

## CAUTIOUS BIDDER [115]

If you were to ask most tournament players which form of the game they prefer – Pairs or Teams, matchpoints or IMPs – most would unhesitatingly respond that they prefer to play Teams. Few would express that preference more vehemently than Sue and myself. We regard ourselves, on a good day, as reasonably competent Teams players, but we generally perform miserably (and are miserable with one another) when playing Pairs.

Why is this? Well, they are very different forms of the game, and they play to different strengths and weaknesses. Teams is a bidder's game. Of course you have to be able to play the cards, but the key is to bid to the right contract, and especially to bid aggressively in the game zone, and to exercise good judgement above the game level. Pairs is different. There is a much greater premium on competing the part score, and thereafter, whether declaring or defending, every single trick matters. As a consequence, in matchpointed pairs what matters above all else is card skill - the ability to eke out that extra trick. You also have to be prepared to make tight penalty doubles (anathema to Sue). And all the time you are trying to calculate what the rest of the field is up to - a doomed undertaking if ever there was one.

Players vary in the extent to which they modify their approach according to which form of the game they are playing. Playing matchpoints, Sue doesn't modify very much at all; I on the other hand modify *a lot* - probably far too much. The result is predictable, the occasional good result shining like a discarded jewel amidst a pile of dross.

Last weekend we tried to play in the West of England Congress Teams, but the event was full, so we ended up playing on the Saturday instead, in the Pairs. We didn't do particularly well. This was Board 48, taken from the final match.

**Dealer West; N/S vul**

	♠KQ52	
	♥9	
	♦Q1087542	
	♣8	
♠AJ108		♠9
♥A72		♥J1084
♦A3		♦K9
♣J1052		♣AKQ976
	♠7643	
	♥KQ653	
	♦J6	
	♣43	

We sat East/West. The bidding (not recommended) was as follows:

W	N	E	S
1C	2D	2H	P
3H	P	3N	P
P	P		

We now play a 10-13 no trump at favourable vulnerability (my idea, naturally), so Sue couldn't open 1NT. Our agreement in these circumstances is to open our four card major in

preference to a four card minor, but Sue, who doesn't much like the method, followed her usual inclination to stay low - hence 1C. When North entered with a weak jump overcall in diamonds, I really didn't know what to do. Playing Teams I would have bid 3D, agreeing my partner's suit and leaving plenty of room for slam exploration. But this was Pairs, and I wasn't sure I wanted to play in clubs - certainly not in Five Clubs, which is quite likely to be hopeless at matchpoints (or so I am inclined to believe).

The upshot was that fairly gruesome 2H, which my partner in her innocence raised to the three level. I might still have reverted to clubs, but that siren King of diamonds was winking at me so I felt impelled to take a shot at the nine trick game. Needless to say this was a pretty awful sequence, to be excused (if you think there can be any excuse) only on the questionable basis that when playing matchpoints all normal bridge judgement is suspended.

Whether I had done the right thing would depend not simply on my own efforts, but on the results at all the other tables (which is an excellent reason in itself for hating this form of the game). As you can see, Six Clubs can be made, but it can also go down. Do you want to be in it, at Pairs? I don't think so - the odds aren't good enough, in my view. You certainly don't want to be in Five Clubs - that will score terribly. So your task in the play is simplified - you want to do at least as well as all the pairs in Three No Trumps (probably the majority) and you are prepared to give best to those heroes who bid and make slam.

I received a predictable Jack of diamonds lead (I'd have preferred a heart, but that wasn't going to happen, was it?), and my target, plainly, was to make eleven tricks. That should do it, I thought. I had ten, and I just needed a second heart trick. Simple. There are few layouts in the heart suit that will *not* yield a second trick, but of course you don't know what to play for. In these circumstances I generally favour the psychological over the purely technical - often because I can't work out what the correct technical play is. My instinct was to play a low heart off the dummy, and to watch what North did. So I won the diamond lead in dummy, and played a heart. North contributed an immediate nine of hearts. I inserted the Jack, and South played the Queen (he should have played the King).

Now strictly, having embarked on this line, I should play North for honour doubleton (if the honour isn't played the first time, you plan to drop it under the Ace on the next round). But I wasn't playing against Gunner Hallberg - he was sat at Table One, where I emphatically wasn't - and I didn't think this particular North would play low so smoothly when holding K9. So I decided that South probably held both heart honours. A further diamond was played. I won the King and advanced the 10 of hearts, my 10 and 8 being equals. To his credit South played low smoothly, but my mind was made up. I ran the 10 and that was eleven tricks.

How did that score? Not as well as I'd hoped. It turned out that quite a lot of pairs had bid the slam, most of them making it, and a fair proportion of those playing in Three No Trumps emerged with eleven tricks as I had done. I had secured just 74 matchpoints, with 65 being average. Not bad, but nothing special. What a strange game it is, especially the way I play it.

I should mention that Filip and Diane Kurbalija came 2<sup>nd</sup> in a field of 130 pairs, with the standard towards the top end being more than respectable. That was an excellent result - and for Filip and Diane their third mention in three weeks (your cheque is in the post).

GD