

# In the Zone

[Pete Matthews Jr](https://3nt.xyz) – <https://3nt.xyz> – © September 24, 2023

To play our best, we need to stay focused, centered, “in the zone.” When I’m in the zone, I can play very good bridge. Unfortunately, my zone is relatively small and my hold on it is relatively fragile. How is yours? Here are factors that affect the size and sturdiness of our zone, and staying in it.

## Preparation

Arrive at the game well rested and ready to play. Minimize alcoholic beverages the night before the game, especially after retirement age. Avoid or reduce other activities before the game. Stay in good physical and bridge condition.

Yes, we need to get in shape for bridge, both by playing and reading about the game. Bridge problems, such as those of Eddie Kantar in the *Bulletin* or many of his books, are great for this. The old Ashlar House page-a-day calendars were superb for staying in shape, because the topics were all over the place – just like deals at the game. I keep my old pages and cycle through them over the years. These efforts broaden and strengthen our zone.

My writing has certainly improved my knowledge of bidding, but it may not help me to stay in shape for playing. Directing and teaching bridge while playing can easily knock us out of the zone.

## Emotions and Distractions

One of the great bridge books of all time is the *BOLS Bridge Tips*, edited by Sally Brock. One of its best articles is “Ecstasy,” by Mike Lawrence. His tip is:

*Any time you feel yourself succumbing to an emotion, whether sadness, depression, irritation, COMFORT, ELATION or ECSTASY, you should fight it off. STOP AND PAY ATTENTION.*

**Minimize talk at the table.** Beyond an occasional brief mention of a key system issue, don't talk about the hands at the table, which is just a distraction from the next board.

Never criticize partner at the table, or between rounds. Partner is the only one on our side – it's our job to help keep them in the zone, too. Here are possible outcomes from criticizing partner:

1. Partner is a hero, shrugs it off, stays (or gets back into) the zone, and continues to play their best.
2. Partner takes it to heart, drops out of the zone, and blows up the next board.
3. WE take it to heart ... and blow up the next board.

The same applies to berating ourselves – snap out of it!

**Make a note.** Circle number of a noteworthy board on the scoresheet, and move on. If there may have been a mistake, put the initial of the possible offender next to the board number. We need to channel our emotions into those actions, and then let them go.

**Commit** to resolving these issues after the game or tournament. Deprived of resolution, discussion at the table can be irresistible.

**The heroic action.** Clamp down on an emotional action, for example:

♠ 10 7 6 ♥ Q 9 3 2 ♦ K 3 K J 6 4

Playing matchpoints, the opponents bid {1 ♠ – 3 ♠ (limit); 4 ♠}. We lead the ♦ K, find partner with the ace, and get a ruff. A great play? NO! They bid a game, so we usually have at most 15 HCP, combined. Odds are that partner's hoped-for 6 HCP do not include the ♦ A. Our lead would usually be a gift. This lead has more attraction at IMPs, where setting the contract is everything, but it's still too heroic.

♠ 10 7 6 ♥ 10 9 3 2 ♦ K 3 ♣ 9 8 6 4

{1 ♠ – 2 ♣; 2 ♠ – 4 ♠ (weak)} Once trumps are drawn, declarer may be able to run the clubs and discard red-suit losers. This calls for an aggressive lead, and the ♦ K is that lead. Partner may have 12 HCP. We can get a ruff if partner has the ♦ A, or the ♦ Q and a spade trick.

There is a place for the heroic play, but make sure that it's at least as attractive as any mundane alternative.