Scoring and Tactics of Duplicate, Pairs Bridge

The way to win bridge is **to bid game and make it as often as possible** (and as a corollary, to prevent your opponents from bidding and making their games). The game contracts are: ***Three No Trumps, Four Hearts or Spades, Five Clubs or Diamonds***.

You will go a long way if you solely internalise the above goal. However, understanding *why* this is a good strategy requires an understanding of scoring. Unfortunately, the scoring of bridge involves a lot of arbitrary arithmetic so we tend to skate over the intricacies when teaching beginners. Below we'll outline all the ins and out of scoring a duplicate bridge session as well as provide some pointers as to how these concepts affect our strategies.

How is the score for each hand calculated?

At the conclusion of each auction there will be a contract. Declarer will then endeavour to make their contract and will be awarded a positive score if they succeed and a negative score if they are unsuccessful. The score for a successfully made contract comprises a "trick component" and a "bonus component".

The trick component is relatively straightforward – you will receive a score for each trick you make above six, provided you successfully made your contract (so if you bid three spades, you will receive a trick score as long you as you win at least nine tricks). The trick scores are as follows:

Minors (Clubs or Diamonds)	20 points for each trick over six
Majors (Hearts or Spades)	30 points for each trick over six
No Trumps	40 points for the seventh trick and 30 points for each subsequent trick

The bonus you receive depends on whether you have bid a grand slam, a small slam, a game contract or what is known as a part-score. It will also depend on whether you side is **vulnerable** or **not vulnerable**.

Grand Slam Bonus	2000 if vulnerable or 1300 if non vulnerable (Bidding and making a 7-level contract)
Small Slam Bonus	1250 if vulnerable or 800 if not vulnerable (Bidding and making a 6-level contract)
Game Bonus	500 if vulnerable or 300 if not vulnerable (Bidding and making 3NT, 4H, 4S, 5C or 5D)
Part-score Bonus	50 whether vulnerable or not (Bidding and making any other contract)

So some examples:

Contract	**Components**	**Score**
Non-Vul 4 Diamonds making 11 tricks	50 (partscore) + 5x20 (tricks above six)	150
Vul 5 Spades making 12 tricks	500 (vul game) + 6x30 (tricks above six)	680
Non-vul 3 No Trumps making 9 tricks	300 (non-vul game) + 40 + 2x30 (tricks above six)	400
Vul 7 Diamonds making 13 tricks	2000 (vul grand slam) + 7x20 (tricks above six)	2140
Non-vul 7 Spades making 13 tricks	1300 (non-vul grand slam) + 7x30 (tricks above six)	1510
Non-vul 1 Spades making 13 tricks	50 (part-score) + 7x30 (tricks above six)	260
Vul 5 Diamonds making 11 tricks	500 (vul game) + 5x20 (tricks above six)	600
Vul 4 Diamonds making 11 tricks	50 (part-score) + 5x20 (tricks above six)	150
Vul 2 Diamonds making 11 tricks	50 (part-score) + 5x20 (tricks above six)	150

You can see that there are very large bonuses on offer if you can make game/slams. In particular, notice the last three entries on the above table. In all of them, Declarer made 11 tricks. However, it was only by actually **bidding** the game contract that Declarer was rewarded. The score for 2 Diamonds, making eleven is exactly the same as the score for 4 Diamonds, making eleven.

First Tactical Insight: There is no point bidding higher in a part-score *unless you are trying to bid game*. If you are in Two Spades and are going to make nine tricks, you will get exactly the same score as if you are in Three Spades….But you now *have* to get that ninth trick. Best to stay in the safer Two Spade contract unless you are trying to get your partnership to game.

What happens if you don't make your contract?

The above section shows the value in bidding games or slams – you will earn hundreds more points….but only if you make it. Bidding game contracts comes with a risk, namely that the opponents only need to take a few tricks to thwart your attempt to make your contract. Bidding slams comes with a bigger bonus, but an even bigger risk. Now they only need one or two tricks to stop you.

If you are unsuccessful in making your contract, you will give your opponents a positive score for each **undertrick** ie for each trick you fall short. This constitutes a negative score for you, which as you can see is much, much worse than bidding and making any contract. The penalties you will give away for failing to make a contract once more depend on the vulnerability.

Non Vulnerable Undertricks	50 points per trick you fall short
Vulnerable Undertricks	100 points per trick you fall short

Notice that failing your contract by one is usually not terrible – if they can stop you from making their contract, there is probably another contract *they* could have made. Hence giving them 50 or 100 is not terrible compared to the 90-140 they could have scored by playing in their own part-score.

Second Tactical Insight: It is worth competing for the part-score contracts. If you leave the opponents alone, they will probably find a nice safe contract and play in something like Two Spades (110) or Two Diamonds (90). If you bid over them and go down by one, you are likely to give them a lower score than if you had left them alone. Sometimes, you will push them too high and suddenly you will score a positive when they have most of the cards!

Third Tactical Insight: vulnerability makes a difference when you are likely to go down. Going down one vulnerable gives the opponents 100….no big deal. But going down two when you are vulnerable gives them 200 – this is better than any part-score contract. If you push too hard when you are vulnerable, you may well be giving the opponents a score *better than anything they can generate on their own.*

The practical impact of this is that then we take "risky" actions (such as overcalling when the opponents have already announced a good hand, or pre-empting and bidding very high with a weak hand) we should have a very good suit in order to protect ourselves from going two or more off.

This judgement takes time to develop, but it is the reason behind being cautious when interfering in the opponents' auction when vulnerable. You should still push them around, but push a little more safely – a*lways have a good suit when pre-empting or overcalling if you are vulnerable!*

The numbers above underpin almost all of our bidding theory. When we say "you should bid game with twenty five points" we don't mean that any time you have twenty five points you will make game. That target has been set on the assumption that every game we make we will score between 400-620. Every time we push and go one down we will only give away 50-100. You can see that you don't have to get every game decision right to be ahead in the long run.

The way to win bridge is to bid game and make it as often as possible and where possible to prevent your opponents from bidding and making *their* games when they have the cards.

Doubled Contracts or Redoubled Contracts – How Do Things Change?

I recommend skipping this section – doubled and redoubled contracts happen rarely enough in open play, they are almost never encountered in a supervised section. It is included here for completeness and will become relevant later in your bridge career but is not terribly important in the first couple of years of playing bridge.

One call open to us when the opponents have bid something is to **double**. Double ostensibly "raises the stakes" and both increases the score the opponents will receive if they make their contract but also increases the penalty they will give away if they don't. Doubling your opponents is essentially a bet that they have got it wrong and pushed too high, beyond their ability to make their contract.

The excitement doesn't end there. If your side bids to make a contract and the opponents elect to double you (expressing their scepticism in your ability to make it) you can choose to **redouble** which raises the stakes even higher. If you make a redoubled contract you will do exceptionally well. However, for every trick you fail to make a redoubled contract, you will lose a lot.

If a contract is doubled or redoubled and the declaring side fail to make their contract, the change is relatively straightforward. The undertricks score is shown on the table below, based on whether the declaring side were Vulnerable or Non-Vulnerable:

Undertricks	Vulnerable			Not Vulnerable		
	Undoubled	Doubled	Redoubled	Undoubled	Doubled	Redoubled
1	100	200	400	50	100	200
2	200	500	1000	100	300	600
3	300	800	1600	150	500	1000
4	400	1100	2200	200	800	1600
5	500	1400	2000	250	1100	2200
6	600	1700	2300	300	1400	2800
7	700	2000	2600	350	1700	3400
8	800	2300	3200	400	2000	4000

Things are more complicated if you successfully make a contract that has been doubled or redoubled. Firstly the trick score changes. The score you receive for the tricks required to make your contract increase, but the score for overtricks increases even more significantly. The trick scores are summarised below:

	Vulnerable			Not Vulnerable		
	Undoubled	Doubled	Redoubled	Undoubled	Doubled	Redoubled
Minor Suit Contract Tricks	20	40	80	20	40	80
Overtricks	20	200	400	20	100	200
Major Suit Contract Tricks	30	60	120	30	60	120
Overtricks	30	200	400	30	100	200
No Trumps – Trick Seven	40	80	160	40	80	160
Tricks Eight+	30	60	120	30	60	120
Overtricks	30	200	400	30	100	200

There is an additional bonus of 50 awarded for a doubled contract made or 100 for a redoubled contract made. This is known as a double for the "insult" of suggesting we weren't going to make it!

But Wait….The Game Bonuses All Change Too!

One of the things we talk about a lot is the value of bidding game. In fact, I'm going to say it again:

The way to win bridge is to bid game and make it as often as possible and where possible to prevent your opponents from bidding and making *their* games when they have the cards.

The game contracts are Five Clubs, Five Diamonds, Four Spades, Four Hearts and Three No Trumps. But why are those contracts singled out? The determining factor is that those are the contracts where the Trick Score is at least 100. But as we just saw, the trick score when contracts are doubled or redoubled *changes*. Suddenly, you don't have to bid and make ten tricks in a major to earn 120 trick points. You can just bid and make eight tricks if you are doubled (and you only need to make seven tricks if the contract is redoubled!)

This means that, when doubled you will get the game bonus (varying based on vulnerability) for bidding and making much lower contracts. The contracts that will earn you a game bonus when doubled are: Three Clubs, Three Diamonds, Two Spades, Two Hearts, Two No Trumps. When redoubled, it's even easier to get the game bonus. In this case you will only need to bid: Two Clubs, Two Diamonds, One Heart, One Spade or One No Trumps.

To work through a few scores. Imagine we are in Three Hearts Doubled, Not Vulnerable and we score Ten tricks. Our score would be:

Contract Tricks (Doubled) = 3 x 60 = 180
Overtricks (Not Vulnerable) = 100
Bonus "For the Insult" = 50
Game Bonus (since our trick score is >100) = 300
Total Score = 630

Now suppose we are in Four Spades Doubled, Vulnerable and we make twelve tricks:

Contract Tricks (Doubled) = 4 x 60 = 240
Overtricks (Vulnerable) = 2 x 200 = 400
Bonus "For the Insult" = 50
Game Bonus (since our trick score is >100) = 500
Total Score = 1190

Or imagine the opponents got it right. We pushed to Five Diamonds, they doubled us and we only made Eight tricks. Here the penalty we will give away will depend on the vulnerability:

Undertricks (Not Vulnerable) = 500 Undertricks (Vulnerable) = 800

You can go through and work out a few more examples, however most players just rely on the scoring software. In general you will not need the actual number during play – it's enough to know that doubling the opponents in a making contract is very, very costly. And that making a doubled (or redoubled!) contract is very, very rewarding.

Fourth Tactical Insight: Doubles are usually "Takeout" doubles. They usually mean "I have shortage in the suits bid so far, I have enough points that I was going to bid if they hadn't and I am not sure what to do. I have tolerance for all the other suits (or I at least know what to do, no matter what you choose)"

The cost of getting a penalty double wrong is substantial. However, the benefit of getting one right is also very significant! It is very important for you and your partner to have clear understandings of when doubles are "for penalties" and when they are takeout. Hint: They are nearly always takeout!

I told you you should have skipped that section!

Putting It All Together For A Session

The preceding pages outline how each board is scored. However at the end of a duplicate bridge session you don't get some enormous sum of all of these scores. Typically your score will be reported as a percentage. How is that percentage calculated?

The brilliance of duplicate scoring is that it eliminates the luck element around what cards you were dealt. Maybe you got no points all session. Maybe whenever you bid game it was one of those ones that didn't make but whenever the opponents bid game it sailed home. In duplicate bridge you are not actually comparing scores with the people you are playing, rather your scores are compared against how everyone else in your seat, holding you cards did.

To see that in action, let's imagine a board where your partner opens One No Trump, vulnerable and you have ten high card points, so you bid game and your partner makes ten tricks. From the preceding sections we know that this will score you 630 points.

At the next table, a more timid player chose to pass. Her partner also made ten tricks but only in one no trump, so they scored 180. At table three, the people with your cards bid Three No Trumps as well but only made nine tricks, scoring 600. Table four the pair got carried away and bid Six No Trumps. They made eleven tricks (more than everyone else!) but because they bid too high, they scored -100 for one undertrick. Whereas at table five the pair in your chair chose to defend four hearts. They beat it by three tricks for a score of 300.

The computer will track all of these results as follows (we'll assume you are sitting North-South):

Board Four (All Vulnerable)

Table Number	Contract	Declarer	Result	North-South	East-West
1 (This is you)	3NT	N	10	630	
2 (Timid player)	1NT	N	10	180	
3 (Weaker cardplayer)	3NT	N	9	600	
4 (Overbidders)	6NT	N	11		100
5 (Forgot to double)	4H	E	7	300	

Each pairs' score is now compared against the score every other table achieved with exactly the same cards.

You at 1 NS have done better than everyone else. They will score 100% for this board (their opponents score 0%)
Table 2 NS have beaten one pair and lost to the other four. They will score 25% (their opponents score 75%)
Table 3 NS have beaten three pairs and only lost to you. They will score 75% (their opponents score 25%)
Table 4 NS have done worse than everyone (I probably pushed them) They score 0% (their opponents score 100%)
Table 5 NS have been beaten by two pairs and have beaten two pairs. They score 50% (as do their opponents).

This process is repeated for every board at every table:

Board Five	Contract	Declarer	Result	North-South	East-West
Table 1 (You)	2D	N	9	110 (75%)	(25%)
Table 2	2D	N	9	110 (75%)	(25%)
Table 3	3D	N	9	110 (75%)	(25%)
Table 4	5D	N	9	(25%)	50 (75%)
Table 5	2S	E	8	(0%)	110 (100%)

Board Six	Contract	Declarer	Result	North-South	East-West
Table 1 (You)	1NT	S	8	120 (37.5%)	(62.5%)
Table 2	1NT	S	8	120 (37.5%)	(62.5%)
Table 3	1NT	S	7	90 (0%)	(100%)
Table 4	3NT	S	9	400 (100%)	(0%)
Table 5	1NT	S	9	150 (75%)	(25%)

These percentages are then averaged over the entire set of boards you play. So to calculate for each North-South pair in the above round, we would score:

NS 1 (You) = 100% + 75% + 37.5% = 212.5% divided by three = 70.83%
NS 2 = 25% + 75% + 37.5% = 137.5% divided by three = 45.83%
NS 3 = 75% + 75% + 0% = 150% divided by three = 50%
NS 4 = 0% + 25% + 100% = 125% divided by three = 41.67%
NS 5 = 50% + 0% + 75% = 125% divided by three = 41.67%

Fifth Tactical Insight: You can see from the above that what matters is how you rank *compared to everyone else holding your cards*. This is why bidding game is so important. If you can bid game and make it, you have a huge score in the bank – the chance of people with your cards doing better is very, very slim.

If you miss a game, it doesn't matter how well you play it, you are destined for a poor score on the board.

The way to win bridge is to bid game and make it as often as possible and where possible to prevent your opponents from bidding and making *their* games when they have the cards.

Sixth Tactical Insight: Every board matters and every board matters equally. In our supervised sessions we usually play around 16 boards. This means that each board is worth around 6%. (In an open field, we usually play around 27 boards and each board is worth slightly less – around 4%).

A "normal" result on a board will get you 3% towards your total. A "Top Board" will score you about 6% and a "bottom board" will get you 0%.

It doesn't matter if it's a slam hand or defending two of a minor. Every board is rated equally at the end of the day.

Seventh Tactical Insight: You are scored based on relative position. That means if you bid three no trumps and make ten you will be scored better than everyone who only made nine.

Overtricks matter! It is not just enough to make your contract, if you can score one or two tricks beyond that, your score will improve. But be careful….**Failing to make your contract when you should get a positive score is a disaster!**

It is worth pushing to make extra tricks, but only once you are sure of making your contract.

Eighth Tactical Insight: When we have a game bonus available and the opponents outbid us, it is **essential** that we remember to double them!

Look at what happened on board four, table five in our example round. The North-South pair probably bid their Three No Trump contract and East-West merrily bid Four Hearts. Because NS forgot to double, they defeated the contract by three but only scored 300 for a 50% result. If they had doubled they would have scored 800 and netted them a 100% on that board.

That simple slip cost them 3% from their percentage at the end of the session!

Summary: The scoring of duplicate bridge is relatively intricate but is straightforward in concept. Our scores are compared against everybody else's score holding our cards. Every board is weighted equally (just because our opponents made Seven No Trumps Redoubled it doesn't mean our session is over!) Our strategy should be to garner the highest score we can on every board – whether by defending well, playing well or bidding well. I strongly recommend you ignore the score for the first year or two of your bridge career (my most commonly ignored advice!)

Focus on mastering the winning strategies and tactics and the good scores will come later.