

Point-a-board Teams – Ian Mitchell

What's the difference between 'Pairs scoring' and 'Teams scoring'? This is a question you might often have asked, or have been asked. 'Overtricks matter at pairs,' might be the reply, 'whereas at teams the important thing is to ensure that you make your contract'. You might then elaborate on all sorts of finer details about pushing for vulnerable games, and the competitive auction.

But the terms 'Pairs Scoring' and 'Teams Scoring' are misnomers. What we really mean is 'Match Point Scoring' and 'IMPs Scoring' respectively. It just so happens that almost every time that you play in a Pairs Tournament (including your 'normal' club night), 'Match Point scoring' is used; and virtually without exception 'IMPs scoring' is used at Teams.

But there's little reason why you shouldn't use 'IMPs scoring' in Pairs events, and 'Match Point Scoring' in Teams events. The reason why we've always done it the other way round is probably more an accident of history rather than because each format is particularly suited to one method.

In fact an increasing number of organisations – clubs, counties & the EBU – have decided to try out 'Pairs events with Teams Scoring', otherwise known as 'Butler Scoring': All pairs are given the same imaginary team-mates, who score an 'average' result on every board. For each board played, a pair is awarded IMPs, depending on the difference between their score and the average score (or 'Datum'). Thus getting a 'top' by bidding a slam that nobody else bids would be worth several IMPs, but getting an overtrick that nobody else gets will only get you 1 IMP.

Now, how about trying the opposite: 'Teams events with Pairs Scoring'?

Actually, this is quite popular in the USA, where it is known as 'Point-a-board', or (rather misleadingly) 'Board-a-match' scoring. This is often associated with a Multiple Teams format, but it can equally be applied to Swiss or Knockout Teams. The idea is very simple – Every board is either 'won', 'drawn' or 'lost', obviously depending on whether you score better or worse than your team-mates' opponents. For every board won, you receive two 'Match Points', and one MP for a drawn board (a difference of just 10 points counts as a draw).

In the USA, they give 1 MP for a win and ½ for a draw. This has exactly the same effect, but it might help to explain where the term 'point-a-board' comes from, there being 1 point at stake between the two contestants for each board played.

How does the scoring method affect your play? For those of you who play most of your bridge in Match-Pointed pairs, it's very much the same. You can win a board by bidding the slam that the opponents don't bid, but you get just as big a reward for an overtrick that the opponents don't make. You can sacrifice against their game if you think you have a better than 50/50 chance of getting a better score; but if it goes wrong and you go for 1700 penalty, then it doesn't greatly matter – it's just one board, one point!

Is this a fair method? Opinion will always be divided. Some people will say that size matters – that bidding and making a slam should be worth more than making an overtrick. Others will say that matches, or sessions, should not be decided on one 'big' board – that each board should carry equal weight within any event: If I outplay my opponents on one board, and they outplay me on the next, honours should be even; it shouldn't matter that one board is a slam hand and the other a part-score battle.

I'll leave you to form your own opinion, but in the meantime, don't close your mind to different forms of scoring – have a go at Butler Pairs, or Point-a-Board Teams.