

## Managing Internal Distractions

Occasionally in bridge you play against one of those pairs whose bidding style might be described as optimistic. They push for every marginal game and slam. You just hope that today isn't going to be one of those day's when all the marginal games and slams come home. Recently I sat down in a team's match to play against one such pair and one of the opponents said to me "I don't want you using any of that voodoo magic against me tonight".

Well clearly on this board any voodoo magic around was on their side as they reached the cold slam on this hand without any cue bidding. North jumped to slam over his partner's sign-off expressing annoyance that partner had clearly forgotten the system because he hadn't cued anything!

Dealer: South

Vulnerable: N-S

	♠ K875	
	♥ A8	
	♦ K9	
	♣ A8643	
♠ J6		♠ Q2
♥ QJ5		♥ K107432
♦ QJ8754		♦ 2
♣ 107		♣ QJ95
	♠ A10943	
	♥ 96	
	♦ A1063	
	♣ K2	

South	West	North	East
1S	Pass	2C	Pass
2D	Pass	2H <sup>1</sup>	Pass
2S <sup>2</sup>	Pass	3S <sup>3</sup>	Pass
4S <sup>4</sup>	Pass	6S	All Pass

- 1 – Fourth suit forcing to game
- 2 – Minimum hand, no heart stop
- 3 – Slam Try
- 4 – Not interested

In the 9-board per match format of the event, a making slam bid which most would not reach will often be the decisive board in determining the outcome in the match. It would be easy to allow the result on a hand like this to distract you from focussing properly on the remaining boards in the set.

We often see players at the table thinking about the hand that has just gone. With their thoughts distracted by what just occurred a player will often do something silly like bid, lead out of turn, misplay or mis-defend the next hand because they are not concentrating properly on the task at hand.

But the result on a board just played isn't the only kind of internal distraction we are faced with when playing bridge. Other types of internal distractions which might arise and preoccupy your thoughts include:

- you have made an error, or perceive you have made an error;
- your partner has made an error, e.g. a revoke, dropped a card, underbid, etc., and this error is occupying your thoughts;
- the opponents have made a contract you "think" you should have defeated;
- you are physically tired or unwell;
- you have something on your mind from work or an event that happened earlier in the day;
- and so on....

Learning how to deal with distractions like these and to refocus when and if they occur is an important skill to have in your 'mental toolbox'. Just like we practice bidding and card play, we can also think about and prepare for what we will do when one of these events occur, particularly if we know we have performed poorly in the past in these circumstances.

In my competitive sporting days, identifying incidents which might happen during a match and preparing mentally how to deal with them if and when they occurred was equally as important as practicing the technical aspects of the sport itself.

Considering the answers to some key questions will help you to manage this type of internal distraction at the bridge table and help prevent one error from becoming several. For example:

*What can go wrong during play?*

The opponents have just made a slam which you know you have mis-defended and you think this is going to mean you will have a bad score for your side.

*How will I react?*

When this type of event has happened in the past, I know I sometimes lose concentration while thinking about what I should have done differently and this can be costly on the next board.

*What can I do to limit the potential damage?*

I will make a note on my scoresheet about the board as a reminder to think about it later. I will refocus by taking a deep breath and I will say to myself a focussing word like "concentrate" or "next board".

Refocussing the mind so we can concentrate on the current hand is an important mental skill. While some players can refocus effortlessly, others need a tactic to assist them. Using the above method to work out your tactics in these circumstances will assist you with managing internal distractions at the bridge table.

And if you are wondering how we did against the 'optimistic' pair? Well their optimism continued and they gave back most of the slam bonus so consequently we ended up losing the match by two – not a bad outcome when all things were considered.

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