



David Bird

**52 BRIDGE
MISTAKES TO
AVOID**

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Introduction

Why are the world's top players so successful? They spend a long time building and remembering their complex bidding systems. They acquire a host of cardplay and defensive techniques. They have also played many thousands of deals and feel they have 'been there before' when facing some tricky situation.

There is another reason for their success. They make many fewer basic mistakes! Players at a less exalted level tend to make the same mistakes over and over again throughout their bridge careers. In this book we will see many of the most frequently made mistakes – in the bidding, play and defense. Each type of mistake will be illustrated by several deals where the original player went wrong. Every chapter will end with some Tips, to help you to avoid making such errors yourself.

In the first section, Mistakes in the Bidding, I have used deals from high-level tournament play, including world championships. I watch a lot of top-class bridge, commentating on Bridge Base Online. The cardplay and the defense are usually excellent but it's amazing how often the players surprise the kibitzers with a bid or call that seems to be a clear mistake. Experts make such errors less often than the rest of us but I think you will find it instructive to look at these wayward decisions. Try to analyze why the bid was wrong before reading my own thoughts on the matter. I do not name the famous players involved because this would add nothing to the instructive value. However, I will specify the match or tournament to add authenticity. When it comes to declarer play and defense, expert mistakes are rarer. Most of the time I will illustrate the various mistakes with constructed deals, or deals from a lower level of play.

The more of these 52 common mistakes you can remove from your game, the better your results will be. Mind you, it's just possible that someone out there will finish the book and think: 'Well, I'd never make any of those mistakes'. If so, I look forward to watching you in the next Bermuda Bowl!

David Bird

This book is dedicated to my fabulous
and ever-tolerant wife for 40 years,
the great Thelma.

PART I

Mistakes in the bidding

Board	Contract	By	Tricks	Score	IMPs
3	5♣X	S	6	1100	15

Mistake 1

Unsound penalty doubles

Judging whether to make a penalty double is not as easy as you may think. In this chapter we will look at some unsuccessful penalty doubles and try to analyze why the player should have known that it was not the right moment for such an action.

We'll begin with a type of double that you will see countless times, particularly in the less experienced reaches of the game:

N-S Vul. Dealer North

	♠ 7 3 2		
	♥ 5		
	♦ A K J 10 7 3 2		
	♣ A 6		
♠ 8 5 ♥ A 10 6 4 ♦ Q 9 6 ♣ K Q 4 3	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> N W E S </div>	♠ K Q 10 9 6 ♥ Q 9 8 3 ♦ — ♣ 10 8 5 2	
	♠ A J 4		
	♥ K J 7 2		
	♦ 8 5 4		
	♣ J 9 7		

West	North	East	South
—	1♦	1♠	1NT
pass	3NT	pass	pass
dbl	all pass		

West, who had resisted doubling 1NT, was very happy to double 3NT on the next round. He led the ♠8 to East's ♠Q, ducked by declarer.

At Trick 2, East switched to the ♥Q in the hope that the defenders might enjoy four tricks there. (This was optimistic after declarer's spade duck at Trick 1.) The queen was covered by the king and ace and West returned a heart, declarer winning with the ♥J. A diamond to the ace revealed the 3-0 break. Declarer finessed the ♠J and took the marked finesse of the ♦J to

bring in that suit. Seven diamonds, two spades, one heart and one club gave him two overtricks and a score of +1150.

‘I had to double after your overcall,’ West exclaimed. ‘I held 11 points!’

We cannot condemn West’s double merely on account of an adverse entry on the score-sheet. We must try to write down a few reasons why he should not have doubled. Think of some yourself before reading my own suggestions.

- North obviously held strong diamonds and West’s ♦Q96 sat under them
- Nothing had forced North-South to bid 3NT. They obviously thought they could make it and West had no surprise for them
- If 3NT went down, it would be a good score for East-West anyway
- South’s spade honors would sit over East’s holding
- An overcall by partner does not promise any defensive strength. West should have paid more attention to the opponents’ bidding.

The next deal comes from the semi-finals of a USA2 under-21 trials.

N-S Vul. Dealer North

	♠ J 5 4 3 2		
	♥ Q 9 4 3 2		
	♦ 10 4		
	♣ 9		
♠ 8 7 6 ♥ K J 10 7 ♦ K Q 9 7 5 ♣ 2	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> N W E S </div>	♠ Q 9 ♥ A ♦ A J 3 2 ♣ Q J 10 8 5 3	
	♠ A K 10		
	♥ 8 6 5		
	♦ 8 6		
	♣ A K 7 6 4		

West	North	East	South
—	pass	1 ♣	pass
1 ♥	pass	2 ♣	pass
pass	2 ♠	3 ♣	dbl
3 ♦	pass	pass	dbl
all pass			

North led the ♣9 against 3♦ doubled. South won with the ♣K and returned

the ♣7. Declarer ruffed with the ♦K and was not pressed thereafter to record three doubled overtricks for +770. What did you make of South's two penalty doubles?

The double of 3♣ would appeal to some, although the risk of a red-suit removal was evident. The subsequent double of 3♦ was... well, I mustn't be rude, particularly as they were juniors. Let's just say that it was poorly judged. North had not been able to overcall 1♠, yet he subsequently contested the part-score with 2♠. What should South make of that? North was likely to hold a shapely hand with very few points. Consequently, there was every chance that one of the opponents would have a singleton spade (not so, in fact). How many clubs did South think were going to stand up against 3♦, when West had pulled the double of 3♣ to 3♦? At most one. So, South was doubling 3♦ with a probable two tricks in his hand, opposite a partner who might have no defense whatsoever.

This was the auction at the other table:

West	North	East	South
	pass	1♣	1NT
dbl	2♣	pass	2♦
dbl	2♥	dbl	2♠
dbl	all pass		

West made a slightly risky double of 1NT. The defenders were then caught in a 'doubling rhythm'. I can't see why East should double 2♥ (which can be made). I certainly don't understand for a moment why West thought he should double 2♠. Had he not already shown his hand to the full? Eight tricks were easily made, for another 670 in the minus column, and the total cost was 16 IMPs.

Let's look at something different, a spectacularly unsuccessful double of a Stayman bid. It comes from a match between England and the Netherlands.

N-S Vul. Dealer West

♠ A J 8	♠ 7 2	♠ 9 6 4 3			
♥ 8 4	♥ A K 6 5	♥ 10 7 3 2			
♦ A 9 8	♦ K 2	♦ 6 5 4 3			
♣ K J 10 8 6	♣ A Q 9 7 5	♣ 2			
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ K Q 10 5				
	♥ Q J 9				
	♦ Q J 10 7				
	♣ 4 3				

West	North	East	South
1♣	1NT	pass	2♣
dbl	rdbl	all pass	

The England West decided he was worth a lead-directing double of South's Stayman bid. North promptly redoubled, to show interest in playing in that contract. Look at the diagram. How many tricks do you think the Netherlands South made?

The ♥8 lead went to the ten and queen. Declarer led a trump, West inserting the ♣10 and dummy's ♣Q winning. When the ♦K was led, West captured immediately and returned his remaining heart. Declarer won with the nine and played two more diamond winners, throwing a spade from dummy. West ruffed the next diamond with the ♣6, overruffed with the ♣7.

These cards remained in play:

♠ A J 8	♠ 7	♠ 9 6 4 3			
♥ —	♥ A K	♥ 3 2			
♦ —	♦ —	♦ —			
♣ K J 8	♣ A 9 5	♣ —			
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ K Q 10 5				
	♥ J				
	♦ —				
	♣ 4				

A spade went to the king and ace. When West returned the ♣K, declarer played the ♣5 from dummy. West could not make another trick, whichever card he returned! He eventually scored the ♦A, the ♠A and only one trump trick from his ♣KJ1086. Declarer made two redoubled overtricks, entering +1560 on his score-card. That was 14 IMPs compared with +630.

It's an amusing story but our purpose here is to examine the penalty double of the Stayman 2♣. Was it simply unlucky or was it a bad double? This is how I see it:

- There was limited value in asking for a club lead, particularly if the opponents ended in a suit contract. West had already bid clubs and his holding was not particularly wonderful.
- The INT overcall warned West that good clubs sat over him.
- There was no little chance that partner could contest in clubs
- Doubling a Stayman bid gives the next player extra options.

The next deal is from a round-of-16 match in the 2014 Spingold:

N-S Vul. Dealer South

	♠ 3							
	♥ J 10 9 7 6 3							
	♦ 8 5 3							
	♣ K J 6							
♠ K Q 10 7	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100px; height: 100px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> </table>		N		W	S	E	♠ 9 8 6 4 2
	N							
W	S	E						
♥ 4		♥ A 5						
♦ K J 10 9 7		♦ A Q 4 2						
♣ A Q 8		♣ 9 3						
	♠ A J 5							
	♥ K Q 8 2							
	♦ 6							
	♣ 10 7 5 4 2							

West	North	East	South
—	—	—	pass
1♦	pass	1♠	dbl
4♠	5♥	5♠	dbl
all pass			

South led the ♦6 to declarer's ace and a trump was played to the king. A heart back to the ace and a second trump saw South rising with the ace. When he switched to a club, declarer rose with the ♣A, drew the last trump and claimed an overtrick for +1050. That was 9 IMPs away compared with

4♠+2 for +680 at the other table.

To avoid making such doubles ourselves, we must sit back and consider exactly why South's final double was a clear-cut mistake. Ponder on the matter before looking at my list.

This is how I see it:

- North held long hearts but insufficient strength to overcall 1♥ (or 2♥). It was clear that he had long hearts and very few points.
- The longer North's hearts were, the less defensive trick potential there was in South's ♥KQ82.
- South's defensive values were no more than his ♠AJ5, which could well be worth only one trick
- North's 5♥ was surely going down, so East's 5♠ was bid to make.
- If East had misjudged and 5♠ was going one down, this would be a good board for North-South anyway.

The next deal arose during an NTU semi-final in China:

Both Vul. Dealer East

	♠ 10 8 6 4 3 2										
	♥ —										
	♦ Q 4 3										
	♣ A 10 5 2										
♠ 9 5	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100px; height: 100px; text-align: center; font-size: 2em;"> <tr> <td></td> <td>N</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>W</td> <td></td> <td>E</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>S</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ J
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ A J 10 5 4 2		♥ K Q 9 7 6									
♦ A J 8		♦ 10 9 6 2									
♣ 9 3		♣ 7 6 4									
	♠ A K Q 7										
	♥ 8 3										
	♦ K 7 5										
	♣ K Q J 8										

West	North	East	South
—	—	pass	1NT
2♥	2♠	3♥	3♠
pass	4♠	pass	pass
dbl	all pass		

An overtrick was easily made, for +990. It was a poor double because the game was freely bid, albeit after an apparent sign-off by North on the first round. The defenders' hearts would be worth little, since an early ruff was likely. West's main defense lay in diamonds and her partner's single heart

raise did not promise anything much in addition. West had no ‘surprise’ for declarer and could expect a good board anyway if 4♠ went down.

The last penalty double to receive our inspection arose in a European Championship match, a good while ago, between England and Finland:

N-S Vul. Dealer South

	♠ A Q 6 3 2					
	♥ 7 6 5 4					
	♦ 6					
	♣ 10 8 6					
♠ 10 4 ♥ A J 9 8 3 ♦ 10 8 7 3 ♣ 9 5	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ K ♥ K Q 10 2 ♦ J 9 5 2 ♣ K Q J 3	
N						
W E						
S						
	♠ J 9 8 7 5					
	♥ —					
	♦ A K Q 4					
	♣ A 7 4 2					

West	North	East	South
—	—	—	1♠
pass	3♠	dbl	pass
4♥	pass	pass	4♠
pass	pass	dbl	all pass

Tony Forrester (South) ruffed the ♥A lead and played a trump to the ace, felling East’s king. He then made the remaining tricks on a cross-ruff. That was three doubled overtricks and an unusual route to the score of +1390.

Why did the Finland East double 4♠? He may have thought it was a sacrifice because Forrester had not bid 4♠ on the previous round. Even on a good hand such as South held, though, there was no need to bid 4♠ immediately when 3♠ had been doubled. If anything, East held less defense than his partner would expect for the original take-out double at quite a high-level. If West did have the hoped-for two defensive tricks, he would have doubled himself. Finally, East’s ♠K was likely to lie under the ace in the South hand (it did not, in fact).

The various penalty doubles we have seen were very poor examples, each with several arguments against them. Most unwise penalty doubles have only one or two pointers against them. If you look back and fix in your mind the sort of reasons why these penalty doubles were unproductive, there is every chance that you won’t make similar doubles yourself. A few of my partners will think I should do the same!

Tips to avoid Mistake 1

(Making unsound penalty doubles)

- Do not double a freely bid game simply because you have a lot of points. The opponents will have distribution to justify their auction.
- Be more inclined to double when you have an unexpected surprise for declarer, such as a bad trump break.
- Do not double on the basis that your partner has overcalled. An overcall does not promise anything much in defense.
- Do not double when you will get a good result anyway if they have overbid and are going one off.

Mistake 2

Unwarranted Gambling

Many points are thrown away by entering the auction at a dangerous time, in the hope that partner will have a fit for you. We are about to see some examples from top-level play. As in the previous chapter, there will be no profit from this exercise unless we try to analyze why the bids were wrong.

The first deal comes from the final stages of the 2014 European Championship, with England facing Norway:

E-W Vul. Dealer North

<p>♠ 8 4 ♥ 6 5 ♦ K 9 5 4 ♣ A K J 7 4</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="margin: 0;">N</p> <p style="margin: 0;">W E</p> <p style="margin: 0;">S</p> </div>	<p>♠ A K Q 10 5 2 ♥ A ♦ A 8 ♣ 9 8 6 3</p>	<p>♠ J 3 ♥ K 10 8 7 3 2 ♦ Q J 10 6 ♣ Q</p>
--	---	---	--

West	North	East	South
—	1♠	pass	pass
2♣	3♠	4♥	pass
pass	dbl	all pass	

The England East went 800 down, losing 14 IMPs against 4♠ two down at the other table. Why was East's 4♥ a mistake? This is how I see it:

- East's suit is weak, with no guarantee of support opposite. The bid is a huge gamble and may be very expensive when vulnerable.
- He has only one card in partner's suit.
- The bid will cause no problems for the opponents.
- If he wanted to bid his hearts, he should have overcalled 2♥ on the first round rather than entering at a high-level.

The next dubious intervention comes from a quarter-final of the 2013 Bermuda Bowl, with Canada sitting East-West against USA1:

N-S Vul. Dealer West

	♠ A K J 10 8		
	♥ K J 8 3		
	♦ 7 5		
	♣ A J		
♠ 7 ♥ A Q 10 9 ♦ 8 6 4 ♣ 9 8 6 5 3	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> N W E S </div>	♠ Q 9 5 4 ♥ 6 5 2 ♦ Q 3 ♣ Q 10 4 2	
	♠ 6 3 2		
	♥ 7 4		
	♦ A K J 10 9 2		
	♣ K 7		

West	North	East	South
pass	1 ♠	pass	2 ♦
2 ♥	dbl	all pass	

What do you make of West's 2♥ overcall? The vulnerability was favorable and he was a passed hand. Yes, but such a risky lead-directing overcall should be considered only at matchpoints, where a heart lead might save an expensive overtrick. As I see it, bidding 2♥ on that hand is a wild gamble at IMPs. The bid may help the opposing declarer to place the cards. It might also lead to an unwarranted sacrifice from your partner if he places you with a more shapely hand, albeit weak in values.

North was able to double for penalties and the contract went five down for 1100. At the other table, North-South bid ambitiously to 6♠ and went three down for a loss of 16 IMPs. They say it is good luck when you have two bad results on the same board. That's because it would have cost more if they had come on separate boards. Wise words, perhaps, but it's the sort of good luck we can all do without.

How often do you hear players say: 'I was only a point or two light? If I'd had another queen, we'd still have gone 800 down and you wouldn't have complained about my bid.' This was one such deal, from a semi-final of the 2014 Grand National Teams in the USA:

N-S Vul. Dealer South

	♠ J 9 7 5										
	♥ A 2										
	♦ K 4 2										
	♣ K 8 7 6										
♠ Q 2	<table style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A K 8 4
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ K J 9 6 5 3		♥ 10									
♦ J 7		♦ A Q 10 3									
♣ A 5 2		♣ Q 9 4 3									
	♠ 10 6 3										
	♥ Q 8 7 4										
	♦ 9 8 6 5										
	♣ J 10										

West	North	East	South
—	—	—	pass
1♥	dbl	rdbl	1♠
pass	pass	dbl	2♦
pass	pass	dbl	all pass

What do you make of North's take-out double, vulnerable against not and facing a passed hand? It was risky, with little to gain and possibly a huge penalty to lose. To make matters worse, North was facing two of game's most vicious tigers – Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell!

South tried his luck in 1♠. When Rodwell doubled this in the East seat, South jumped from the frying pan into the fire, correcting to 2♦. This was also doubled and Meckstroth led the ♠Q, the defenders taking three tricks in the suit. Declarer discarded the ♣10 on a fourth round of spades and West ruffed with the ♦7.

West's ♦J switch was covered by the king and ace. East drew further rounds of trumps with the 10 and queen. He then switched to the ♥10, won with the ace. When declarer called for a low club, East rose with the queen and exited with a low club. Declarer discarded a heart and West won with the ace. He cashed the ♥K and gave East a heart ruff with the ♦3. Declarer scored the ♦9 at Trick 13. With only two tricks before him, he then had to enter -1700 in his scorecard. This cost 15 IMPs compared with 3NT+1 at the other table, where North did not make a take-out double over 1♥.

North's loss on the board is our gain – a valuable warning not to make sub-minimum bids when the possible losses outweigh the possible gains.

We will end with an unwarranted gamble of a different sort. The deal comes from a quarter-final of the 2014 Spingold.

Both Vul. Dealer East

♠ 5 4 3	♠ K J 9 6	♠ A Q 8 2									
♥ A 9 5 4 2	♥ J 10 8 6	♥ K 7 3									
♦ Q	♦ 10 6 4	♦ J 9 8 7 5 2									
♣ Q 6 5 2	♣ K 3	♣ —									
	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center; width: 60px; height: 60px;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table> </div>		N		W		E		S		
	N										
W		E									
	S										
	♠ 10 7										
	♥ Q										
	♦ A K 3										
	♣ A J 10 9 8 7 4										

West	North	East	South
—	—	1♦	2♣
dbl	3♣	3♠	5♣
dbl	all pass		

At the other table South's 2♣ was passed out and eight tricks were made. Here West contested with a negative double and North raised the clubs, expecting at least six clubs opposite. What should South do over East's 3♠?

Bidding 5♣ is too much. Partner didn't bid 2♦ to show a sound raise to 3♣. There are likely to be three quick losers in the majors and a fair chance that you will lose a diamond too. Even if you think 4♥ or 4♠ will be a make, you won't cause any awkward decision for West by leaping to 5♣. He is a passed hand and can hardly be thinking of going to the five-level.

Declarer lost two spades, one heart, one diamond and a club, conceding 800 for 13 IMPs away. Of course it was unlucky to lose so much but when you make an unwarranted gamble, the cards will often let you down.

Tips to avoid mistake 2

(Unwarranted gambling)

- Entering the auction at an unsafe level, on a hand that is not worth very much, may be a thrilling experience. Like climbing an icy peak, it can also be dangerous.
- Bridge is meant to be a game of skill, not a rival attraction to playing roulette. When some flight of fancy goes wrong, this can be upsetting for your partner and your teammates.
- By all means try to make life difficult for the opponents, but draw a sensible limit in this regard.

52 COMMON BRIDGE MISTAKES

Why are the world's top players so successful? They make very few basic mistakes! Players at a less exalted level often make the same mistakes over and over again throughout their bridge careers. In this book you will see 52 of the most frequent mistakes — in bidding, play and defense. The chapter on each mistake will contain several deals where the original player went wrong. It will end with some tips, to help you avoid making such errors yourself.

In the first section, Mistakes in the Bidding, the author has used deals from high-level tournament play, including world championships. The cardplay and the defense in such events are usually excellent but it's amazing how often experts surprise the kibitzers with a bid or call that seems to be a clear mistake. Experts make such errors less often than the rest of us but you will find it instructive to look at these wayward decisions. Try to analyze why the bid was wrong before reading the author's thoughts on the matter. When it comes to declarer play and defense, expert mistakes are rarer. These errors are illustrated with constructed deals, or examples from a lower level of play.

Every time you eradicate one of these 52 common mistakes from your game, your results will improve. Avoid all of them and... who knows what may happen?



DAVID BIRD (Southampton, UK) is the world's most prolific bridge writer, with more than 125 books to his name. The present title is his 50th to be published by Master Point Press. David has regular columns in the *London Evening Standard*, the *ACBL Bridge Bulletin*, *BRIDGE Magazine*, *English Bridge* and other periodicals around the world. He is married with a daughter, a son and two grandchildren.

