

Five Tips that are Guaranteed to Improve Your Scores!!

By Neil Kimelman

Wow! That is a big statement. Let me prove it you! This article is adapted from the advice I gave in my 2nd book, *The Thin Fine Line*.

Before I carry on, I just want to make a comment on the three books I wrote. All of them are on bidding judgement, where I believe is by far the most important aspect of our game. If I had to estimate, the relative importance of the three main areas of bridge are:

Bidding 70%

Declarer Play 10%

Defence 20%

To put it another way, it doesn't help you how well you play the hand when you are in the wrong contract! Here is another question to mull over:

Q: Should I read your books?

A: My books are about bidding judgement and are intended for advanced players. However all players can benefit, as what the book teaches is what questions to ask yourself before deciding on a bid. The themes are universal, but might be more difficult to grasp with less of a bidding foundation to build upon.

Ok, let's carry on with the theme for this article...

Five Tips that are Guaranteed to Improve Your Scores!!

1. Stay in the present.
2. Pay attention.
3. Think before bidding.
4. Take care of your partner.
5. Learn.

1. Stay in the present.

In *The Thin Fine Line* I talk about 'Processing Speed', and the advantage in thinking faster. But you cannot process information on the current deal, if you are still thinking of the last hand! Or what you had for lunch! Or why players have to yell when they call for the Director! And, and and, and and!

We are not computers, so it is vital to be in the present to maximize of our chance on doing the right things. One of the common issues we all face, including me, is when the last hand didn't go your way. It is really hard to let go!!

My advice – use a word or a phrase to assist you to transition from the last hand to the current one. This might be silently saying the serenity prayer, or choosing a specific word or phrase. For a while I used, 'Heather', the name of a high school girl friend. The important thing is when I said that word, the message from me to me was:

'Ok, Neil, you blew the defence and the singleton king was onside that allowed the contract to make. The board will be a zero. The hand is over, focus on the new one.'

If I find myself drifting during the hand (i.e. what type of beer will I have after the session), I simply say the word Heather, to bring me back to the here and now.

We all know of players in our bridge community that are always subject to late plays and slow play penalties, while some consistently finish rounds later than others. That is in a large reason is dwelling on the last hand, or other distractions from the present hand.

2. Pay attention.

This is closely tied to the first principle. I start paying attention right away, when I pick up the cards for the new hand. I organize them, count my high cards and wait for my turn to bid. But there is more to do before one bid is made. Here are a couple of ideas:

- Observe your distribution.
- Do you have good points or bad points?
- What is the vulnerability?
- Who is the dealer?

And once the bidding starts:

- What are you going to do if RHO opens the bidding?
- It looks like I will be on lead against a spade contract, what should I lead?

What if I don't process information fast?

The advantage of being able to 'think faster' is significant. If a player can think quickly and play in tempo, they have an advantage. They can now use other available time for more esoteric or future

potential bidding and play decisions. The opponents cannot tell when you had a problem if you can think quickly and play in tempo.

How can you process quicker? One possibility is playing a lot of bridge. The more you practice these principles, the easier and faster you will get. Another plus is to have a long standing partnership where you don't have to think about what bids mean in various auctions as they have come before and your partnership has discussed how to handle these situations.

A third idea, and one that everyone can do, is **to use your time allocated wisely**. Bridge is a social game, but try to balance your time between being social and doing your best. Often there is time after the round is over to catch up with what is new, and discuss with your opponents.

Another good practice to get into is try and picture what each of the other three players have as the auction and hand proceeds. If declarer, here is a partial checklist to go through before trick one:

- What does the bidding tell me about the opponents' hands?
- What does the lead tell me?

3. Think before bidding.

This may seem obvious, but is a common fault of ALL players at what time or another! The trick is to minimize doing this, thus minimizing bad bids or plays from being too anxious.

When you have seven hearts with a weak hand, and are not vul vs vul, the knee-jerk reaction is to preempt. It may be right. But before you bid three hearts, you may want to ask yourself:

- Will partner play me for this hand?
- Should I bid this vulnerable against non-vulnerable opponents?
- Is partner a passed hand? If not will I be pre-empting them instead of the opponents, which is my goal?
- Will pre-empting just help the opponents in deciding how to declare?
- Do I have too much defence that may cause a sacrifice to be a phantom one?

Try to go through a final checklist before taking a card from the bidding box.

4. Take care of your partner.

Although listed second last, do not underestimate this important rule. Bridge is a partnership game. It doesn't matter how well you play if partner plays poorly. You want to ensure your partner is at their maximum efficiency. Here are a couple of tips that may help:

- 1) Greet your partner before the game and engage in what the French call, *Politesse*. That is asking how you are today, how was traffic driving in, what's new, etc... Before you get into 'bridge talk' engage with partner at a more connected level.

2) If they guess wrong to do, don't say, 'You are an idiot!' Don't laugh, I have heard that and worse at the bridge table from one partner to the other. Eventually they will stop playing with you, but in the meantime, they will be on tilt and thinking not nice things about your comment, rather than doing their best on the next deal.

If you want to acknowledge the result, you may want to say,

- Tough guess pard.
- Difficult hand.
- None of us are perfect.
- It's just one board.

All of these sentiments acknowledge the likely poor score, the elephant in the room, but tells partner you are in their corner!!

5. Learn

We all get bad scores, for a variety of reasons. The emphasis should be on correcting mistakes that are in your control.

Look at the boards played from your last game. Hand records are a godsend in helping remembering them. Did you forget a convention? Overcall when you shouldn't? Consistently get bad scores when you preempt?

Even better, do this with your partner. Often you can twig an agreement, agree on what type of hand to preempt with, or what a bid should mean. This not only fosters your partnership bond, but narrows and manages expectations for similar auctions in the future.

There are many ways to accomplish this dialogue. You can do this right after the session, by facetime or phone conversation the day after, or in an email later in the week. I actually prefer the latter for a couple of reasons:

You have time to review the hands at your leisure, often changing your mind to what you initially thought. The big plus for me is that you can save the conversation, and open up the email at any time to remember what you and your partner discussed, and agree on.

I hope these tips help. If not please contact me to receive a full refund!