

Scoring at Bridge

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Learning to play bridge is often compared to learning a new language, or relearning English as it pertains to bridge. In addition to all the bidding rules, defensive strategies and declarer play techniques, there are also multiple ways to score at bridge. The differences can affect your decisions in bidding, play and defense.

Pair games

Matchpoints is typically the form of scoring duplicate players learn first. What, exactly, is a matchpoint and how do you get them? Here is how you matchpoint:

If you are playing in, say, a seven-table game, there are six other pairs playing your direction that you are competing with. Every pair is awarded one matchpoint for each pair they scored better than, and half a matchpoint for every pair they tie. In this game, a 6 would be a “top board.” Scoring no matchpoints is referred to as a “zero” or bottom board.

At matchpoints, the best score wins; it doesn't matter by how much. That is why it's said that overtricks matter. For example, if your contract is 1NT, even if you took an overtrick for a score of plus 120, if the rest of the field made three for plus 150, you would get no matchpoints. The theory of risking the contract for the overtrick is that it's the same bad score if you don't take the risk, so you might as well.

If you are playing online, you might see your score for a board displayed as a percentage. This is the percentage of matchpoints you earned. For example, if in our seven-table game you scored 4 out of 6 matchpoints, you would have a 67% board.

The total available matchpoints for a session depends on how many pairs, the movement and how many boards are in play. Your final score is the percentage

of total available matchpoints you won. If there are multiple sections, your score could go up or down after the game is scored across all sections in play.

Team games

In a team game, you and your partner sit one direction at one table, and your teammates sit the opposite direction at another table. The two pairs from the opposing team do the same. The same boards are played at both tables.

When you play a team game, the contracts are scored the same as at pairs. After you play the boards, you compare scores with your teammates. The difference in your scores is measured in International Matchpoints (IMPs).

If there is no difference, it's a “push” board. The difference in points begins at 20 and costs 1 IMP. If you are plus 100 and your teammates are minus 110, that is a push board. If you are plus 90 and your teammates are minus 120, the score is minus 1 IMP for your team and plus 1 IMP for the other team.

Let's take another look at that notrump partial from the matchpoint session. At teams, you just want to make your contract. You are not going to risk your plus 120 for plus 150. Why? This is what it sounds like when you and your teammates reconvene to compare scores:

“Board one, plus 120,” you say. Your teammates, “Minus 120. Push”

What if you risked an overtrick and went down one?

“Board one, minus 50.”

“Minus 120. Minus 170 is lose 5.”

If you didn't get the overtrick and they did, it's only lose 1. Better to lose 1 IMP than 5.

The bigger the difference in scores, the more IMPs are won or lost.

For example, say you are North–South and you reach a vulnerable game

IMP Scale

Difference in Points	IMPs
20–40	1
50–80	2
90–120	3
130–160	4
170–210	5
220–260	6
270–310	7
320–360	8
370–420	9
430–490	10
500–590	11
600–740	12
750–890	13
900–1090	14
1100–1290	15
1300–1490	16
1500–1740	17
1750–1990	18
2000–2240	19
2250–2490	20
2500–2990	21
3000–3490	22
3500–3990	23
4000 +	24

20-pt. VP Scale

IMPs	VPs
0	10–10
1–2	11–9
3–4	12–8
5–7	13–7
8–10	14–6
11–13	15–5
14–16	16–4
17–19	17–3
20–23	18–2
24–27	19–1
28 +	20–0

in a major, just making, for plus 620. Your teammates, sitting East–West at the other table, played a contract undoubled and went down two for minus 100. Your net score is plus 520 which, converted to IMPs, is win 11.

Phrases such as “double partscore (or game or slam) swings” mean that both sides can make such a contract. When your side is double-negative, it can mean a loss of a lot of IMPs. If you have a minus score, hope that your teammates have a plus.

A swing can also mean that one side made it but the other did not – or did not bid the same. That score might look like plus 420 and plus 50, for a win (or loss) of 10 IMPs, or plus 420 and minus 170 for a win (or loss) of 6.

Negative IMPs detract from your score.

Once you tally up your plus and minus scores, you have your IMP margin. Sometimes, there is a further conversion to victory points (VPs). The conversion depends on how many boards you played, and which scale you are using. The most common is the 20-point VP scale, which simply means there are 20 available victory points in a match. If both teams score the same number of IMPs, each team gets 10 VPs.

If you are playing an eight-board match and you won by 12 IMPs, your team would get 15 VPs and the other team 5.

Swiss

Swiss is a method of matching contestants, as opposed to a round-robin where you play everyone. In a Swiss, after each round, the next round’s matchups are determined by each team’s score. If you have a big win the first round, you’ll likely play a team with a similar score in the second round.

Knockouts

In a knockout, the field is divided into two or more groups, called “brackets.” The division is according to the average masterpoints of all players on each team. You only play the teams within your bracket. The number of teams in each bracket and the number of brackets depend on the number of teams entered in the event.

Typically, a knockout consists of 24 boards. The teams compare after 12 boards and then play the other 12. You really get to know your opponents with this format.

Knockouts are single elimination: The winner advances, the loser does not. You do not convert IMPs to VPs. 🚫