

Maintaining Focus

When I competed in my first Commonwealth Games in 1994, I walked into the shooting range on the practice day, and right behind my shooting bay was a TV camera.



Well, some sports people experience TV cameras all the time, but in shooting this was an anomaly. In fact, it would be fair to say that I had never competed anywhere previously that there had been TV coverage. It was fortunate that I had anticipated this type of scenario during my pre-event preparations, and was able to maintain my focus during the match the next day, rather than being distracted by the idea of being on TV.

At bridge, players know that there are going to be all kinds of distractions such as:

- noisy playing areas;
- other players talking about hands;
- bad play;
- bad defence;
- director calls;
- and so on.

Players often allow these distractions or incidents to interfere with their play. Many players will dwell on an incident from their round such as a director ruling, play of a hand, a bidding sequence or poor defence, instead of focussing on the current hand.

In fact, some players become so upset by these distractions, that they misplay or misbid hands because they don't have a means of focussing on the task at hand and blotting out the other stuff. Being able to re-focus on the task at hand is a key mental tool that will enhance your overall performance, and having a plan for what you will do when distractions occur is an integral part of this plan.

Whilst some players are fortunate and could maintain focus during an earthquake, many are not so lucky. Let's consider these distractions as two types.

Type 1 distractions are external to you and are predictable events which happen in nearly every tournament. They include things like:

- director calls to tables nearby;
- someone falling ill;
- loud noises, things being dropped, etc.

Type 1 distractions are those you can and should plan for and work out what you are going to do when they occur.

For example, the players at the next table spill a drink all over the cards, and start creating a ruckus which is distracting for your table.

You may wish to plan to stop play until the activity at the next table calms down, rather than trying to continue, lose concentration, and going off in a game you should make because you cannot concentrate with all the peripheral noise.

I recommend you make a list of all these types of distractions, and have a plan for how you are going to manage them.

So, where something has happened at an adjacent table, planning to say something to the other players at your table like "I'm sorry, but I just can't concentrate with all this going on at the next table. Would you mind if we just wait a moment until things calm down?" is a nice way of letting the opponents know you want to have a short pause in play.

After you make your list of distractions, rehearse in your mind what you will do if each of them occur. Get your partner on side with your strategy too. The idea here is to be prepared so when something does happen you know how to deal with it and it doesn't throw you off your game.

Type 2 distractions are internal to you and include those areas where:

- you have made an error, or perceive you have made an error; or
- your partner has made an error which is on your mind; or
- the opponents have made a contract you "think" you should have defeated; etc.

It is very hard for some players to make their mind let go of these issues, but it is important to be able to do this to play at your optimal level. Some players deal with Type 2 distractions by making a note about the issue, so that they can consider it later. Making a note can have the effect of "giving yourself permission" to let the incident go, and act as a reminder to discuss it later. If this doesn't work for you, and you cannot let an incident go, consider excusing yourself for a bathroom break, to get a drink or some other time-out, so you have a short pause to get over the incident. Each match has ample time for each round, especially at major events, so unless you are exceptionally slow players, there is plenty of time to have a little break to get over a stuff up.

In shooting I had a list of stuff that I had prepared identifying what could go wrong or happen during the event and I mentally rehearsed what I was going to do if such and such happened in competition for

each item on it.

In my opinion, when considering your pre-match preparation in bridge, there are five key questions to ask yourself:

- What can go wrong before I leave home?
- What can go wrong at the event?
- What can go wrong during play?
- How will I react?
- What can I do to limit the potential damage?

Developing strategies to properly manage the answers to these questions will help you to play at your optimal level, and ensure you don't give away imps inadvertently. Working on proper match preparation is a critical part of ensuring your success in competition bridge.

Coaching Cathy at Contract

by David Lusk

Jobs for the Boys (and Girls)

Hi Uncle,

I submit two hands that I have failed on in recent weeks. I seem to be better at working out the dangers on a hand, but some of the details go missing.

Detail #1

♠ Q 10 7 3
♥ K 8 4
♦ J 7
♣ A 9 7 6

♠ K J 8 6 5
♥ A 9 6
♦ K Q 5
♣ 10 8

West doubled my 1♠ opening, but we got to 4♠ anyway. West led ♥2 and I took East's Jack with my Ace. Then I led trumps. West took the Ace and played another heart. Eventually, I lost a trick in each suit. How often do I go one down?

Detail #2

♠ 6 5
♥ K 8 4
♦ 9 6 3
♣ A J 9 6 2

♠ Q 10
♥ A Q J 10 7 3
♦ A 5 2
♣ K 10

This time I was in 4♥, with the other side silent. West led ♦Q, and I won and drew trumps. West showed out

on the second round, so I had to play trumps three times to draw them. Then I played ♣K and ♣10, overtaking with ♣J for a finesse. That lost to ♣Q and the opponents took two diamonds and two spades – two off.

Since you won't accept these as hard luck stories, can you point my feet in the right direction?

Ever Disillusioned, Cathy

Dear Disillusioned,

Sometimes it helps to understand what tasks your winning cards will achieve for you in the play of a hand. High cards are obviously potential tricks, but they can also be playing a stopper role, protecting a danger suit, and they may be required as entries when you need them most.

I hope you counted your winners and losers on the first hand, because you would have done better to address the issue of four potential losers before the first trick, on which you made your first error (sorry).

You will have enough winners on this hand once you establish diamonds but you must address the problem of your four losers first. West has found the best lead for his side, so the problem of a heart loser must be addressed as a matter of priority. Having won the first trick, leading diamonds in time will no doubt solve the problem of a heart loser, as long as nobody trumps the third round. So the plan should have been to win the first trick and lead a diamond. Before we get to that, what are your two heart honours doing for you?

They are obviously stopping hearts for the time being but one of them may be a crucial entry. Let's say you took the first heart in hand (as you did) and then started on diamonds. If you held the first diamond trick and lost the second, you would have been defeated by the opposition's smart play and your own error at trick one. So let's go back to that.

♥A is the only quick entry to your hand and the future winning diamond, so winning the first trick in dummy is required to preserve this function. Now ♦J at trick two, and the defender can hold up if he wishes, but you can continue diamonds and set up your winner. Now when hearts are continued, you can win in hand and play your diamond winner, throwing a heart.

Only after the completion of this mission should you lead trumps. Not only have you averted the heart loser but you have your 10th trick when you trump your third heart in dummy.

On the second hand, the club finesse could have turned out better, but you may have done better to try to ruff out ♣Q.

This is a slightly better chance (♣Qxx or ♣Q doubleton will do) and a much better chance if ♥9 falls early or the hearts are 2-2. Unfortunately, your description of

by Kim Frazer

Maintaining Focus, Part 2

In an earlier article on maintaining focus (May, 2014), I discussed some tactics that could be undertaken to cope with distractions that occur during bridge events.

These distractions could be external - noisy players, director calls, noisy room, etc; or internal to you such as when you have made an error and your mind cannot let that go.

In a later article on Visualisation (January, 2015), I described how mental rehearsal assists athletes in performing their routines.

When I was shooting, I mentally rehearsed every shot I made in practise and competition before firing the shot. The process became automatic, and only took a few seconds each time.

My mental program started after I loaded the rifle. I would run through in my mind the perfect shot sequence that I wanted to perform, then execute it (no pun intended!). At the end of the mental program I would think the word "Ten" and picture the sight centred on the target.

This cue word was the instruction to my mind to focus. After running my mental program and saying the cue word, I was at what is called the *point of initiation*, after which my mind was now focussed on firing the shot and not on anything else. Athletes in all types of sport use this type of process before executing their performance.

How might this type of mental program apply at the bridge table? How do we ensure we maintain focus during a hand? Or if we lose it, how do we regain focus?

I mentioned earlier the use of a cue word in my mental program for shooting. This cue word was a signal to my mind to focus and pay attention to the task at hand. I believe the same tactic could apply in bridge. Here is how I think it could work.

There are two parts to every hand.

- Part one is the bidding.
- Part two is the play, either as declarer or defender.

Between Part one and Part two there is a small break in concentration while you write the contract down on your scoresheet/enter it in the electronic scorer.

Before commencing Part one, you could use a cue word to get your mind on the job at the *point of initiation*. I



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suggest in bridge this is the point just before you take the cards out of the traveller.

The cue word could be anything that works for you, but it should be an action word. Something like *Attention*, *Focus*, *Count* or some other word to get your mind to wake up to the fact you are about to initiate the bidding sequence. The "word" is a signal to your mind to pay attention and stop worrying about distractions around the room, the last hand, etc. Say it every time you are about to pick up your cards to play a hand, and take a deep breath. It also helps if there is a routine to this part of the hand.

For example: *Check I am picking up my seat's cards*, *Count Cards*, *Check who's Dealer*, *Check Vulnerability*, *Sort Cards*; *Count points*; etc. (note this is not an exhaustive list, but it is a basic routine to get your mind on track). Just like an athlete rehearses the jump they are about to make, and I rehearsed the shot I was about to fire, the routine and focussing process will have the most impact if you run it mentally through your mind before saying the cue word and picking up the cards.

When the auction is finished, there is a short break in concentration while some housekeeping happens like entering the contract, notes on record sheets, and so on.

Before commencing Part 2, the play of the hand, you want to refocus. Use the same word to help get your mind back on track for this part of the game. I suggest avoiding a word like "lead" - it might make you lead out of turn!

It is a well known fact that the mind has a limited attention span before it needs a "mental break". Given matches are usually one to two hours in duration, planning mental breaks and using cue words to refocus your attention can ensure you maintain an appropriate level of focus during your whole competition and avoid those costly lapses in concentration that might occur without a mental management plan.