



Handcuffed by the laws

Written for a Newsletter and subsequently published in Bridge magazine under the heading of My Main Concern

One area that, sooner or later, the English Bridge Union will surely have to address, if they wish to embrace anything but a small percentage of bridge players, is how the Laws should be applied.

The Laws as written are primarily devised to answer all the questions which arise at the higher levels of the game, and, to be blunt, to endeavour to stop devious practices within the game. Fine, but what takes place at international and county level really has little bearing on the needs of those who wish to play competitive duplicate bridge in a social and competitive yet friendly atmosphere and who have no aspirations to progress beyond that point. And in this statement, "social" is all-important.

I know it; you know it; everyone knows it: there are countless numbers of bridge players who have wanted to play in a club environment but who have been put off by the attitude of other players, but does anyone do anything about it?

FIRST EXPERIENCES

Of course, it is nice to do well and come near the top, but that is not what most players play bridge for: they play to give themselves an interest, to meet friends, and to allow them to get their grey matter working! And I have to say that there is little in what I have experienced over the years to suggest that much is being done to ensure bridge players can play duplicate bridge with these objectives firmly to the fore.

I remember the first time I went to a bridge club and how, on the very first hand, I leaned across and touched a card in dummy before changing my mind. My goodness. It felt like the wrath of the Almighty himself had landed upon me and I was made to feel like a common criminal. Of course, I should not have touched the original card, but was it that serious? Did it really make any difference to the outcome of the Game? I doubt it. But what it did do was throw me into a state of dire panic, which lasted throughout the evening.

Then there was a time when each player passed on the first round and I made as if to re-deal. This time it was the turn of the devil himself to vent his anger. Phew!

BAD EXPERIENCES

Okay. So I survived and stuck with a bridge club, but I know from bitter experience how difficult it is to persuade those who have been put off to come back. We have one lady now who refused to go near a bridge club for four years because an experienced and good player had reduced her to a tearful bumbling wreck. He should have been ashamed of himself but instead all I got were questions about my teaching ability. And no, I do not teach re-opening doubles nor two suited overcalls, nor Extended Stayman in the first couple of years of someone's learning! player who had shouted out he most certainly would have been spoken to.

The problem here is that the game is influenced far too much by those who see it as being an avenue to demonstrate their own opinions and egos, and by those whose sole purpose is to show everyone else how superior they are. You might say that that is exactly what I am doing now, but there is a difference, and it comes down to not so much what is said but to when and where. A Newsletter, surely, is one place where discussion, argument and opinion are justified: the bridge table certainly is not.

I wonder if those who are for ever lecturing and those showing dissent at the bridge table realize how many other would-be duplicate players they have frightened away: that number must in itself be frightening. I also wonder if those who bemoan falling numbers of players have ever stopped to consider this and what can be done about it.

So far as I know, the EBU do little to face up to this problem. The SCCBA have brought in an excellent Zero Tolerance Policy but it is voluntary and rarely applied in clubs.

THE REASON WHY

But it is my belief that the problem is not only with players. Insidiously, the Laws of the game also contribute to the problem. The fact is that in promoting this game of duplicate bridge one is handcuffed by its own laws. That is unless one is prepared to make run for it.

In the first place we have a book of laws which is virtually unintelligible to the average player and is not understood by many who direct, qualified or not.

And now I perhaps speak heresy.

One can only have sensible social bridge where the Laws, whilst important, are secondary to the general enjoyment of those playing.

I have already mentioned the banning of re-dealing hands thrown in on the first round of a session. What utter nonsense this surely is. Take the East Sussex. On a Monday and Thursday afternoon we usually play twenty-two or twenty-four boards* (see note at end) in the three hours. If two boards are passed out then the number can be as low as twenty boards actually played. If there is a half table this can come down to eighteen. Is that what players come out for: to sit and look at thrown in boards? Of course not, which is why at a regular session I have hands re-dealt when thrown in on the first round. What is more, it is done in virtually every club I have played at, although not readily admitted!

Oh, I know the arguments against re-dealing; the main one being that other pairs might bid the hand. Okay. So they might. But most of the time they do not. I agree if pairs are playing weak-two opening bids, multi two diamond openings, or two notrump to show a weak hand with both minors then they may miss out. Tough on them. But then the majority of social duplicate players do not play these conventions. Such bids are not permitted at the East Sussex and many clubs would benefit from taking the same stance. And no, you do not have to play them in order to win, although it helps if you understand them.

Then there is the nonsense of saying the Director must be called at every possible opportunity. There are some situations where it is necessary to call the Director, such as revokes, claims, which are not accepted, and disagreement over how many tricks have been made. But do we really need to call the Director because someone forgot to show the Stop Card?

It is no good saying players should not be put out by the Director being called. They very often are. And remember, we are talking about social duplicate bridge, not serious competitions.

There are other situations that need to be dealt with, such as players telling others what they should have done or talking about a previous hand once the next hand has been started. But surely it is better that the Director has a quiet word rather than invoking the full powers of the Laws. But having had the quiet word there should be no excuses for repetitions.

I said earlier that I was going to speak heresy, but before anyone jumps on me from a great height let me give you examples of why I also said earlier that people are not honest about the Laws.

A FEW EXAMPLES

Some time ago a Director wrote in a bridge magazine that you must call the Director at every opportunity. No ifs or buts, must.

At that time I would regularly take students to their first No Fear, Simple System competitions. At the last one I went to, half way through the afternoon I called the Director to say that our opponents were playing Transfers, something expressly not permitted. What was his ruling? "Ah well, it's only a friendly afternoon." But those two players were experienced players who well knew they should not be playing Transfers. My partner did not understand!

Then there was a major congress at which I came across two county players who were playing a somewhat complex system that I did not know. I asked the player on my left for his convention card, only to be told they only had one between them and that probably was not exactly what they were playing. So I called the Director, who should have told them to play only Simple System whilst they had only one convention card. What did he do? He said my partner and I would be allowed extra time so that we could pass the one card between us! Amazing - and appalling, the more so that had it been the other way round and it had been my partner and I with only one card between us the full force of the Laws would almost certainly have fallen upon us.

Another example. It was a competition so when the first hand was thrown in I said we had better ask the Director if we could re-deal. The lady on my left said I was ignorant and stupid; they always re-dealt at her club. Because it was a competition I insisted the Director make a ruling. What did he rule? "So long as you all agree it will be all right to re-deal." As he walked away the lady again accused me of being ignorant and stupid so I called the Director again. What did he rule? "Don't worry about it" And we wonder why players are put off going to competitions!

Another. It was the penultimate round in a county competition. My partner and I were at Table 2, which meant we were up close to the top of a large number of players. We had just started the second hand when a rasping voice shouts out from Table 1, "Director, fine Table 2 for slow play." It is not easy to concentrate with such an interruption, the more so that we had been kept waiting for the boards from the previous table.

Now the player who shouted out was a top county player, a top Director, and the eventual winner. He should have known better, and the Director of the day should have put him in his place. But of course, he did not, and I would suggest if it had been a lowlier player who had shouted out he most certainly would have been spoken to.

CONCLUSIONS

So where are we now? Much as it will be denied it is my firmly held belief that the top players are often favoured in the way they are treated, but that apart, surely somewhere along the line there has to be an accepted distinction between social duplicate bridge where the Laws are not sacrosanct and those events where everything is very serious and the Laws strictly applied. And I do not decry the latter as I also enjoy serious competitive bridge albeit I sadly have little time to give to it. But whichever, the sooner the game rids itself of those who make life a misery for others and the Laws applied sensibly the better the game will be and the more it will prosper. And we need it to prosper, for if it does not then it will further decline.

End

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* This was written shortly after the club was founded. We now play 26, 27 or even 30 boards in a three and a quarter hour session including a fifteen-minute tea break.