

## The Mental Game - Segmenting Performance

In an earlier article, I spoke about competitors make errors when performing well in competition because they become anxious or nervous due to their performance exceeding their expectations. They get outside what's known as their comfort zone (see ABF Journal July 2014). One way to enhance this anxiety is to spend a lot of time looking at the scoreboard between rounds. This is guaranteed to make you start thinking about the outcome - winning, rather than the task at hand - making or defending this contract, bidding according to your system, and so on. Some players have no problem knowing how they are performing, and many thrive on it lifting their performance when they have a chance to win. If you are not one of those players, and your history is that you "choke" or make mistakes when the pressure is on, then one tactic that can be tried in matches, apart from avoiding looking at your score all the time, is to segment your performance and set segment goals.

Segmenting performance makes a player focus on achievable goals, rather than the overall outcome. In shooting my match could be broken into parts and it was quite easy for me to set segment goals. For example a match was 60 shots so it was broken into 10 shot segments with a goal for each segment which concentrated on technical factors. How would this type of methodology translate into application at bridge?

Most of our bridge competitions are made up of multiple segments. For example:

- a one day Swiss Pairs or Teams event might be 7 x 8 board matches or similar. Each match is a segment.
- A competition at your club might be made up of 2 x 14 board rounds per day or night for 3 weeks.
- A duplicate game consists of 2, 3 or 4 boards against each pair of opponents.

Whilst the overall goal is to win the day, setting sub-goals for each segment and achieving these sub-goals can assist in achieving the overall goal of a good performance. In duplicate pairs a score based goal in every segment would be as simple as getting a plus score on every board. Even if the opponents have the cards their way, a "plus" could still be to ensure the overtricks are kept to a minimum or even defeating a contract through careful defence or subterfuge by making an unexpected lead or play. Endeavouring to play consistent bridge is always the objective, however, generally segment goals comprise a combination of factors which may include this score goal, but more importantly include some technique goal(s), a personal improvement goal, and so on. Hence the segment goals may become:

- get a plus score on every board; or
- count the hand out before playing to trick one; or
- no chatting about the hand after the play; or .....

Let's consider the segment goal "counting the hand before playing to trick one". For a basic level player this could mean thinking about the opening lead before you play to trick one, and trying to count that suit before playing - think about what is in the leader's hand, what is in your hand, what is in dummy, what is in the 4th player's hand. For an intermediate player, counting can advance to considering the shape of the whole hand based on the lead, what you can see of dummy and the bidding. This thinking could then advance to also thinking about what inferences can be drawn from this lead, as opposed to some other lead that might have been made. Throughout the hand continuing to consider what card is played, and by deduction what this implies continues the focus on this segment goal. Occupying the mind with a technical aspect like counting the hand decreases the likelihood that anxiety through thoughts about scores & winning will have an effect on performance during the match. Eventually this approach to each hand becomes automatic, and the segment goals will be redefined over time. Throughout the day, a different goal can be used in each segment, so the player's focus remains sharp.

Players should set goals that help their particular performance objectives. The best players know when a contract should or shouldn't have been made immediately, but some less experienced players don't always know this until they see the hand record. There is a temptation to become distracted by the thought that a contract should have been bid or made, or a particular defense employed - whether or not it is true. It is also easy to get distracted in a segment of the match by the perception that the cards aren't running your way and it doesn't matter what you do, you have no chance.. Staying away from the scoreboard and thoughts about your placing or winning and keeping your mind on segment goals can improve concentration and performance to ensure your results are the best they can be.

Thanks as always to David Morgan for his insights in this article.