

Let's Talk about IMPs

When you first start playing duplicate, you're introduced to **Match Point**, or **MP**, scoring. This is, by far, the most common scoring method for pairs events. In fact, when you play at the Hartford Bridge Club, it's just about the only scoring method that's used. The idea behind it is pretty simple: At the end of each hand, you compare your score to the scores of all the other pairs that played those same cards. The more pairs you beat, the higher your score on that board. It doesn't matter if you scored 10 points or 2000 points more, it's purely driven by winning and losing. At the end of the session, all the scores are averaged together and you're presented with a score of something, like 55%. While it seems pretty easy and intuitive now, MP scoring does have some quirks for new players, especially social players. Remember how upset you were the first time you got a "bad" board even though your opponents went down because your side could make a game?

The first time most people are introduced to a different scoring system is when they attend their first tournament. Pretty much all team games at tournaments (i.e. Swiss, Knock-Out, etc.) use an alternative form of scoring called **International Match Points**, or **IMPs**, scoring. Just like **MP** scoring, it can be very daunting the first time you encounter this new method. On top of that, more experienced players will often tell you things like, "IMPs is truer bridge" or "IMPs is a totally different game than Match Points." So, if you take nothing else from this lesson, just remember this: Relax, it's not that different. In fact, in terms of the mechanics, IMPs and MPs are exactly the same: You bid your hand; you play the cards one at a time; you take tricks the same way; and, when all 13 tricks have been played, you figure out what the score was.

The difference with IMPs comes with how these scores are converted into your relative score on the boards. In Match Points, we mentioned that all that matters is wins and losses; the magnitude doesn't matter at all. With IMPs, you look at the magnitude of the **difference** in your scores and use the table below to find a final score for each board.

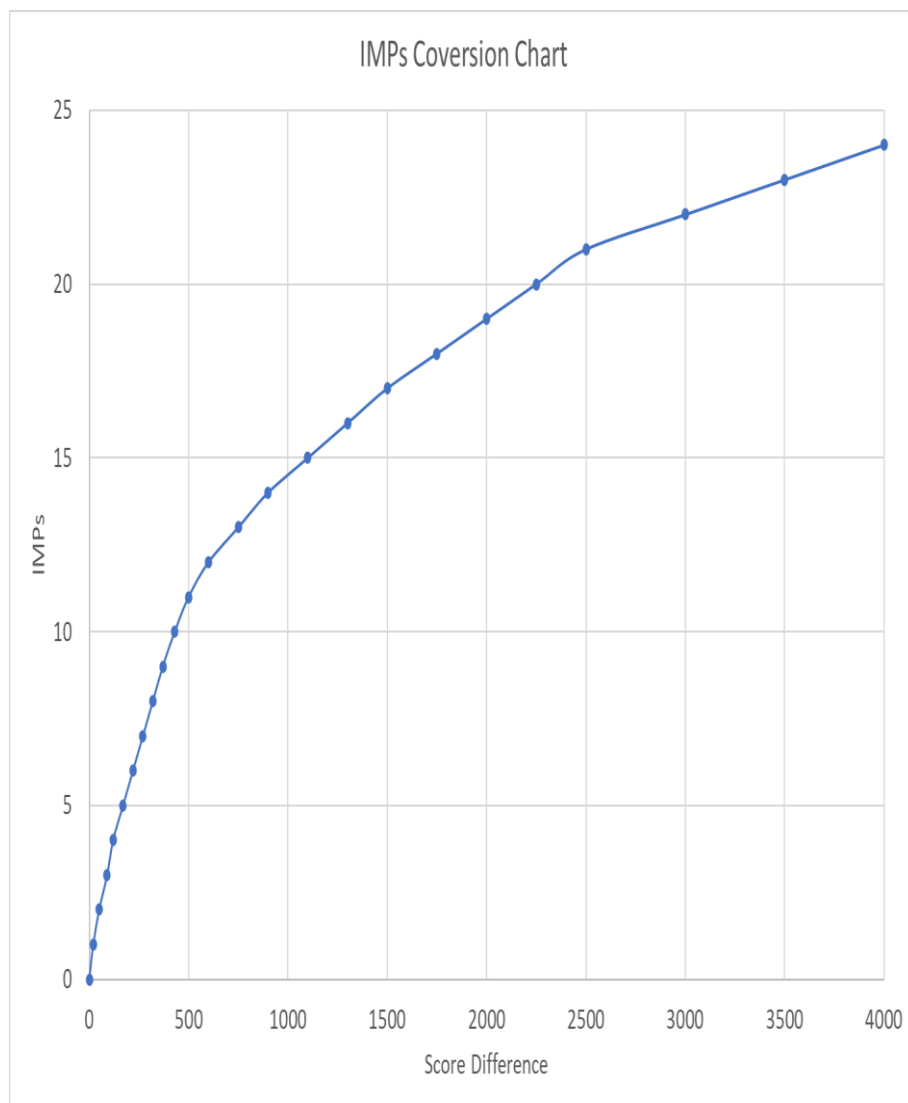
Let's consider an example. Since IMPs is usually used in team games, we'll use a simple team example. On board 3, you and your partner are sitting North/South. Your opponents bid 3♥, but make 4. That produces the same base score of 170 that we're familiar with. At the other table, your teammates, playing East/West, bid and make 4♥ on the same board - for a score of 620. On the card, which is different for team games than pair games, you record the following information:

Your Card						Your Teammates' Card					
		Score		IMPs				Score		IMPs	
Board	Contract	+	-	+	-	Board	Contract	+	-	+	-
3	3H E +1		170	10		3	4H E -	620		10	

IMPs Conversion Table

(found inside your convention card)

Difference	IMPs
0-10	0
20-40	1
50-80	2
90-120	3
130-160	4
170-210	5
220-260	6
270-310	7
320-360	8
370-420	9
430-490	10
500-590	11
600-740	12
750-890	13
900-1090	14
1100-1290	15
1300-1490	16
1500-1740	17
1750-1990	18
2000-2240	19
2250-2490	20
2500-2990	21
3000-3490	22
3500-3990	23
4000+	24



The first four columns of data are the same items you would fill out in a pairs game: what was the contract; who was the declarer; what was the final result; and what was the resulting score. After you've finished all the assigned boards for the round, you get back together and compare scores. On this board, your teammates got +620 and you got -170. Add those together to get +450. When you look that up in the table, you see that 450 is between 430 and 490, so you get +10 IMPs. Your opponents would go through a similar exercise at their table and come up with -10 IMPs. Once you've gone through all the results, you total them up and get a final result. It's a little tricky the first few times you do it, but you'll get the hang of it once you've done it a few times.

Before we get into the implications of this change in scoring, there are two other terms you should be familiar with: **Victory Point (VPs)** and **cross-IMP scoring**. As you can see from the table above, it's possible to have one hand create a huge swing. To limit the ability of a good team to win an event

by running up the score on a weaker opponent, the total IMPs get converted into **Victory Points** based on a table like the one below. (Note: The actual conversion depends on both the number of boards played and the scale used, but, it's the same basic idea.) When IMPs are used to score a pairs event, such as those available on BBO, things are a little more complicated because multiple pairs need to be scored against one another. In those cases, the IMPs table above gets converted to **cross-IMPs**. These tables have the same basic properties as the one above, but are adjusted so the final average across all players stays at 0. While these are both useful items to know, neither one affects the strategic changes that come with IMPs scoring.

20 Point Victory Scale (found inside your convention card)

IMP Difference (6-8 Boards)	Victory Points
0	10 - 10
1 - 2	11 - 9
3 - 4	12 - 8
5 - 7	13 - 7
8 - 10	14 - 6
11 - 13	15 - 5
14 - 16	16 - 4
17 - 19	17 - 3
20 - 23	18 - 2
24 - 27	19 - 1
28+	20 - 0

Now that we've discussed the basics of IMPs scoring, let's switch our focus to the impact these changes have on the **strategy** associated with IMPs. Consider a simple example: You've bid up to 3♥ and have to decide whether or not to bid 4? If we assume that you're bidding to make, not as a sacrifice, you're deciding on a tradeoff between these results:

Making	Stay in 3	Bid 4 (Non-Vul)	Bid 4 (Vul)
3	+140	-50	-100
4	+170	+420	+620

At Match Points, this tradeoff is easy to understand: If I only make 3, I'm better off staying in 3. If I make 4, I'd wish I bid the game. As a result, you'll get the best results if you push to these when you over 50% likely to make¹. But, at IMPs, the magnitude of the gain/loss matters. So, we first need to convert these changes into IMPs:

Making	Bid 4 (Non-Vul)	Bid 4 (Vul)
3	-5 IMPs	-6 IMPs
4	+6 IMPs	+10 IMPs

¹ If you're expecting to make the extra trick by better declarer play, you are almost always better off staying in 3!

In this case, the upside is worth more than the downside, especially when vulnerable. As a result, you should take the push much more often. For example, when vulnerable, you'll score more IMPs, on average, even if the contract makes only 40% of the time! Based on this, there are several key strategies you should employ when playing IMPs:

- Bid games aggressively, especially when vulnerable.
- Play to make your contract.

At Match Points, an extra trick can be the difference between a top and an average board. So, it's often worth the risk to try for that overtrick. However, at IMPs, it's just not worth the risk. Making an overtrick is worth at most 1 IMP, going down at a game contract can cost between 10 and 16 IMPs! I'm not saying you shouldn't try for overtricks, just don't risk the contract for them.

There are two parts of this: The first is the importance of **safety plays**. With a safety play, you're thinking about two things -- "What could go wrong?" and "What can I do about it?" Consider this holding:

West

♠ A K J 8 7 4 3

East

♠ 9 2

Assume you need to take 6 tricks from this suit to make your contract and there are no outside entries to the West hand. We'll also assume that East has the other suits covered. At Match Points, the play would be easy. "Eight ever; nine never," says play the AK and hope the suit splits. This will make more than 50% of the time with an overtrick. At IMPs, we think about what could go wrong. If North has all four cards, we're going down regardless of what we do. But what if South has them all? In that case, we can make the contract by leading the 9 from East and playing LOW from West! This will lose a trick any time North has the Q or 10, but will guarantee the contract unless North has all four. That's good for a 94% make rate, which is much better than the 50% the Match Point approach will get us.

The second part is **card placement**. Sometimes, we need a miracle to make our contract. Assume we need to make five tricks from the combined holding below. Our only shot is if South holds K J (x).² So, play the suit based on that assumption: Lead the 8 from East and let it ride if South doesn't cover. You should also make any secondary inferences from this assumption. For example, if South didn't open this hand, he's unlikely to hold two outside Aces.

West

♠ A Q 10 9 3

East

♠ 8 2

² If South has 4 or 5 spades, including the K and J, we can't finesse enough. If North has either the K nor J, we can't make five tricks even if the honor is a singleton.

- Bid your best game (i.e., the one most likely to make).

At Match Points, we very rarely end up playing in minor suit games. We also will often play in 3NT, hoping to beat the pairs in 4♥ by making the same number of tricks. However, at IMPs, this 10-point difference is almost never worth even a single IMP! So, you should strive to find the game contract with the highest likelihood of success, even if it's 5 of a minor. The same thing goes for both small and grand slams.

- Be VERY sure you're going to set a contract before you double it.

At MPs, a penalty double can be a very effective weapon, especially against a pushy game bid. For example, if your opponents are the only ones in a making game, you'll get 0% whether you double or not. But, if they go down, your double could very easily turn an average into a top. At IMPs, the math is very different. Doubling a contract that goes down one turns -50 into -100, non-vulnerable. That's only worth 2 IMPs. But, if they **make** a doubled major-suit contract, you've turned +420 into +590. That's worth 5 IMPs. On the other hand, doubling them in an ill-advised contract can be enough to win the ENTIRE match. For example, after some miscommunication, I ended up down five doubled the other day on BBO. That debacle was worth -22 IMPs! Needless to say, I didn't do very well that session.

- On defense, it's OK to risk giving up overtricks in an attempt to set the contract.

Consider this holding.

West

♦ K 2

North

♦ Q J 7 6

At MPs, we would almost NEVER lead this suit. Unless we have a strong reason to believe that our partner has the Ace, we're much better off sitting back and collecting our King in due course. But, at IMPs, what if the only way to set the contract is to cash two diamonds and get a rough? In that case, you should lead the King and hope partner takes the Ace on the second trick to give you the rough. This is VERY likely to backfire since the declaring side does tend to have most of the points. But, if it's the only way to set the contract, it's well worth it at IMPs.

- Be VERY careful with your sacrifices.

Quick Quiz

If you and your partner are sitting North-South at Table 1, how many IMPs are these combination of results worth to your side?

Table 1

3♠ by East +1 for 170
3NT by North +1 for 630
3NT by South for 600

Table 2

4♠ by West for 620
4♠ by South for 620
4♠ by South -1 for 100

At IMPs, how would you play this suit if West has no outside entries? (Note: You need 6 tricks from this suit to make your contract.)

West

♥ A K Q 8 7 4 3

East

♥ 5 2

At Match Points, as North, which of these hands would you bid game on? What about at IMPs? Assume the bidding has gone 1♥ - Pass - 3♥ - Pass and that you're vulnerable.

North

♠ 9 7 5
♥ A K 10 9 6
♦ 7 5
♣ A 5 2

North

♠ A 9 7 5
♥ A K 10 9 6
♦ 7
♣ A 5 2

North

♠ A 7 5
♥ A K 10 9 6
♦ 7 5
♣ Q 5 2

North

♠ 9 7
♥ A K 10 9 6 2
♦ 7 5
♣ A 5 2