

MATCHPOINT DEFENSE



By the author of *Thinking on Defense*

JIM PRIEBE

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*Countless thanks to my wife, Joan,
for her help in preparing this
manuscript.*

“As you learn more and more insight into the ways of the game, you will realize that the hard part is applying the correct snippet at the appropriate moment.”

Phillip Alder, writing in the *Toronto Sun*

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“It is agreed by nearly all experts that defense is the most difficult part of the game. If good defense is difficult at rubber bridge or IMPs, at matchpoints it is nearly impossible. In addition to the other handicaps faced by the defenders, at matchpoints they often don’t even know what their objective is.”

Kit Woolsey in *Partnership Defense*

Matchpoint bridge is an intriguing blend of technical and psychological problems. Every session of matchpoints yields a satisfying crop of intricate plays and an assortment of subjective maneuvers. On average, we defend half the deals we encounter, declare one quarter and spend another quarter as dummy. What better opportunity could we find for improving our results than looking to our defensive skills?

Successful defense requires above all attention to detail. Brilliant plays are there, but only on one deal in a thousand. Busting squeezes, breaking up endplays, derailing trump coups all make the headlines. When they occur, they provide opportunities to win points. They do not come up often. The bulk of defensive opportunities come on bread and butter deals, where a player watches the spots, processes all of the clues available, considers some alternatives and makes a good play. When we complain that we had very few cards East-West and couldn't do anything, we are really saying that the best defensive players won that session.

It helps to have a mental database of tactical maneuvers at the ready. One cannot work out every defensive problem from first principles and the ability to apply tactical insights both speeds up play and makes it more accurate.

Two important aspects of the matchpoint game differentiate it from other forms of bridge and are worthy of special attention.

Every Trick Matters

Signals, lead methods, counting and thinking in general are common to both forms of the game. At IMPs, the setting trick is all important. Playing matchpoints, defenders can never relax. With few exceptions, every trick is important, not just the setting trick. One can never assume that the defensive problem of the moment is routine. A single deal may account for as much as four percent of a session's work. A lapse in concentration may send these points to the opposition and ruin an otherwise good effort.

The Field is Uneven

In a pairs game we change opposition every two or three deals. As we move through the field, we find a remarkable difference in the skill levels of our opponents. This is true even in a national championship event. National champions, world champions, social players and all levels in between make up the field we encounter. A game at our local club will pit us against a blend of real experts, beginners and solid players. Declarer play is often imperfect. Even the best declarers slip on occasion. Mistakes and misguesses are a rich source of matchpoints for capable defenders.

In games at our regular club and in many tournaments we know our opponents. We can judge the quality of the bidding with some accuracy — we know the players who bid forever and the very timid bidders — but there is still considerable guesswork involved. Even when we know our opponents well, we can never be quite sure of their state of mind. An expert pair who has had a couple of poor results may decide to shoot for the remainder of a session and gamble all of the matchpoints on certain deals. A beginner may do this unknowingly. We must constantly make judgments on our objective: Should we defend aggressively or passively? Are we trying to set the contract or prevent overtricks? These judgments are based on our assessment as to whether a contract is sound and normal, a wild fling or something in between.

The deals I present in this book are all from actual games. The standard of declarer play and the bidding is what you might find in any actual duplicate game: a mix of world champions, national champions and enthusiasts of varying ability.

MATCHPOINT DEFENSE

In a twenty-six board duplicate game, each deal counts for close to 4% of a session's work. The following table summarizes the findings from data I compiled from a National Life Master Pairs, as well as several years' worth of deals from world-wide pairs contests. The conclusions were the same, albeit with large variance.

CONTRACT	DEFENSIVE RESULT	IMPACT ON SESSION SCORE
Partscore	One overtrick	1 percent
	Set	2 percent
Game	One overtrick	1 percent
	Set	2 percent
Slam	One overtrick	1 percent
	Set	4 percent
Doubled	One overtrick	Negligible
	Set	3-4 percent

What this table tells you is that every overtrick you deny to your opponent will improve your score by one percent in a session. Secondly, if you set a contract, you get a rich reward, especially if the contract is a slam or a doubled contract. Finally, the chart reinforces a point that we all know: if we double them, we had better set them.

Throughout the book, where actual matchpoint records were available, I have shown the score that different results would have achieved.

THE HEART OF
MATCHPOINT DEFENSE

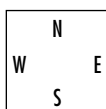
Good matchpoint defenders routinely ask two questions as soon as dummy hits the table.

Is this a normal contract?

Is there hope of setting it or are we playing to prevent overtricks?

Let's start with an abnormal contract. You are East.

♠ 8 2
♥ 9 5 4
♦ A J 9 7 2
♣ Q 4 2



♠ 7 6 5
♥ K 10 8 6 2
♦ 10 8 4
♣ A 6

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1NT
pass	2NT	pass	3NT
all pass			

West leads the ten of spades and declarer's jack wins the first trick. As soon as dummy is spread, it is clear that few North-South pairs in the field will reach this contract. Not only that, but it appears that the opening lead has cost a trick. You are headed for zero matchpoints if this contract makes. Overtricks are of no consequence.

SCORE MORE MATCHPOINTS

Yes, defending is hard, but we defend half the deals we play. And at matchpoints, where every trick counts, the consequences of inaccuracy can be severe. In this book, Jim Priebe (the author of *Thinking on Defense*) shows how to approach defending at matchpoints, as opposed to other forms of scoring. The key aspects of matchpoint defense are all covered, from choosing the opening lead to knowing when to give up on defeating the contract and cash out.

Praise for *Thinking on Defense*

"First books by unknown authors are often unappreciated by the bridge community, but it would be a mistake to pass this one up.

Invest some time and effort and read what Jim has to say!"

Eric Kokish

"This super book does just what the title suggests, as it shows you what to think about, and how to organize your thoughts when defending a hand."

BRIDGE Magazine



JIM PRIEBE (Toronto) divides his time between bridge, writing and golf. He won the Canadian Teams Championship in 2004 and represented Canada in the Istanbul Olympiad later that year. His previous books are *Thinking on Defense* and *Takeout Double*, a murder mystery with a bridge background.



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