

Zero Tolerance works well in Sussex

By Ken Latty, proprietor of the East Sussex Bridge Club
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STRANGE as it might sound I never really intended or even wanted to run a bridge club of my own, primarily because it would take up precious time that I could spend teaching. It was only because my students kept asking where they could play duplicate bridge as they could find no club that would accept them that I was persuaded

My first effort, which was in partnership with another bridge player, was for a time successful, but I grew weary of the continual backbiting and the sniping at those with little experience. Gradually I found myself spending more time teaching than attending the club and it was closed. But my students would not give up and not long afterwards they persuaded me to start again, this time on my own.

Guide lines

By now I had learned many a hard lesson regarding duplicate bridge and decided that, in the light of what I had come across both at my own and other clubs, the new club would have some founding principles on which it would operate. These were:

1. The club would not become a battlefield. Everyone had to be friendly. No one would be allowed to attend if they made life unpleasant for others.

2. There would be no prima donnas; the less experienced players would be just as important as the more experienced.

3. No one would be allowed to lecture others at the bridge table, neither their opponents nor their partner. Most folks come to duplicate to play and enjoy their bridge and they cannot do that if being lectured. If they want to be taught they go to classes. Besides which, most of what the inexperienced players are told at the bridge table is wrong anyway.

4. Only a relatively simple system and few conventions would be permitted. After all, that is what most bridge players are taught and expect and want to play.

5. The laws would be applied in a manner relevant to the player's standard and in such a way that would prevent others using them to intimidate.

6. We would have set finishing times. Why keep folk waiting to start and why should they not know at what time they would finish? If players were behind schedule they would have to take an average. In the early days averages were commonplace, now they are seldom necessary as slow players learn to speed up their game.

7. We would have quality biscuits, served up nicely. No, I am not joking. The tea break would be an integral part of the session, where folk could mix and talk, not a five-minute break where the smokers such as me could have a quick fag!

On such principles the club came into being.

Getting started

Those early days when we met on a Monday afternoon were not easy. Composed only of students from the then current improvers classes, and playing only rubber bridge, numbers were few. If we had four tables we were doing well, but slowly we built up to six or seven tables, at which point we started duplicate on alternate weeks, and immediately lost several players who wanted only rubber. However, it was not long before we were playing duplicate every week.

Even within that select body of players there were those who were difficult and those who forever wanted to tell everybody how to play. Almost weekly I would remind the players that they had to be friendly and not lecture either their partner or opponents, but I was still painfully aware that there were those who dropped out because of the attitude of others.

But then I came across Zero Tolerance, a policy formulated in America and adopted in principle by Sussex County Contract Bridge Association. This began with a warning: any player spoiling others' enjoyment of the game would be fined match points for the first offence and may be asked to leave for a second offence. Now that had to be the way forward and the East Sussex became a Zero Tolerance Club, not by lip service but by absolute appliance.

Today our Zero Tolerance Policy states:

Anyone found reducing others' enjoyment will be fined part of his or her score for the first offence and may be asked to leave for a second offence. Listed below are some of the things that could be considered unacceptable.

Harassment, intimidation, insinuation, profanity.

Negative comments about opponents' or partner's bidding and play.

Giving unasked-for tuition at the bridge table.

Discussing hands in a manner that can be heard at other tables.

Discussing hands after a round has been called.

Gloating over one's own good results or opponents' misfortune.

Objecting to a call for the director.

Disputing a director's ruling during a game.

Poor hygiene, grooming and dress. Shorts are not permitted.

Over indulgence in alcohol.

Having alcohol or food at the table, except that supplied by the club.

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The acid test

Having set out Zero Tolerance as our policy there came, of course, the first time when it had to be applied and I confess it was not all that easy to tell someone that his membership was cancelled and he was no longer welcome at the club. I wondered if there would be a backlash within the club, but instead all I received were thanks for having removed someone who had, so it turned out, been annoying others for a long time.

Now the significant aspect of such apparent draconian action was that we began to again see several players who had stopped coming because, it transpired, they could not stand the attitude of the now banned player. I knew then that Zero Tolerance had to be right.

We moved to larger premises and started two sessions a week. Three more times I had to tell players that they were no longer welcome and each time we saw a surge in numbers attending, so much so that Mondays became so full I introduced a third session, expecting the numbers on a Monday to drop as members chose to play on Thursdays instead. They did drop, but only temporarily. We now have more tables on a Monday than when I introduced Thursday, and Thursdays are quickly catching up with Mondays, as are Wednesdays.

Happy ending

The East Sussex has a wide mix of players, from the very good to those who have no aspirations other than to play basic bridge and care not whether they come top or bottom. Yet they all mix in happily, all are friendly and helpful and there is no unpleasantness, I have absolutely no doubt this is due to Zero Tolerance being adopted and strictly applied.

I understand that playing relatively simple system and few conventions will not suit everyone, but if all clubs will apply a Zero Tolerance policy and apply it without fear or favour, then more players will be attracted to the game of duplicate bridge - and Terry Collier's grand plan for the EBU will come to fruition much more quickly than if we continue to let a small minority spoil this game for others.

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