



Ask Jerry

BY JERRY HELMS  www.jerryhelms.com

Dear Jerry,

Especially in club games, we sometimes see top A players in the room ending the day with scores in the 40% range, and longtime C players scoring over 60%. Has anyone attempted to explain how much the role of luck plays versus skill? I would appreciate your thoughts. I need all the luck I can get.

Steve

Hi, Steve,

I don't know if anyone else has attempted to do this, but as an "A" player who on occasion coughs up a sub-50% score, I feel relatively qualified to take a shot at answering your question.

Bridge is a game of skill, but you cannot remove the luck factor from the game and, in my opinion, this is a good thing. In a chess game, the superior player who maintains his focus will defeat an inferior opponent virtually every time. In bridge, the best players usually win, but not always. Here are a few examples of why.

On one of your very good days, in a matchpoint event, the following will happen. Facing the best pair in a room, the auction will go 1NT-3NT, the opening lead will be a completely obvious top-of-sequence type, and there will be exactly 10 tricks available – no more, no less. You get an average board. On the second board, your expert opponents will have one of their rare bidding misunderstandings, reaching an inferior contract and getting their just reward of a poor score. You depart the table well above average.

On one of your very bad days, in a similar event, the following occurs. On the first board against you and your partner, the best pair in the room has a complicated auction to reach an excellent minor-suit slam scoring plus 1370. At the end of the day, no other pair bids slam, so you get a zero just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the next board, your expert opponents reach a tricky 4♠ contract and by ex-

ecuting a double squeeze, bring home 10 tricks. Looking around the room, you decide that a double squeeze is unlikely to be enacted by anyone else. Your fears are justified and once again, you get a what I call a positional zero.

Lest you think that positional boards only involve experts, think again. On your good day, you encounter arguably the worst pair in the room. Despite holding 28 high-card points, with 11 tricks readily available in either spades or notrump, your opponents politely stop in a partscore, and you get the expected top. On your bad day, you play the same pair and this time, despite a nine-card major-suit fit with 27 HCP, the trump suit breaks 4-0 and game is doomed. Your opponents, however, were in 2♠, making three. Zero!

One of the reasons many experienced players prefer team games to matchpoints is a reduction – not a removal – of the luck factor. The greater the number of boards played, the more likely skill rather than luck will determine the outcome. In a six-board Swiss team match, almost anybody can lose, but in a 64-board knockout match, the cream generally rises to the top. In a way, a matchpoint event is like a series of two- or three-board matches where the luck factor is ever present.

This luck factor, which enables weaker players to occasionally get good results against the expert, helps keep the game alive. Several years ago, I doubled one of my students and went minus 790! Every time I play against him, we bring it up and laugh. ■