

The Non Directors Guide to the Laws and Ethics of Bridge

By Bruce Owen

As the title suggest this page is aimed at non directors, in particular newer players, to give them a better idea of their rights and obligations in competitive bridge. It does not attempt to explain what the rules are - more a general discussion guide on some of the most important points.

Overview

It is important to realise that ruling at the table is often a very subjective matter. One of the most significant laws in the book is 81C2 under Duties and responsibilities of the director, which includes "to administer and interpret these laws....."

This word "interpret" is of fundamental importance. Just because two different directors at on two different locations ruled differently on the same issue does not necessarily mean one was right and one was wrong. They may just have viewed it differently - like they say, "you had to be there". On the other hand one of the rulings "may" have been a director's error. By definition this all means that the views expressed here may not always be agreed on by other directors. There may well be directors out there who will disagree with something I have written here. It certainly happens in online Directors forums all the time!! That is the nature of the beast.

First a couple of preliminaries

Q. Do the cards have to be cut?

A. No! Only if one of the opponents specifically asks. (6A)

Q. Must the first hand be given to the dealer's LHO? (Dealing machines make this a rare activity)

A. Not necessarily!. They must be dealt in rotation, and then placed into one of the pockets.- that's all the book says. (6B) But remember, a member of the opposition must be there when the cards are dealt. All players remaining seated throughtout the session at the table are now responsible for ensuring the playing conditions are correct such as the correct board number.

The Auction

First remember there is a difference between a bid and a call. A bid is an undertaking to win a certain number of tricks in a specified suit or in no trumps. A call is any bid, double, redouble or pass. This becomes important when you correct an insufficient bid. It is also important to understand when the auction begins and ends, particularly when it comes to ruling on cards exposed during the auction (see below). Many players assume it starts with the first call, and finishes with the final pass. Wrong! It begins for a side when either partner withdraws the cards from the board, (17A) and ends after the final call. However the auction "period" continues until the opening lead is faced. This is the "clarification period" when the auction may be reviewed. (22)

Q. If the first hand is passed in, what should happen?

A. Law 22 is quite clear that there shall not be a redeal. Many players cannot understand this and get quite annoyed. But the reason is that many hands will be opened with as little as 6 points, as players of weak 2 openers, multi diamond or club, tartan two, and INT openers as low as 9 pts know. Just because you don't open doesn't mean someone else won't. At club level this law tends to get ignored, especially in the more relaxed grades. Even at junior tournaments, I have

know directors allow 4 flat hands of under 12 pts to be redealt (I'm one of them!). But really they shouldn't. One of the laws that can be most open to different interpretations is the following

Q. "I've written down my bid, but I din't mean to bid that. Is it too late to change it?"

A. Not at all. Inadvertant bids have been allowed literally for decades except that they are now called "Unintended". You have a fistful of spades and somehow 1H appears on the bidding sheet. Even if the next player has called, any director should allow this as a clear unintended bid without penalty (Law 25A.) Phrases like "I haven't taken my pen off the paper" or "I changed it in the same breath" have as much relevance to real bridge as cheese fondue has to arthritis. It is the real intention that is the issue, not the speed of change. But what if you have just made a mistake in your bidding. For example you bid 2H in response to your partners 1NT opener thinking you are playing transfers, then you remember you are not. This would not be allowed as an Unintended bid.

Awareness of Potential Damage (23)

Time to look at one of the most important Laws in the book. It is a total overhaul of the old Damage by Enforced Pass law but one which often gets overlooked by directors, and since few players even know it exists, could be deprived of an adjusted score in their favour when they were entitled to it. This law states that when a player commits an irregularity that damages the opposition, then if the offender could have known that this pass would be likely to cause this damage, then the director shall award an adjusted score. Once again whether the player **did** know is not the point - it is whether s/he **could** have known (as with the compulsory play of a card rule). A couple of examples illustrate the point.-

Example 1. After two passes the bidding comes to you (at favourable vulnerability) and have

Jxx

Xxxxx

Xxx

xxx

Reasoning that your LHO has a boomer of a hand this becomes a perfect hand for a psyche opening of 1S!! which is what you do. (More of psyches below). Despite this, the opposition find their natural contract when your RHO bids 3NT. You now realise that your partner thinks that because you opened you have an opening hand, and s/he could be about to double. A player who thinks they are clever now bids 3H, and when the director is called, changes it to a pass, thereby ensuring partner does not double. Never mind that this is highly unethical, (To infringe a law intentionally is a serious breach of propriety -72B1) -there is clear damage by the enforced pass in that it would have been highly likely that partner would have doubled. The score will be adjusted.

Example 2. An actual example from The Waitomo Veterans a few years ago - and it happens more often than you might think. An opening double!!! Law 36B2 requires that the player replace the call with a legal one -(in this case she replaced it with 1H) - and partner now has to pass for the rest of the auction. This penalty is, in my view, out of proportion to the seriousness of the offence - but hey -I didn't write the law book! In this case opener had 16 pts opposite

partners 10. Because partner was forced to pass, they remained in 1H making 3H whereas most of the rest of the room was in an unmakeable 3NT going 1 away. Thus the offenders earned a top board. In this case no-one can seriously argue that the offender "could have known that the irregularity would be likely to damage the non offending side" when she opened with a double, so no adjusted score can be given. Tough one.

Q. That "psyche" just referred to - are you allowed to do that?

You certainly are - its an integral part of bridge. Of course your partner must be totally unaware of what you are up to, and you are only obliged to disclose what your partnership understanding is.

It is not improper for a player to violate an announced partnership agreement, so long as his partner is unaware of the violation and no player has the obligation to disclose to the opponents that he has violated an announced agreement. If the opponents are subsequently damaged they are not entitled to redress. After all, the purpose of the psyche is damage the opponents, the risk being that it can damage your side instead!

Since psyches are becoming more common - I've come across two at intermediate tournaments in recent times, - there are some points to remember should you experience them or start to use them.

a. NZ Bridge recommends that no more than 2 should be permitted per session, or it becomes persistent psyching which can in turn become a partnership understanding.

b. Many overseas countries have regulations down to club level requiring that all psyches be "recorded", but it has been slow in coming in here. Should your opposition psyche, call the director at the end of the hand and point it out. Only s/he knows whether this is the 3rd one of the session.

c. At club level it is considered be "unsporting " to psyche a player of considerably less experience than yourself.

Q. When is a bid a bid? e.g. I write 1, then wish to change it to 2S.

A. A bid has not been made till it states a number and a denomination. Therefore it is quite legal to change your mind, though again, this is unauthorised information.

Q. My partner, dealer, hesitates for some time and then passes - am I allowed to bid?

A. Certainly! But you must be prepared to justify your bid. It would be totally unethical for you to open on a marginal hand in this case. Hesitations throughout the auction and play constitute unauthorised information. An opponent may say to you "hesitation noted." Careful - you're being watched! BUT DO NOT feel compelled to bid just because your partner hesitated

Q. My partner gives a mistaken explanation of my bid. What should I do?

A. Nothing -not yet anyway. Why not? Because if you, in all good faith, call the director and say what has happened you have just alerted your partner to the misunderstanding. This is the same logic that makes it illegal for you to remind your partner to alert when s/he has forgotten to do so. That's right - if partner forgets, no looking daggers across the table, or waiving little circles in the air. POKER FACE - please.

Example - You open the strong NT which you have agreed to play but your partner tells the opposition you are playing the weak. S/he is sitting there with a nice 10 pts ready to pass. If you remind your partner to alert or call the director, your partner now realises the mistake and puts

you to 3NT saving a bottom board. So what should you do? You call the director at the end of the auction if you wind up as declarer, and at the end of play if you are the defender. Why the difference? Its all to do with illegally alerting your partner. If you are defenders you must not do anything to alert your partner to the fact that something is amiss till the hand is over, since s/he will realise at once that your hand is not as assumed. If you are declarer or dummy it does not matter, since one person plays both hands. If you cannot remember what to do, call the director and ask to speak to him/her away from the table, although this step itself will constitute anauthorised information.

The Play

Q. Can I review the bidding during play?

A. You cannot review all the bidding, but at your turn to play you may ask to be reminded what the final contract is, and whether you were doubled, but not by whom. (41C). You may also ask for an explanation of the opponents bidding at your turn to play throughout the play of the hand. (20F2)

Penalty cards - Most players believe that a penalty card is simply a card you have exposed illegally which you leave face up and play at the first legal opportunity. I have lost count of the number of times our members have been told that this is not necessarily the case. There are major penalty card and minor penalty cards, and the rulings are different in each case. It is not the purpose to go into this here - read Law 50 if you want to. But I make the point once more that every time there is a penalty card, you must call the director. Apart from all this, when the partner of an opponent who has a major penalty card is on lead, you may demand or forbid a lead of that suit. How often do you see anyone exercising that right? If you fail to call the director as soon as the irregularity occurs you may forfeit your right (11A)

As declarer I moved a card in dummy to play the one above it. I was told "You touched it, you must play it"

Rhubarb. The law (45C3) makes it quite plain that you must play a card once touched except if it was touched for the purpose of arranging or reaching the one above. For an opponennt to try to cash in on something like this surely contravenes the spirit of the game.

You can have an Unintended Bid, so what about an Unintended Play of card??

Curiously enough there is a law which is little known and because of this because is rarely invoked - Law 45C4(b) covering an unintended Designation.

"Until partner has played a player may change an inadvertant designation if he does so without pause for thought."

By definition this can only mean a card played by declarer from dummy, since it is only then would you be designating a card. Moreover according to dictionary definitions of 'designate" it must have been played by naming, not by touching.

Declarer led from the wrong hand. Can I accept it?

Certainly, and this is usually overlooked. If declarer leads from, say dummy, when the lead should have been from hand it may well be to a defenders benefit to accept it. For example take this dummy

AJ106

Kx

Imagine you are West and declarer (South) inadvertently leads the six from dummy. You definitely want to accept it, don't you??

Interestingly, either defender can accept a lead from the wrong hand (55A), the only example in the book when either non-offender can accept the infringement as opposed simply to the normal next one in rotation.

Q. I took a card out to play and changed my mind. Must I now play it?

A. In the case of a defender, only if it was possible for the partner to have seen it. Whether or not the partner did actually see it is not the point - it is whether s/he could have done. Also the fact that an opponent saw it is utterly irrelevant - show the opposition your whole hand if you wish - they can hardly claim damage if you do. As far as declarer is concerned the law must qualify as gobbledygook of the year (45C2) -

"Declarer must play a card from hand held face up, touching or nearly touching the table, or maintained in such a position as to indicate that it has been played"

If you understand what that means please ring me up and tell me.

Dummy's Rights

These are quite limited, and basically all you can do if keep track of the tricks, try to prevent declarer from committing an irregularity and inquire after possible revokes. There are a couple of interesting points here -

You may not point out that declarer has led from the wrong hand, but you may try to prevent it from happening. In other words be alert here and try to stop it happening before the event. If this sounds odd, remember that dummy may not draw attention to an irregularity during play, but may try to prevent it. If declarer has already played from the wrong hand, then the irregularity has already occurred - it is too late to say anything.

Another point is that dummy is not allowed to call the director unless attention has been drawn to an irregularity by another player. If I find dummy has called me, I will always ask who drew attention to the irregularity, and if it was dummy, expect a stern warning, and a Procedural Penalty if they become repeat offenders.

Contested claims (70)

This is the biggie. If you remember nothing else from this article, remember the following. An opponent claims the remaining tricks, but you disagree because you think you can take one or more. What most players will do now is utter what I describe as the four craziest words in bridge - "Play it out please". Crazy because what you have just said to the claimer is "I believe I can take a trick". Claimer will then quickly work out what it might be, e.g. a remaining trump, and promptly take it off you. Those four crazy words will often cost you a trick. O.K. That's what you don't do. What do you do? You call the director - radical idea!!! The important thing is that once a claim is made, play ceases. If there has been any play after the claim, it will be declared void. There are a number of very important points here.

a. If the claimer did not state the intended line of play at the time of the claim, it is too late now. Claimers will usually now waffle on about what they could have/should have done. Tough. It's

too late.

b. All cards will be faced on the table. Remember, play ceased once the claim was made. A ruling will be made as equitably as possible but "...any doubtful points shall be resolved against the claimer" (70A).

d. When there is an outstanding trump, if a trick could be lost by any "normal" line of play, then it must be awarded to the opponent. The key to the whole page and a half covering this law is the following -

"The director shall not accept from claimer any successful line of play not embraced in the original clarification statement if there is an alternative line of play that would be less successful.(70D)"

Confused? What this is saying is that it does not matter how many ways claimer could have avoided losing a trick, if there is one normal line of play by which a trick could have been lost, then that's what will be awarded.

The law goes further and states that "normal" includes play that could be careless for the class of player, but not irrational. In other words if an opponent claims the last 3 tricks with the K 7 2 of trumps and you have the trump Q and two other irrelevant cards, then you will not be awarded a trick, since it would be irrational for claimer to have played anything other than the K first.

So remember to engrave those words "Play it out please" indelibly into your mind and promise yourself never, ever to say them again!

Q. My partner concedes the remaining tricks, but I disagree. What can I do about it"?

A. Object immediately. If you do, then no such concession has occurred.(68B) But be careful here. That concession by your partner is unauthorised information, (keeps cropping up, doesn't it). Be careful that you can justify any play you make from now on.

Q. Aren't the laws sometimes unfair ?

A. Yes - the revoke laws can sometimes overpenalise a side but 12B2 states "The director may not award an adjusted score on the grounds that the penalty provided in these laws is either unduly severe or advantageous to either side".

4. General Proprieties (74)

The law which most often gets ignored at all levels of bridge, and should not be, is very simple indeed. Law 74A1 states that "A player should maintain at all times a courteous attitude". This applies not only to the way you speak to the opposition and to the director, but to your partner. Partner abuse should not be tolerated. If you have been subjected to two opponents being unpleasant to each other, call the director and complain. Until people start doing this, it will continue. Oh yes - be nice to your partner too, won't you.

Other points to remember are that players should refrain from -

- a. Detaching a card before it is your turn to play. Going a step further and replacing it with another when it comes to your turn is grossly unethical.
- b. Prolonging play unnecessarily - e.g. by not claiming when clearly all the remaining tricks are yours.
- c. Indicating approval or disapproval of a call or play.
- d. Looking intently at another player, or at their cards, to see where they drew them from. e. Varying the normal tempo of bidding or play.
- f. Making your own rulings at the table. Only the director has the right to assess penalties (10).

Senior players, who are not directors, are notorious at telling junior ones what the laws are, usually wrongly. In fact since Murphy and Parkinson invented their own laws, so can I, and Owen's Law goes like this -

"The tendency for bridge players to tell others what the laws are, increases with their card playing ability, but their actual knowledge decreases at a similar rate."

If you are new to this game, take everything you hear from other than a recognized director with a pinch of salt, and check it out.

Some General Comments.

But some players tend to forget bridge is first and foremost a social game, and are out to get their pound of flesh in any way they can. Perhaps the most important statement in the law book, and one that every bridge player should remember at all times, comes not in the laws themselves, but in the first paragraph in the Introduction -

"The laws are primarily designed not as a punishment for irregularities, but rather as redress for the rectification of situations where non offenders may otherwise be damaged."

To this extent I believe that when the director is faced with a grey area following an irregularity, the question to the opposition must ultimately be "Do you believe you were damaged?" If not, then "continue to play please".

Finally I leave you with this thought -

"A measure of a persons mental stability is the degree to which they can play bridge as though it was just a game."