



Ask Jerry

Jerry Helms

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Dear Jerry,

As an intermediate player I'm looking for advice on what I can do to improve my overall game at a faster pace. I read the *Bridge Bulletin* cover to cover and try to attend seminars whenever possible. What would you recommend?

MAB

Dear MAB,

"For those players ambitious to improve their contract bidding, I should proffer the following advise: Study card valuation, develop your imagination, rely on your common sense and adopt as few conventions as possible." Leila Hattersly, *Contract Development*, 1928.

This excellent advice from 80 years ago is still applicable today. My personal "advise":

1. **Study the game.** Read books about card play and defense to improve your individual skill. Seek the opinion of experienced players.

In both the *Bridge Bulletin* and *The Bridge World* magazines, there are columns that I believe are particularly useful:

 - "The Bidding Box" and "Challenge the Champs" allow you to see how two pairs would bid a series of hands. Bid these hands either with yourself or (better) with a favorite partner. Review the comments of the pairs and the commentary to see what led to their decisions.
 - "It's Your Call" and "The Master Solvers Club" involve problems that offer an opportunity to view a single hand where you will be called on to make a bidding decision or perhaps choose an opening lead. After your decision, you can see the decisions and comments of a panel of experts. There are often divergent views espoused by the experts, but you get to be inside their heads and see what led to their opinions.

2. **Play as often as you can.** Play with and against the very best players possible. At times this can be damaging to a fragile ego, but if you have the desire and can tough it out, you will be a better player for the experience.

During a matchpoint session, try to guess-timate how well you have done on each hand. A simple way to do this is to use the 4-3-2-1-0 system. If you think you have a top, you get a 4, average, a 2, etc. When the session is over, record your matchpoints, and see how well your estimates fared against reality. If on any given board, you thought you were above average, yet received a near zero, go back over the hand to find out if it was a matter of reaching the wrong contract or perhaps taking fewer tricks than others. By doing this you can determine what areas seem to need the most work. Constantly strive to improve by studying your results rather than ignoring them.

3. **Be a good partner, and your results and enjoyment of the game will prosper.** Bridge, unlike chess, requires cooperation and chemistry. I have never met anyone who plays as well under pressure from a critical partner as they would in a more nurtured environment. In my opinion, players who loudly and frequently berate their partners are insecure. They feel the need to make sure everyone else knows that a particular poor result was not their fault when in fact if they were confident in their own abilities, there would be no need to express them in a negative fashion. A simpler way to express this is: If you can't say something good, say nothing at all.

Thanks for a great question.