



Andrew Kambites

# Concentration, Concentration, Concentration

WHY do you play bridge? For some readers their priority is a social night out, which is a very sensible reason. However, I suspect that most of you, even if you have no ambitions to be a world-beater, would like to play well at your own standard and to fulfil your potential. To do this, we need to analyse types of errors and decide what can be done about them.

Have a look at this deal:

♠ A 8 7 2	♠ K 9 4
♥ K 8 5	♥ A 7 3
♦ 8 2	♦ K
♣ A J 10 5	♣ K 9 6 4 3 2

<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
1NT	2♥	3NT	All Pass

North led the four of diamonds. Declarer breathed a sigh of relief when dummy's king of diamonds won, quickly played a club to his ace of clubs and went one down when North showed out.

Can you see what happened?

Having overcome the first hurdle when dummy's diamond king won, declarer didn't mentally readjust. If he had re-tuned his mind, his thought processes would have been clear. North has overcalled in

hearts and shown length in diamonds. (North-South were not playing two-suited overcalls to 1NT). Clubs are likely to break 2-1, but if anybody has three it will surely be South. Therefore declarer should start with dummy's king of clubs, allowing him to take a marked finesse against South's ♣Q-8-7. Too much elation when the king of diamonds won, followed by too little subsequent concentration!

## Experience and errors

All of us make some unavoidable errors. I believe strongly that most things we get right, particularly at card play, come from pattern recognition. When a beginner first sees dummy he can be overwhelmed. It is probably pointless expecting him to count winners and losers, preserve entries and a million and one other things. If he even tried to do this, he would slow the game down to the point of serious disruption, and totally exhaust himself.

Learning bridge is like learning a foreign language: having to think about everything you do it is hard work and you do it badly. With experience you start to do the right things naturally and effortlessly. Even very experienced players still encounter new situations and are likely to get them wrong. *Unavoidable errors should be accepted as part of the learning process. The problem isn't that you get it wrong; the problem is that it preys on your mind and leads to avoidable errors on the next hand.*

## Avoidable errors

So if we cannot prevent unavoidable errors, we must clearly focus our attention

on *avoidable errors*, caused by lack of concentration, poor temperament etc. Any loss of concentration during play is off-putting. For example, I lead the two of clubs against 3NT. Dummy wins with the ace of clubs. Partner and declarer play, the cards are turned over quickly and declarer quickly calls for a card to trick two, but I become aware that I didn't notice partner's card. I feel uneasy for the rest of the defence. Even if partner's signal turns out to be inconsequential, I feel disorientated. So how can we avoid this type of error?

## How to avoid avoidable errors

You need to analyse when your concentration is liable to waver, e.g.

- A. **External Factors**  
Noise or temperature.  
Opponents, e.g. you don't like them.
- B. **Internal Factors** (many of these involve emotions)
  1. *Fatigue*. Sometimes unavoidable, but you do need to play at a pace and level that is sustainable for the whole session. Players who try to work out every last detail at a snail's pace at the beginning of an evening but are totally exhausted at the end are not helping themselves.
  2. *Anxiety*. How will partner or team-mates react to your -1100? Good team spirit and partnership morale will help this. Anxiety brings on fatigue later in the day.
  3. *Frustration* with partner's error, team-mates' poor performance, a perceived poor TD ruling, bad luck (opponents making a grand slam on three finesses). Note that the factors are external, but the problem is internal. It is not the event that is the problem, it is your reaction to it.
  4. *Elation*, as seen by my opening example.
  5. *Complacency*. You have had seven good boards. That is not an excuse to relax and chuck 13

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IMPS on the eighth.

6. *Thinking about a previous hand:* 'Could I have made that 4♠ contract?'
7. In a long match or session, by far the most common times for a concentration lapse are the first board (when you haven't yet settled) and the last board (when you are mentally winding down).

**Key Principle: It is the bridge player's reaction to the problem that determines whether concentration will be lost, not the problem itself.**

*The chances of a consistent performance are maximised by using a consistent pre-performance set of behaviours, called Performance Routines.*

There are two types of performance routines:

1. *Pre-session routines.* I like to arrive early and spend at least five minutes sitting quietly, thinking about nothing. There is nothing more damaging than cutting it fine, fuming that every set of traffic lights are red, and then frantically looking for an elusive parking space.
2. *Pre-hand routines,* involving attention cues (see below).

**Fact: Total continuous concentration is impossible; for most people twenty minutes is probably the limit.**

Bridge players need to have ways of relaxing at convenient points (maybe you are dummy or at the end of a hand) and then ways of switching on concentration at the start of the next hand. These are called *Attention Cues*.

Possible attention cues for bridge players include:

1. *Physical,* e.g. take a deep breath.
2. *Verbal,* e.g. say a word silently (such as 'Concentrate' or 'Focus').
3. *Visual,* e.g. focus intensely on something specific in your environment.

*At the bridge table, you should never start a hand until the previous hand (whether a good or bad result) is consigned to the recycling bin of your mind.* Ideally, emotions (elation, depression, frustration) should

play no part in bridge. Your attitude to Board 2 should be the same, independent of whether Board 1 was +1700 or -1700.

### Useful Rituals

*Partnerships should have rituals to signify that a hand is finished.* One possibility is that when one player takes out the hand for the next board, it is a sign that all discussion or thought of the previous board is finished.

My partner and I feel that sometimes a brief 'clearing of the air' helps us settle after a particularly unsuccessful result. Suppose one player takes an action that goes horribly wrong. He can say:

1. 'Sorry. That was stupid/my fault,' or:
2. 'My reason for this action was . . . ' or:
3. 'I did have a reason for this. There is not time to explain now but I will explain later.' Very often there is not time to explain at the table and a player needs to be confident that his partner is not being judgmental without knowing the facts.

If you doubt the effectiveness of this psychological approach, bear in mind that many top sports players pay a lot of money to sports psychologists to help maximise their performances. Some of the

seemingly slightly eccentric actions we see from top sportsmen are performance routines to ensure that every time they play a shot, take a free kick, etc. they have exactly the same mindset, free of distractions. For example:

1. Rugby Union star Jonny Wilkinson's routine of hand-clasping before taking a penalty kick.
2. Snooker players who are disturbed by a noise in the crowd, walk away from the table and start their pre-shot ritual over again.
3. Cricketers who reach a century and take a new guard as a cue to regain concentration and start again.

Sometimes we have seen just how seriously this can be taken. In the 2003 World Athletics Championships two athletes were disqualified in the men's 100 metres sprint under new rules which judge false starts by a computer measure of their reaction times on the starting blocks rather than whether they have crossed the starting line. Every time the officials tried to restart the race, the crowd jeered and hissed. The most experienced remaining athlete would not start under those conditions, and repeatedly walked away from the starting blocks, delaying the start by over thirty minutes. □



IN our Daily Match-Points Room, as in most of our club competitions, sixteen boards put you on the leader board. I can just about manage that – sitting at my computer and 'resting' in the middle for about an hour to walk the dogs.

At our Hinckley Congress in January more boards than that were played, so I struggled and envied everyone else's stamina, especially the winners': *Corby Cup:* LindseyC (Lindsey Clark) and Gary\_C (Gary Conrad); *Bears Teams:* Lindylou (Linda Quigley), Hi John (John Golding), Mary Poppins (Mike Elliot) and Fibonacci (Rikki Kittel); *Bridge Club Live Pairs:* Andrew.www (Andrew Worth) and Maggie (Maggie Eaton).

Back online, the 2008 season is well under way. Alongside the regular Daily Play in many rooms of the club, the Competitions programme has something for

everyone: Indies, Pairs, Teams, Girls v Boys, MPs, IMPs, Ladders, Knock-outs.



*L-R: Mary Poppins, Lindylou, Fibonacci, High John*

Our less experienced players are also assured of competitions and help on a regular basis. Each week there is a Pairs Tourney for Improvers and two sessions of Supervised Practice where experienced players 'mentor' some of the less confident.

So there are lots of reasons to visit us at [www.bridgeclublive.com](http://www.bridgeclublive.com). See you soon, I hope!

*Fran Bramzel*