Frustrations

It is known to many that bridge is a competitor’s game. Yet, it is just as equally an enjoyable pastime and a means for socialization. As tournaments cater to supplying the highly competitive atmosphere, the common bridge clubs attempt to find a balance between casual and professional. This is accomplished through firm application of bridge law in a more relaxed environment.

To clarify this idea, here are a few specific instances in which clubs diverge from tournaments:

* Little/no application of late penalties
* Time frame for corrections
* Tolerance for mechanical errors and similar deviations

While it is no wish of mine to make the two settings indistinguishable, there is an amount of undisciplined behavior and etiquette within bridge clubs that should be extinguished. As the loyal attendee, consider the following the next time you go to play.

1. Explaining Calls, Answering Questions & Knowing When to Ask Them

This is the category of highest concern. Most people do not realize that their explanation is inadequate, and in some cases illegal. This is in part due to the fact that many people are not familiar with alternative bidding methods or the need to ask such questions. Sometimes embarrassment leads to suboptimal definitions as well. Whatever the case may be, you can decide to become a great bridge player by informing your opponents properly.

This auction came up as I wrote this article:

N E S W

 P

1N\* P 2♣ P \* 15-17 balanced/semibalanced

2♥ P 2♠\*\* P \*\* explained as “spades”

3N AP

I sat West, and received the foolproof explanation of “spades”. This is just as sad an occurrence playing online as it is in the club, occurring frequently in both settings. The reason this explanation is inadequate is that it isn’t in any way specific. Does spades imply a four card suit? A five card suit? How about the strength of the hand? What does this bid deny/imply regarding other aspects? These questions should be considered in responding appropriately to the opponents.

South’s actual hand was:

♠KT98 ♥J82 ♦KQJ2 ♣87

I would expect the appropriate explanation of 2♠ to be something like “4-5♠ and less than 4♥, 8-9 HCP.” Clearly the hand is too strong under this definition, but it was the prescribed meaning in the opponent’s methods. This in mind, it is important to understand that the opponents are entitled to **100% disclosure on your BIDDING METHODS**, not on the hands you actually hold.

Additionally, all **explanations during the auction should be given by the partner of the call in question.** In other words, if W makes a bid that is being asked about, E gives the detailed explanation. Do not try to explain your own bid. This alerts partner to your intention, which is unethical. Partner should know the agreement; partner should also be the one to forget the agreement, should the opportunity arise.

The corollary to this is that **when you are in doubt about partner’s call, explain the call as “undiscussed**”. Always. Responding “I’m not sure”, “Uhh…” or even suggesting possibilities

are erroneous. In any case there is transmission of unauthorized information. Partner doesn’t know that you are unclear about his bid UNLESS you indicate this. Therefore, keep your response consistent to prevent conveying this kind of information. You’re playing bridge, not poker.

Another aspect that is well known but not consistently applied is asking the right questions at the right time. Generally speaking, it makes the most sense to save your questions about an opponent’s call for the end, before the opening lead. Obviously, if the meaning affects your bidding at that moment, go ahead and ask. However, if as W you hear something like:

N E S W

 P

1♣! P 1♥! P

1♠! P 1N! P

2♣! P 3♣! P

3♦! P 3♥! P

3N P 5♣! P

6♣ AP

Don’t ask about this complex auction until after the end. To inquire after each and every bid slows the bidding down. It also alerts your opponent’s to what their bids mean.

Yes, it is unethical to draw inference from partner’s explanations. Even so, it is very difficult to not “wake up” after partner explains that 1♠ is a relay for shape, not controls. Good thing your opponent’s asked now and not later, since you weren’t 100% sure what to bid before they asked.

Additionally, it is not appropriate to ask questions solely for partner’s benefit, or to illegally suggest an aspect of your hand to partner. Perhaps you hold (as W, of course)

♠KQJTx ♥xxx ♦xx ♣Axx

N E S W

1N P 2♣ P

2♦ P 3N AP

A question about 2♣ (or any bid, for that matter), such as “What does that imply about *spades?*” is blaringly unethical. This is why partner has to make his lead face down before you ask any questions after the auction.

Please do not confuse this type of questioning with those concerning understanding negative inferences. For example,

N E S W

P P 1♥\* P

2♠ AP

\*4 card majors

It would be completely appropriate to ask questions regarding N’s other options for bidding ♠ earlier in the auction. It would also be appropriate to ask about S’s tendencies regarding his suit quality and lengths of other suits. This isn’t an attempt to suggest something to partner as much as it is an attempt to better understand the opponent’s methods.

Anybody worth their salt would happily make a director call when something deemed questionable occurs in a tournament. Equity must be restored if necessary and possible. Don’t hesitate to call yourself if you feel violated based off of an inadequate explanation, a suggestive remark, or improper procedure.

1. Unnecessarily Slow Play

Following is an excerpt from the ACBL website.

“Bridge is a timed event. If a pair takes more than their share of the allotted time for each round, they are inconveniencing their fellow competitors as well as gaining an unfair advantage over them. When a pair has fallen behind it is incumbent on them to make up the time lost as quickly as possible whether at fault or not.”

This is an aspect that is often neglected at the club level, perhaps because the feeling of informality incites a sense of relaxation in the average bridge player. Clearly, there isn’t much sense in this. I’m sure that there are several individuals in any game who would prefer that stricter time limits were set, be it per board, per round, or per evening. Not only are they entitled to this, but it increases the overall pleasure of the game.

How is one supposed to curb slow play? To determine this, the most common causes must be clearly identified. Only then can suggestions be made to assuage the damage. Here are a couple common reasons:

* Lack of technical skill
* Mental Stamina
* Disposition

Thankfully, there is no source presently that cannot be amended in some fashion.

For those lacking technical skill (i.e. most beginners/intermediate players), the concept of bidding and playing quickly can seem silly, if not completely against the concept of learning the game. While there is some truth in this, primary learning should be conducted outside the club, or possibly in an appropriate teaching game. Note that I am not condemning the utilization of club play as a teaching tool. It is when one sits and thinks through an ordinary hand for two minutes, thinking that getting the board right will be a fulfilling teaching experience, that I furrow my brow. If you find yourself thinking for a minute or more without any conclusion, make an instinctive decision and analyze the board later. Remember that bridge is a game. Learn from your experience later and get it right next time.

Like technical skill, mental stamina might change over time. It isn’t uncommon for the “jet lag effect” to take hold after a particularly bad set or the halfway point. Such difficulty in staying focused has led to diligence being a desirable quality in a partner. However, just because you are tired doesn’t mean you can take forty seconds to evaluate your king high hand. Continue to the best of your ability to be aware of your surroundings. Caffeinated beverages, chocolate, mints, and other such stimulants can prove useful as well. Or, if your early yawning is due to stiff limbs, excuse yourself and take a brief stretch. It’s better to take fifteen seconds early than 90 seconds later.

Despite this, there are always particular individuals that seem to be reliably slow. Perhaps it was part of their previous career… If you are one of these people, I highly encourage walking before the game starts. In fact, it would be incredibly beneficial to exercise immediately before the game starts. Research has suggested that exercise stimulates the production of a protein called IGF-1. This protein indirectly encourages the formation of new neural pathways, increasing focus in the process. Or, if you believe that it is merely the adrenaline rush that keeps you focused, pursue skydiving or some similarly thrilling activity.

If you don’t foresee yourself becoming an adrenaline junkie, you are not quite excused from curbing the plague of delay. Consider efficiently ritualizing the way you play. What does this look like? Perhaps this will explain.

1. You arrive at the club. Hopefully partner is already there. If not, find a table.
2. Partner (finally!) arrived. Briefly recap on anything you recently agreed about. Check your bidding box for all cards (1 ♣ -> 7NT, Pass, Double, Redouble, Alert, Stop).
3. As soon as table mats, boards, etc. are distributed, check for your pair number, your opposition’s pair number, where you are to move to the next round, and the boards you are to play.
4. Pick up your cards. Sort by suit and consider whether you are ever opening, overcalling, and so forth opposite some handful of auctions.
5. Continue bidding in this manner. Start considering various leads. If you anticipate being dummy, arrange your cards appropriately in your hand.
6. When the auction ends and you are on lead, take up to ten seconds to select a lead (if you haven’t already thought of one). After your lead is faced, put the contract and lead in the bridgemate.
7. If you are declarer or third hand, take up to a minute now to recap on inferences from the previous auction, partner’s lead, and so forth. After consideration, play to the first trick. Play from this point on should be consistently paced. On rare occasion, should you have an inference to assimilate or a decision to make, take a few extra seconds. Otherwise, do not forestall play.
8. If you are dummy, maintain a silent, indifferent expression throughout the play, keep your hands off the table, and be consistent in where you place quitted cards. Always be alert for partner’s revokes (surely partner doesn’t do that…).
9. If at any point you are able to claim, tend to do so when appropriate. A claim is appropriate when you can clearly state the line of play in which you plan to take, and there is little or no reason to play for your opponents’ carelessness in the card play.
10. As the play comes to a close, be aware for an incorrectly turned card among quitted tricks. Provided that there has been focus in early tricks, usually this isn’t an issue. Be sure that both opponents agree with the result.
11. Place the hands in the board in suit order, rotate boards, and draw out the next hands. Sort these as you would in step 4.
12. Now place the final result in the bridgemate. An opponent should verify the result.
13. Repeat these steps until the last board. Now you may copy the results from the bridgemate for that round to your convention card. Feel free now to mingle with the players at your table.

As any astute reader might have observed, these steps specifically targeted the following time wasters:

* Discussion during the auction and play of the hand
* Fiddling with a convention card before the opening lead is made
* Failing to anticipate upcoming events in the play and the bidding

95% of time is wasted needlessly for one of these three reasons. This isn’t to say that anybody can get the process right every time, nor is it demanded that one follows these thirteen steps verbatim. This is merely an illustration to create awareness of how time is wasted. Rectifying poor habits and behaviors can reduce the amount of time it takes to hold a session of bridge. Players will be able to play more bridge, directors have the option of cutting down game time, and good ethics will be naturally reinforced into the game.

Having said this, a well-rehearsed director should strictly enforce a clearly visible clock. Determine an amount of time per round before the events starts. Pairs that cannot meet these expectations may either be immediately penalized or have the play of their boards postponed. Lenience on these policies only encourages wasteful behavior. Run your game pragmatically!

3. Claims & Concessions

 The following website summarizes this subject brilliantly. I’ll leave it to you to read it. <http://advocate.district8acbl.com/oct07/claim.htm>

4. Unauthorized Information

99% of bridge players understand what unauthorized information (UI) is and why it is unethical to draw inference from it. Even so, less than half of all bridge players behave appropriately with regard to this law.

Perhaps a little examination will bring this misconduct to mind. Consider the following except from the Lawbook

 “(Law 16B.1.) After a player makes available to his partner extraneous information that may suggest a call or play, as for example by a remark, a question, a reply to a question, an unexpected\* alert or failure to alert, or by unmistakable hesitation, unwonted speed, special emphasis, tone, gesture, movement or mannerism, the partner may not choose from among logical alternatives one that could demonstrably have been suggested over another by the extraneous information.

(b) A logical alternative action is one that, among the class of players in question and using the methods of the partnership, would be given serious consideration by a significant proportion of such players,”

Essentially what these two laws imply are that

1. When partner implies something about his hand through means other than the legal auction, we cannot take any inference from that.
2. Our subsequent actions(s) must make sense despite partner’s unethical implications.

I like to sit West, so let’s say you have something like this:

N E S W ♠Kxx ♥KT9x ♦QT9x ♣xx

P 1♠ P 2♠

P 3♠\* P ?

\*Long Hesitation

Partner made a game try… took him an awful long time to do it, though. It doesn’t matter how bad partner’s hands usually are: The INFERENCES from his call BASED ON THE DELAY ARE UNAUTHORIZED. Therefore, you should not pass with this maximum hand because you suspect partner doesn’t have his bid.

Another example: ♠xx ♥KJxx ♦AKQx ♣Qxx

N E S W

- 1♥ P 2N

P 4♣ P 4N

P 5♦\* P ?

\*After S passes, E lets his head fall into his hands as he sighs

You just decided to play 1430… or so you thought! It’s apparent that partner forgot (one time too many) and you actually shouldn’t bid 6♥. Nonetheless, you cannot take inference from his inaudible cursing. Ethics bind you into bidding 6♥, hoping for defensive blunders. Notice that the opponents would be entitled to call the director at any point after S makes his mistake evident inappropriately. It would be most appropriate to call at the end of play (see 16B.3).

Curiously, you are allowed to take inference from the opposition’s behaviors/mistakes, as per Law 16A.2:

 “Players may also take account of their estimate of their own score, of the traits of their opponents and any requirement of the tournament regulations.”

and Law 16D.1

 “For a non-offending side, all information arising from a withdrawn action is authorized, whether the action be its own or its opponents”

Do not interpret this to mean that any hesitation made is always UI. Due to the level of thinking in the game, it is natural to have to hesitate occasionally before choosing a call. It is at times when the opponents are damaged by action that could have taken inference from this information that redress is needed.

However, be aware of your mannerisms at the table. If partner misdefends (again!), don’t scoff or chortle or do any of that nonsense. Not only is it rude, but it is also unethical. Avoid implying things about your hand during the auction (like passing and remarking “Oh, another bad hand”). Finally, if you can, try to maintain an even tempo throughout the game. Anticipating the opponent’s plays and bids will help you make better decisions and be a more ethical player. Partner will appreciate being alleviated from the small burdens that come with bidding after your “thirty second wait” double.

Notice that this merely scratches the surface of all the ways that information can be passed improperly. The key takeaway should be to use common sense, play fair, and when in doubt, call the director.

5. Lead Out of Turn

It’s probably best to illustrate with an example deal. Basically, the ruling changes a little bit depending on which side has led out of turn, and whether or not it is the opening lead.



North is about to lead… until South lays down the ♠K! Now the declarer (W) has the following options:

* Accept the lead, and either
	+ Remain the declarer. The normal dummy is put down, and the normal rotation of play ensues.
	+ Become the dummy. He places his hand down and his partner declares.
* Require the lead of the suit led (♠) from the proper hand (N)
* Prohibit the lead of the suit led (♠) from the proper hand (N)
* Leave the card led out of turn (♠K) as a penalty card, which must be played at its first legal opportunity. The proper hand (N) may lead whatever he likes. Also, if North remained on lead, declarer would choose from requiring/prohibiting the lead of the suit & keeping the penalty card up.

So, our West decided (wisely) to have the proper hand lead anything but a ♠. From there, the play went like so:



Then, declarer carelessly led a ♠ from his hand! Unfortunately he was too ready to pitch those ♠ losers on the clubs. Now, either opponent may make a statement to the effect that they accept or reject the lead out of turn. Unfortunately, they cannot consult each other. Perhaps South would have persuaded North to accept the lead like any other greedy bridge player. North, an auctioneer by profession, quickly required a retraction of the lead. West proceeded to make an overtrick.

For those who are curious, if a defender makes a lead out of turn in the middle of the play, declarer can either

* Accept the lead out of turn
* Require the lead from the proper hand. The card led out of turn becomes a major penalty card, which must be played at its first legal opportunity.

If *dummy* leads out of turn (and don’t say it won’t happen to you… it will), the ruling depends on how exactly the card was played and whether or not the defender followed to the erroneous play.

If declarer called the card from dummy erroneously, and the dummy obediently played the card, either defender may accept or reject this lead. Following to the trick is an automatic acceptance. If the dummy played a card on his initiative, and nobody has followed to the trick, the lead must be retracted and declarer must lead properly from his hand. However, should the next player follow to the card dummy played on his initiative, rectification is forfeited. Nonetheless, there is a case for dummy suggesting a play to declarer through his actions. The director should be called in this event to assess the damage unauthorized information may have caused.

6.