

Australian Team Performance:

by Matthew Thomson

I believe mental readiness, that is executing at the table, is an area for improvement.

1. Are you motivated to succeed? or to avoid failure? Many bridge players, gravitate towards avoiding failure, especially under pressure.
2. Tired? Pain and tiredness will not affect your performance when intense focus is engaged. Bridge players use tiredness as an excuse for mistakes and to circumvent the pain of potential failure, there is no such excuse. Accept your mistakes then commit to train to address - this is difficult for many naturally egotistical bridge players. (To play more is not the answer). Bridge players also use "tiredness" as an out, they do not want to accept the responsibility of potentially playing and failing - leave it to the others in the Team. Yes, it may be best to play the "others", but any serious bridge player who thinks like this needs to develop their mental game.
3. Distraction Control, any bridge player who complains they can't fully concentrate because of a competing noise or activity, requires development. They need to practice staying connected, staying focused. Reacting to a distraction, or reacting to anything outside your control or influence, indicates a wavering of concentration and most likely a wavering of self-belief/confidence.
4. If you are fully prepared, in all senses, there is no pressure, just focused, single-minded concentration on the task. However, we all must be aware of the greatest fear; to do our very best and then not to win. And if we start to entertain these thoughts (we will not win), our very best will never happen.

In the Playoffs there were actions and plays, bids and non-bids made that I would consider as out of character for the players involved. Critically, these "lapses" must be addressed. If these players were playing in a "normal" game, these errors/mis-judgments would not have occurred. Elimination of self-doubt and removal of the thoughts of what could go wrong is a good start - but this doesn't just happen, it needs to be practiced.

For me, I'm very clear in my mind of how I will react at the bridge table when under pressure. I have visualized many scenarios, and spent a lot of time processing this in my head beforehand. It just doesn't all happen at the table, we need to be prepared. I don't always get it right.

I encourage you to make a plan of what you will do - starting from spending as much time thinking about and developing your game, as you do playing. Yes, you can work on this with your partner but it is very individual, it's how you execute at the table in all situations - it's up to you.

I provide two supporting documents.

1. "Gamers - long term winners - Your challenge is to apply to yourself". These are notes I made from the books I have read of this topic.

- "The Guy in the Glass". This to me is a poignant bridge player. Somebody who never excuses themselves for not performing their best, and ensures they walk out knowing they gave it their best shot - whatever the result. It's not about what others think.

As this is very individual, a group discussion is not best. If anyone, maybe with your partner, would like to sit down and work through, confidentially from your perspective, I'd be happy to do it over a coffee. Let me know.

Examples:

I was looking back at a SF we won at the NOT in 2012, we were playing Ish-Ash at our table, with Lall-Grue at the other table and we were 21 imps down going into the last set. Needless to say, I think Peter Newman and I were the only ones who truly thought we were going to win. Early in the Set:

Ash	Ish	
1NT: (2♣) :	X :	(2♥)
p :	(p) :	?

All vul, you hold: ♠ QJ732, ♥ 7, ♦ K5, ♣ A10876.
Two clubs showed both majors, 1NT=15-17.

What do you do?

X is takeout, 2♠ and 3♣ are forcing and natural.

Answer:

Fall back on your bidding principles, do what you do in similar situations, do not try to work out all the "what ifs". Follow your partnership principles and do what you would do in an everyday game. This takes all the pressure away and clears the head. I doubled (knowing that PN would almost certainly pass) because that's "how I always bid", worrying whether it may be plus 200 and we have 600 available needs to be eliminated. Result +1400. The more you think through and visualise such situations as part of your preparation the better equipped you'll be.

A few boards later:

Ash	Ish	
	(1♣)	
1♠ :	(2♥) :	?

Nil vul, you hold: ♠ Q984, ♥ K87, ♦ 10, ♣ 107542.

I bid 4♠ without any "table thought" because I knew with this type of hand, due to my prior thinking, I'm always bidding 4♠ in this type of situation. Bidding 4♠ is nothing "special" but you have an edge if you do it totally relaxed and in tempo.

Ish now bid 5♥ on: ♠ 5, ♥ T943, ♦ QJ86, ♣ AKJ3 and we won 11 imps.

Bidding 5♥ was not a good bid, but I believe the ease that I bid 4♠ probably contributed to his choice.

Similarly going into the last set of the 2017 quarter final against Lavazza we were 25 imps down. I truly thought we would win, and we probably would have if not for a 3-3 break that earned them a slam swing. We lost, but I walked away happy,

knowing I gave it my best shot.

Look at the last set in the 2017 NOT final, Milner made three clearly uncharacteristic errors, Lavazza didn't make any such errors. Lavazza won.

Other Opportunities for Thought and Preparation:

Table Presence: Think how you want to be viewed. Watch others closely, observe everything, especially the tempos.

Be aware of your screenmate, often as there is a screen in place (and as their partner cannot see them) they give out lots of information.

When the bidding tray comes through, be acutely aware of any reaction from your screenmate, what's actually on the bidding tray comes second. Similarly, be acutely aware of any reaction from declarer when they first see dummy, seeing dummy comes second.

Thinking: When a good player thinks, think what they are thinking about, visualise their problem - this takes discipline. Try to do all your thinking when others are thinking, minimise the time you actually take to think when it's your turn. This takes the pressure off you and builds your table presence.