensures we reach our "match ready" state for the first board. In shooting I had a pre-match day and match day routine, and I also had an equipment checklist to make sure I remembered everything I was supposed to pack for the competition. It wasn't much use arriving at the competition to find that you have left a critical piece of equipment at home several hours travel away. Similarly for bridge it is an important part of preparation to be ready when play starts. Get to the table on time. Have your system card, pen, water bottle, headache tablets, or whatever else you normally require with you. Give yourself some time to review the opponent's system. The point here is to create a consistent environment that enables you (and your partner) to perform at your best, not one where you or your partner are stressed out before you even play a hand.

Good preparation is a key part of mental management. Utilising the above techniques will assist in getting you off to a good start at your next tournament "kick-off".

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