

Who's the Dummy?

The top ten mistaken beliefs your partner holds about bridge

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Duplicate bridge is governed by a set of laws — 93 of them, in the most recent version — that were composed by the World Bridge Federation and are revised periodically, most recently in 2017. These laws govern almost all serious duplicate bridge play, worldwide.

In addition, play at duplicate bridge games and tournaments is subject to conditions of contest imposed by the organizations that run them; here, that's the American Contract Bridge League, or ACBL. ACBL rules supplement the laws. Conditions imposed by the ACBL include the convention charts, the alert procedure, and so on.

Many people play bridge regularly, sometimes very seriously, yet don't know all the rules of the game they're playing. Worse, many players think they know the rules, but some of those rules they "know" aren't right.

In this presentation I offer what I consider the top ten misconceptions bridge players hold about the rules and proprieties of the game we love.

If the opponents ask what your partner's call means and you don't know for sure, you should tell them how you're interpreting it

Incorrect!

If you have no clear agreement about the meaning of a call, do not say how you are interpreting the bid — *unless you have substantial reason to believe that's what partner means* (from other experience with this partner, for example). Opponents are entitled to know what you know... but not what you're guessing.

If an opponent asks how you are taking your partner's call, do not answer; repeat (politely) that you have no agreement.

Explanations should be clear and thorough. Do not simply state the name of the convention. ("Bergen" or "DONT" or whatever may mean nothing to your opponents, or could mean something different than it does to you.)

As part of the alert procedure, you should announce the following:

- transfers to minor suits
- the range of notrump overcalls
- “weak” or “preemptive” for jump bids that are weak

All incorrect!

Many, though not all, conventional calls are “alerted”. Some natural calls are also alerted because their meaning is unusual enough that other players might be misled. Say “alert” and wave the alert card or tap the flag; say nothing else unless asked.

A few common calls are *not* alerted; instead, partner immediately makes an announcement of the meaning. The only announcements in ACBL play are:

- The range of 1 notrump openings (but not overcalls, and not 2 notrump);
- “may be short” for minor suit openings shorter than three cards;
- “forcing” for 1NT responses that are forcing (also “semi-forcing”...); and
- “transfer” for a diamond bid that shows hearts, and for a heart bid that shows spades, immediately after a natural notrump bid by partner.

Another thing many players don’t know: Bids above the level of 3NT, beginning with opener’s second call, require a “delayed alert”. Delayed alerts are made as follows:

- The declaring side must alert after the auction is completed and prior to the opening lead.
- The defending side must alert after the opening lead is made face-down and before the dummy is tabled.

When partner takes a very long time before making a call, you should:

Pass — you're barred by the hesitation

Incorrect!

Do whatever you would have done without the break in tempo

Incorrect (but subtly so)

When partner conveys information (often, doubt) through his or her tempo, this is unauthorized information (UI). You can't use UI for your benefit, but there's more: you also can't do anything that the UI suggests, unless it is the only choice that makes any sense.

The first issue is what the UI suggests. Think of it this way: If you can sort of tell what partner hopes you do, then in general you aren't going to be allowed to do it.

The next issue is whether there are "logical alternatives" to what you think partner would want you to do. If there aren't – if it's blindingly obvious what you should do with your hand, UI or not — then go ahead and do it. But if there are logical alternatives, meaning there's something else, something the UI doesn't suggest, that you think is sort of sensible, then you need to do that... even if it's not what you would otherwise choose.

If you can't answer these questions then a reasonable choice is doing what you were going to do anyway... but don't be shocked if the director adjusts the score. It doesn't mean he's accusing you of cheating or being unethical.

If partner explains your bid incorrectly (including by alerting, or failing to alert), you should do what you can to fix the problem

Incorrect (until the appropriate time)

Incorrect explanations produce some of the most complicated situations that arise under the laws of bridge. But we can keep in mind a couple simple precepts:

1. You have to tell your opponents what's correct, but not until partner's hearing is no longer an issue. That means after the auction, for the declaring side, and after the play, for defenders. Call the director, because there may be complications.

Note: Do not call the director right away — wait until after the auction (declaring side) or after the play (defenders).

2. It's not OK to allow for the misexplanation in your own bidding or play — the fact that partner has a different view of the auction than you do is unauthorized information (UI), meaning you can't benefit from it. Roughly speaking, pretend you heard a correct explanation (or alert, or whatever). Sometimes this means passing in an obviously bad contract; sometimes it means driving to a game or slam you know won't make.

What about your own misexplanation? Correct it as soon as you remember. (The law sometimes allows you to wait, but that is not a good idea.)

If an opponent messes up during the auction, as by forgetting what conventions the partnership is playing, and that causes you to be wrong, you're entitled to an adjusted score

Incorrect!

Law 75C: *When the partnership agreement has been explained correctly, the mistake being the call made and not the explanation, there is no infraction. The explanation must not be corrected (nor must the Director be notified) immediately and there is no obligation to do so subsequently.*

Players are entitled to know their opponents' agreements. But they're not entitled to know that an opponent has violated a partnership agreement, whether intentionally or by accident. When a player messes up a convention it can make life difficult for the opponents but in the long run, mistakes don't tend to work out; if it happens that this one time, you get a bad score because your opponent screwed up that's just bad luck, and the laws don't provide for redress.

Relatedly, some players believe that directors have a duty to "protect the field" from weird and seemingly unfair results (e.g., from bidding mixups, penalties imposed, and so on). There is no such rule.

Random stuff happens. Randomly.

When it's your turn to call you may ask about any of your opponents' calls, whether they're alerted or not. Regarding alerted calls, you should ask for an explanation:

Only if you're contemplating a (non-pass) call

Incorrect!

If you know what the call means, but you think your partner might not

Incorrect!

“Please explain.”

While you are *allowed* to ask (at your turn) about any call the opponents have made, you can convey UI by doing so. (For example, if you ask about alerted bids only when you're interested in doubling them, partner will know you have something in the suit when you ask... and that you don't have much when you don't ask.) The only ways to avoid this problem are either never to ask, or always to do so. But sometimes you'll need the information, so that means you should always ask.

Asking for partner's benefit is not allowed. Again, the solution is always to ask.

Hesitation before bidding or passing conveys information and can bar partner, but acting quickly is fine.

Incorrect!

The ACBL did away with the skip bid warning but the rule still applies, so after right hand opponent's jump bid you should count off ten seconds before making a call.

Incorrect!

Your tempo — fast (“unmistakeable hesitation) or slow (unwonted speed) — can convey unauthorized information (UI), and in some auctions it’s important not to make your call (often a pass) too fast. Particularly in auctions that have gotten high quickly, as for example after right hand opponent’s jump bid early in the auction, or in most auctions in which everyone else at the table is bidding, it’s important not to convey that your call, whatever it is, is easy. A fast pass, bid, or double can be just as bad as an agonizingly slow one.

The skip bid warning is gone but it’s true that the rule lives on — you should pause before calling after RHO’s jump bid. But that doesn’t mean counting seconds. You should try to appear to be considering your options... even if you know instantly that you have only one.

Psyching (i.e., bidding that grossly misrepresents what you hold) is:

unfair
illegal
immoral
fattening

All incorrect!

Law 40C1: *A player may deviate from his side's announced understandings, provided that his partner has no more reason than the opponents to be aware of the deviation.*

In other words, psyching is part of the game.

Law 40B2(a)v allows the ACBL et al to restrict psyching *artificial* calls, and the ACBL has chosen to do that; you may not psych artificial opening bids; artificial overcalls; or artificial responses or advances lower than 2NT.

Frequent psyching is not acceptable. "Frequent" isn't strictly defined; roughly, if it's frequent enough that partner expects or learns to allow for it, that's too much because that makes it a partnership agreement which needs to be disclosed.

Some bridge clubs say they disallow psychs entirely, or allow them only once a year or something like that. In general, clubs are allowed to do what they want in their own games (even if they shouldn't), but they may not do so for ACBL games (e.g., STaCs, GNTs, etc.). Tournaments may not restrict psyches beyond what the ACBL does.

If you realize that you've revoked, it's unethical not to point that out to your opponents

Incorrect (but it's OK to do it if you want to)

Law 62A: *A player must correct his revoke if attention is drawn to the irregularity before it becomes established. [It becomes established when you or your partner plays to the next trick.]*

Law 72B2: *In general, there is no obligation to draw attention to an infraction of law committed by one's own side.*

Law 72B3: *A player may not attempt to conceal an infraction, as by committing a second revoke, concealing a card involved in a revoke.*

What this adds up to: It's fine not to mention your revoke and hope your opponents don't notice. But it's *not* OK to lie about it when asked, or to try to hide it. In effect, part of the game is noticing that your opponent has revoked.

The time for an automatic revoke penalty (one or two tricks, depending) ends when someone makes a call on the next board or when the round ends, but the director can restore equity after that.

Dummy can't call the director

Incorrect!

Law 9A4: *Dummy may not call attention to an irregularity until play of the hand is concluded.*

Law 9B1(a): *The Director should be summoned at once when attention is drawn to an irregularity*

Law 9B1(b): *Any player, including dummy, may summon the Director after attention has been drawn to an irregularity*

Dummy not only *may* legally call the director, he or she is *supposed* to — as is everyone else at the table — when attention has been drawn to an irregularity. (“Irregularity” means any deviation from the rules or procedures.) The confusion arises because of the rule that dummy cannot be the one who first *calls attention to* (i.e., points out to others) an irregularity. In other words, as dummy you can’t point out a problem but once someone else has, you can (and should) call the director to get it handled.

After the play of the hand concludes, dummy can both point out an irregularity and call the director about it.

About this Presentation

- Prepared and presented by Doug Couchman
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