



IMP Pairs Strategy by Bob Gruber

IMP Pairs is an infrequently held event. Given that circumstance, many players are not familiar with the scoring method and the strategy that goes with it. Herewith is an introduction to those concepts. But, those just interested in the bottom line tactics, should skip to the bulleted list at the end of this paper.

Not surprisingly, the IMP scale, printed at the bottom of the back of the ACBL convention card, is used.

International Matchpoint (IMP) Scale						
Diff	IMPs	Diff	IMPs	Diff	IMPs	
20 - 40	1	370 - 420	9	1500 - 1740	17	
50 - 80	2	430 - 490	10	1750 - 1990	18	
90 - 120	3	500 - 590	11	2000 - 2240	19	
130 - 160	4	600 - 740	12	2250 - 2490	20	
170 - 210	5	750 - 890	13	2500 - 2990	21	
220 - 260	6	900 - 1090	14	3000 - 3490	22	
270 - 310	7	1100 - 1290	15	3500 - 3990	23	
320 - 360	8	1300 - 1490	16	4000 & up	24	

The raw material for determining your IMP score on a board is twofold:

- 1) the average score (of all pairs, including you) on that board, and
- 2) your score.

The average score is subtracted from your score. Temporarily, ignore whether the difference is plus or minus. Enter the positive difference in the “Diff” column in the IMP table above. If the actual difference is positive, you earn the IMPs shown in the corresponding IMPs column; if the actual difference is negative, you lose the IMPs shown in the corresponding IMPs column.

A complication in the IMP Pairs method of scoring is twofold:

- 1) the average score may not be a whole number. (In fact, it’s unlikely to be a whole number.)
- 2) instead of lumping a range of scores together and giving them a single, discrete IMP number (as in the table above), the IMPs are a continuum, running:
0.00, 0.01, 0.02, ... 0.99, 1.00, 1.01, 1.02, ... 23.98, 23.99, 24.00

What this complication means in practice is that your IMP score will often contain a fractional amount, which ACBLscore displays as 2 decimal digits.

Returning to our major theme of strategy in the event, what we see is that a small difference in your raw score compared to the average raw score, results in very few IMPs. This means overtricks in a contract (+450 or +480 instead of the average of, say, +422.68) may earn roughly an extra IMP or two (a *Diff* of +27.32 or +57.32), but going down when trying for that overtrick can be quite costly (-50 minus the average of 422.68 = -472.68), roughly -10 IMPs. Going down vulnerable is even worse (-100 minus the average of 622.68 = -722.68), roughly -12 IMPs.

In short, play to make your contract, including a safety play that guarantees making the contract at the possible loss of an overtrick.



The flip side is defending a game contract. Here, the penalty for giving up an overtrick or two is relatively small compared to the reward for defeating a game contract that most other pairs are allowing to make. In short, defend to defeat their contract. Don't worry about overtricks.

So, we employ this strategy—don't worry about overtricks—whether declaring or defending a contract. But what is our strategy when bidding?

What we know is that the bonus for a vulnerable game (an extra 500 points) earns roughly 10 IMPs more compared to making the same number of tricks in a partscore, but costs roughly 6 IMPs if you go down (one) compared to a making partscore¹. Non-vulnerable, the differential is only +1 IMP (gain 6 versus lose 5). Small slam is a break even proposition regardless of vulnerability: gain exactly the same # of IMPs for making as you lose for going down 1. Grand slam is a losing proposition: lose 4 more IMPs for going down than you gain for making. **The upshot is to stretch to bid vulnerable games and to bid non-vulnerable games and small slams that are even money or better (50% or better).** Bid grand slams only with a high degree of confidence (say 75% or more) that they will make.

Looking for a different type of comparison, we're reminded of team game strategy. In fact, your IMP Pairs strategy should very much mirror your team game strategy. Although a number of additional points could be made, adhering to the seven (7) major bullets in the list below, should improve your IMP Pairs scoring.

Team/IMP Pairs Tips on Tactics

- Stretch to bid Vulnerable games
- Stretch to Invite game/small slam, but not to Accept the invitation
- Bid to the safest part score or game or slam; don't worry about whether it's in a minor, a major or no trump
 - With a long suit and a likely wide-open suit, don't sit for 1NT; pull the contract to 2 of your long suit
- Don't double a low-level contract into game, unless you're 120% sure you're going to beat it, even if both opponents have highly distributional hands
- Don't sacrifice unless it is very clear they are making their game
- Don't risk your contract to make overtricks, which are not usually significant
- Defend to set their contract. Here too, overtricks are not usually significant

¹ Although this paragraph discusses IMPs in whole numbers, the continuum from 0 to 24 is still in play.