

Butler Pairs Scoring

IMP Scoring for Pairs Competitions

Team competitions are typically scored using the **International Match Points** method (IMPs). Most bridge players like IMP scoring, since it gives proper reward for bidding and making game and slam contracts. A method of scoring pairs competitions using IMPs was invented and promoted by the British Bridge League, under the chairmanship of Geoffrey Butler, some 50 years ago, and is usually referred to as the "**Butler Scoring Method**".

Before we look at how the Butler Scoring Method works, I would like to remind you of how the usual method of scoring duplicate pairs competitions operates.

Standard "Matchpoint" Scoring Method for Pairs Competitions

Club bridge players will be familiar with the scoring system generally used in pairs competitions. For each board, the score achieved at each table is placed in ranking order and the pairs playing the board are given 2 matchpoints for every pair whose score they have beaten and 1 matchpoint for every pair whose score they have equalled.

This "matchpoint" scoring method (often abbreviated to "MP") has the property that beating another pair's score by 10 points brings no greater benefit than beating that pair's score by 500 points. There is nothing defective about the MP scoring method per se, but it does lead to an excessive need to take a risk of going down in a contract than can be made safely in an effort to obtain the maximum score.

The "IMP" or "Butler" Scoring Method for Pairs Competitions

It is possible to use the IMP scoring system for pairs competitions. The simplest and most popular is the Butler method.

For each board:

- A "datum" score is computed from the set of the scores by discarding the highest and lowest scores and retaining the rest. If there is more than one instance of the highest (or lowest) score, one of these is discarded and the other(s) retained. The datum is the arithmetic mean of all of the retained scores rounded to the nearest 10 points.
- For each pair (including those pairs whose scores were discarded from

the datum calculation), a net score is calculated by taking the pair's score for the board and subtracting the datum score. This score, positive or negative, is converted to IMPs according to the IMP table. Each of the pairs scores that number of IMPs for the board, one pair getting the positive score and the other the negative score.

This procedure is executed for every board, and each pair's total IMP score across all of the boards is computed. The winner (E/W and N/S) is the pair with the overall highest total of IMPs .

An example is shown below using scores from WSBC.

September 24th Board No 25 E/W Vul Dealer North											
Butler Datum -300 (average 650 170 170 200)/4											
Pairs			Contract			Scores		IMPs		MatchPoints	
N/S		E/W	Bid	By	Tricks	N/S	E/W	N/S	E/W	N/S	E/W
3		26	4♠	W	11		650	-8	8	2	8
5		21	1♠	W	10		170	4	-4	7	3
6		23	6NT	E	12		1440	-15	15	0	10
7		25	3NT	W	8	100		9	-9	10	0
8		27	3♠	W	10		170	4	-4	7	3
9		29	1♠	W	11		200	3	3	4	6

Advantages of the Butler Scoring Method

Using the Butler Scoring Method makes it appropriate for pairs to employ essentially the same tactics that they would use in a IMP team competition. Namely:

- Overtricks are worth a maximum of 1 IMP each, and may possibly not gain anything (depending on the datum level). It is tactically unsound to risk going down in a contract that can be made safely in an attempt to score an overtrick.
- The 10 point premium for playing in no trump is insignificant at IMP scoring. Playing in 4♠, scoring 420 points, will not lose to those playing in 3NT+1, scoring 430 points.
- Minor suit game contracts should be attempted whenever the 11 trick contract is safer than 3NT. You will tie with those making 9 tricks in 3NT (the same as when using MP scoring). The loss to those pairs making 10 tricks in 3NT will be small, unlike at MP scoring. On the other hand your gain, when the minor suit game makes and 3NT

fails, will be huge.

- Pairs should be more prepared to bid close game contracts than they would be under MP scoring. A close vulnerable game contract will score, say, 620 when it succeeds and lose 100 when it fails. Compare that with the safe part-score of 170 or 140 and the gain is $620 - 170 = 450$ (+10 IMPs) when game succeeds (10 tricks) against a loss of $140 + 100 = 240$ (-6 IMPs) when it fails (9 tricks). You will come out ahead in the long run even if game succeeds only 40% of the time, since 40% of 10 IMPs is 4 IMPs but 60% of -6 IMPs is only -3.6 IMPs.

The majority of bridge players find IMP scoring leads to a more interesting game of bridge. Playing Butler Scoring also has the advantage of giving club players practice at using the correct IMP tactics that will be necessary when they represent the club in a match.

Facts about the Butler Scoring Method

The overall total of IMPs for any competition must be zero, since every time a pair gains IMPs their opponents will have lost the same number of IMPs.

In a two winner movement, the total IMPs for the NS pairs and the total IMPs for the EW pairs need not be zero. However, the total IMPs for all of the NS pairs will be equal but opposite to the total IMPs for all of the EW pairs.

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