

SCORING METHODS AND TACTICS

This handout summarises the main scoring methods used in bridge. It also provides some guidance on appropriate tactics for each method.

There are three main scoring methods used in bridge:

- Rubber bridge
- Duplicate bridge – matchpoints
- Duplicate bridge – IMPs (International Match Points)

RUBBER BRIDGE

Rubber Bridge is the form of bridge played at home or in some clubs, normally just socially or for a small monetary stake. There are also some clubs that play Rubber Bridge for large stakes! Only 4 players are required in a game of Rubber Bridge. Once partnerships have been decided, the players play one or more rubbers. Each rubber comprises a sequence of hands and the main objective is to win two games. Unlike duplicate bridge, the scoring is cumulative.

The side winning two games scores a bonus for winning the rubber, although they won't always win money, since they might have conceded penalties in some earlier hands.

For further details of rubber bridge scoring, see [Rubber Bridge Scoring](#).

DUPLICATE BRIDGE – MATCHPOINTS

Duplicate bridge is the form of bridge played in most clubs. If there are more than 2 tables in play, scoring is generally done by matchpoints. Each pair plays 2 or more hands (boards) against a selection of opponents, although each board is scored separately without reference to what happened on previous boards.

At the end of the session each board will have been played a number of times. On any particular board, a pair scores 2 points for each pair with a lower score and 1 point for each pair with the same score. The margin of difference makes no difference to the matchpoint score.

At the end of the session each pair's score is converted to a percentage by dividing their total matchpoints scored by the total matchpoints available on the boards that they have played. The winner of the tournament is the pair that scores the highest percentage.

For further details of matchpoint scoring, see the handouts on [Duplicate Bridge Scoring](#) and [A Duplicate Competition](#).

DUPLICATE BRIDGE – IMPs

IMPs is the method of scoring in a Team of Four match. One team sits NS at one table and EW at the other table. Each board is played at both tables and the scores are compared. If one team has a net positive on a board, this is converted to IMPs, using a standard scale. The other team receives the corresponding negative number of IMPs.

In general, the higher the difference in points, the more IMPs scored by the winning team, but the scale is not linear. For example, a difference of 30 points converts to 1 IMP, but 150 points is 4 IMP and 750 points is 13 IMP. See [example scorecard](#) with full IMP scale.

The winner of the match is the team scoring a net positive number of IMPs over the whole match.

In addition to head-to-head matches, IMP scoring is also used in multiple teams events, where a team of 4 plays a number of boards against a selection of other teams. In addition, some pairs tournaments (notably on Bridge Base Online) use IMP scoring.

For further details of IMP scoring, see the [Duplicate Teams](#) article, which has instructions for playing a short match at home.

MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE THREE SCORING METHODS

Let's first of all compare the two duplicate scoring methods. At matchpoints, although the aim is to do better than other pairs, the margin makes no difference. Outscoring opponents by 10 points is just as good as outscoring them by 1000 points: both give the winning pair 2 matchpoints. At IMPs, however, the higher margin would be worth much more to the winning team.

It's not so easy to analyse Rubber Bridge scoring because each hand is only played once and the scoring is cumulative. Even so, it's easy to see that large penalties are worth more than undoubled overtricks. There is therefore some similarity between rubber bridge scoring and IMP scoring, in that there is more at stake on some hands than on others.

TACTICS AT IMPs AND RUBBER BRIDGE

This section mainly covers tactics at IMPs, since it's easier to analyse possible results on a single hand, rather than a series of hands that make up a rubber. In practice, tactics at Rubber Bridge are generally quite similar.

At IMPs the philosophy is quite simple: large swings are more important than small swings. This is particularly relevant when playing a contract: the important thing is to make the contract, rather than worry about overtricks.

For example, suppose that declarer at a 3NT contract has the choice between playing safe for his contract, or trying for an overtrick and sometimes going down in the process. If the declaring side is non-vulnerable, the possible scores are as follows:

3NT made exactly: +400

3NT made with an overtrick: +430

3NT going one down: -50

Taking a successful risk for an overtrick therefore gains 30 points, which converts to a swing of 1 IMP. But going down would lose 450 points, or a swing of 10 IMP. The difference is even greater when vulnerable. Thus a declarer at IMP should concentrate on making the contract and only try for overtricks when the contract itself is secure.

TACTICS AT MATCHPOINTS

At matchpoints the philosophy is somewhat different: small swings are just as important as big swings. This is particularly relevant when playing a contract: overtricks are often as important as making the contract itself.

Let's consider the 3NT contract covered in the above section. Taking a successful risk for an overtrick therefore gains 2 matchpoints in relation to each other declarer that plays safe for his contract. But going down simply loses 2 matchpoints per declarer. Thus a declarer at matchpoints should consider overtricks from the outset and should normally be prepared to take moderate risks to achieve them.

Matchpoint scoring also changes the approach in competitive situations. If the opponents bid up to the 2 level and then pass, it's often worth competing in an attempt to push them higher, or perhaps to make a contract of one's own. Also, losing 50 or 100 points instead of 110 or more for an opposing partscore can be worth a lot of matchpoints, whereas there would be no significant swing at IMP.

The opponents can often counter by doubling for penalties, since scoring 200 or 300 instead of 100 makes a big difference at matchpoints. If the contract makes it's just one bad result, whereas at IMP it's quite costly to double the opponents into game.

Another difference at matchpoints is that minor suit contracts are played less frequently, especially at game level. Making 5♣ or 5♦ (even with an overtrick) will generally score very few matchpoints if 10 or more tricks are available at NT. Even at the partscore level a contract of 2NT scores more than 3♣ or 3♦ (assuming that all contracts make exactly), although the minor suit contract is often safer.

Matchpoint tactics are more difficult than IMP tactics and the above provides only an outline of some common situations. The main points are:

- Be prepared to be aggressive in competitive situations;
- Don't neglect the possibility of making overtricks.