

Duplicate Bridge Ethics: Rights and Responsibilities

We all love playing duplicate bridge. Many of us started playing 'Kitchen Bridge' at home, or at a friend's place, and quickly got hooked by the game. These games were a lot of fun, and usually very casual.

Duplicate bridge is different. When we graduate to playing at the Bridge Club, we learn the new norms and rules. However, some of us only learn some rights we have and what behaviour is expected from us. Some not at all.

This article is intended as a reminder for the first group, and an introduction for newer players to duplicate at the club. In that way we can all compete, and try to win by the bids and information allowed, and **enjoy the time playing the game we love.**

Duplicate Bridge: How the game works

There are a number of differences between home games and ACBL sanctioned games at the club.

1. We bid with bidding boxes, and play our cards in a certain fashion. That is the **only legal** way in which we communicate with partner.

2. The ACBL and/or CBF are the sanctioning bodies. As such, all participants must follow their laws and regulations. Infractions and adjustments are the responsible of the designated Director in charge of the game, **not the players**. This person acts in accordance with the Laws and Regulations noted earlier.

Here are two of common infractions, one of which is probably more familiar:

Example 1: A player revokes (does not follow suit when they have cards in the suit led). The Director often adjusts the number of tricks the defence wins.

Example 2: When you indicate to partner what suit you want led, by illegal means. Again the director makes a decision after hearing all the facts, and

provides a ruling and the corresponding legal consequence, the same as Example 1.

Ethics at the Bridge Table

Here is the ACBL Practical Ethics Guidelines for Players:

- ✓ Treat opponents and partners with respect and courtesy.
- ✓ Avoid actions that could mislead or confuse opponents.
- ✓ Volunteer information beyond the minimum required when appropriate.
- ✓ Follow proper bidding and play etiquette, including handling cards and dummy hands correctly.
- ✓ Try to make your bids and plays in the same tempo.

Examples of Illegal/Unethical Behaviour

I will now list some common illegal behaviours, of which many players are guilty of committing. I encourage examining your (and partner's) past actions, with the intent of eliminating inappropriate behaviours in the future. In that way we can all have an enjoyable and fair duplicate experience.

Taking advantage of unauthorized information as a result of partner's action.

This is a biggie. Here are some of the illegal ways we may do so:

1. Taking advantage of partner's break in tempo. Bridge is a tough game, and sometimes what bid or play to make is unclear. So we think, and eventually make a bid or play. **This is completely legal.**

The problem arises when the partner of the hesitator uses this information to make a subsequent bid or play. This is not only illegal, but if you are aware that it is so, unethical. Here some examples of breaks in tempo:

- Bid very slowly after the opponent makes a call.
- Bid very quickly after your right hand opponent makes a bid.

Examples of Inappropriate (illegal) communication

Here are more examples of some common behaviours which are not acceptable, and/or illegal.

Illegal communication 1

THE WRONG WAY: Partner A, after partner B overcalls 2NT, *mumbles 'Oh right we had this auction before and fixed our agreements', or 'What did we decide here?' or 'Hmmm', or scrunches up their face or eyes.*

THE RIGHT WAY: Don't say or do anything that would indicate that you and partner may not have a clear understanding, or you do not remember your agreement.

Illegal communication 2

THE WRONG WAY: No spades partner??! It is legal to ask your partner, but you can't ask in a way (**tone, loudness, looking at declarer**) that communicates to partner, declarer has a **lot of** trumps.

THE RIGHT WAY: In a normal voice say, 'no spades partner?'

Illegal communication 3

THE WRONG WAY: The opponent on your left bids 4♠, which goes pass pass to you. You and your partner have passed throughout the auction. During the auction right hand opponent has bid 2♥ on the way, which is a suit you hold ♥KJ9854. When it goes 4♠, pass pass to you ask your left hand opponent, 'what was 2♥?'

Partner can still lead a heart if this lead is indicated (i.e. singleton). But the director may forbid a heart lead, **if there is any chance** it could be reasonably based on the unauthorized information from partner's question(s).

THE RIGHT WAY: Pass, and when partner has made their lead face down and asks you "questions, partner?" you say to the opponents, 'Could I please have a review of the auction, with explanations?'

Illegal communication 4

THE WRONG WAY: You are defending and are 4th to play to a trick. You know what you are going to do at this trick, **but don't play**, because you are trying to decide what you should play on a subsequent trick.

THE RIGHT WAY: Play in tempo to this trick, unless you have a legitimate problem. If not, an appropriate way to deal with your future potential problem(s) is something like, *'I don't have a problem what to play at this trick, but am going to take a few seconds to think about the whole hand.'*

This type of thinking is often done when partner leads at trick 1, and dummy comes down. If you need time to consider the full deal, and planning your defence, just say that.

This happens sometimes when a declarer wastes no time playing from dummy at trick one. This in itself is an **unethical** play by declarer! A declarer should give the defenders a couple of seconds (if you know what you are going to play as declarer, pause a few seconds before you do so. An internal count to five is reasonable) giving the opponents time to digest dummy, and plan their defence.

Illegal communication 5

THE WRONG WAY:

It goes 3♥ on your left, and you pass like a rocket as you have a complete yarborough! Or you noiselessly mouth counting, or observe the ceiling, so it is clear you are counting, and not considering your hand.

THE RIGHT WAY:

Look at your hand, and pass in tempo! Pass after a silent count to 5-7 count, a reasonable period.

Finally I will close with a topic, of which most players are confused as to their rights and obligations:

Illegal communication 6

Improper Alerts, improper no alerts, and incorrect explanations.

a) Partner alerts your bid, and you forgot about your agreements.

Correct action:

- Do not say or do anything that will give partner a clue you are on different pages.
- Bid as if partner said nothing.
- After the auction, if you are declarer or dummy, call the director and explain what happened.
- If you are defending, do not say anything until **after** the hand is over, and then call the director.

b) Partner does not alert your conventional bid, and has obviously forgotten your agreements.

Correct action:

- Do not say or do anything that will give partner a clue you are on different pages.
- Bid as if partner **had alerted**.
- After the auction, if you are declarer or dummy, call the director and explain what happened.
- If you are defending, do not say anything until **after** the hand is over, and then call the director.

c) Partner alerts your bid, but gives an incorrect explanation.

Correct action:

- Same as b), except the 2nd point, bid as if partner **had alerted and provided the correct explanation**.

Back to the start of the article, the only legal way to communicate with partner is through bids using the bidding boxes, and a limited number of verbal comments (i.e. no spades partner).

Bridge Logic

Sometimes, you can be made aware that partner is not on the same page by a bid they make (or don't make). Here are two examples:

- 1) You open 3♠ showing a club preempt, and partner does not alert, and bids 6♠!! You cannot use the info of no alert, but you can use the jump to 6♠, and use it to guide info for future bids (here it looks like a bottom, any way you slice it. 😞)
- 2) Partner opens 3♠ you bid 4♣ a modified key card ask. Partner does not alert 4♣, and bids 5♣, an impossible response in your system. You cannot use the info of no alert, but you can use the 5♣ bid to logically know

partner is on a different page, and bid at anything you want, to get out of this mess.

Why are these behaviours important?

Behaving in an illegal or unethical manner can have multiple repercussions:

- 1) You subject yourself and partner to score and other potential penalties.
- 2) Upsets partner.
- 3) Causes stress and anxiety for your opponents (and the director!)
- 4) Risks long term bad feelings among all those involved.
- 5) Illegal actions not addressed could result in the penalizing other players following the law.

What do you do if a player at the table communicates illegally?

If you are the partner, you cannot use this information as a basis for a future action. Not only that, if it is close, the onus is on you to only take 100% clear actions.

Example 1. The bidding goes:

West	Partner	East	You
1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♥	pass	Pass	?

Playing matchpoints, it is sound strategy to balance when the opponents have found a fit, but stopped at the two level. It indicates that each side has about half of the high card points, and that you might benefit by coming in.

However, let's say partner took a large break in tempo before passing 2♥. Now balancing is much more appealing, as you know partner was thinking of doing something. In this situation, you must bend over backwards not to use partner's hesitation in your decision to balance. Pass. If you do take action, the opponents have the right **and** the responsibility to call the director, and seek recourse.

Why responsibility?

Because a score obtained from illegal means does not only affect you, but affects the scoring of that board, across the whole field. It may cause someone to come 1st instead of 2nd, or vice versa.

What should you do?

Practice **active ethics**. That is making sure you and partner are getting it right. Ask knowledgeable players, director, etc... if you are unsure at what is appropriate, ethical behaviour.

What is Active Ethics?

Besides not taking advantage of illegal information, there is one other very common practice – **disclose all partnership agreements to the opponents**.

As an example, if partner pre-empted with 3♣, and RHO asks what is that, you not only say preemptive but respond something like, 'Yes 3♣ is preemptive, but in 1st seat when vulnerable our agreement is that our agreement is that we always have an excellent suit.'

Another example is that if partner raises your major, and it promises exactly 3 card support, that is alertable and active ethics.

But wait, there is more!!

We all know the TV infomercials that say wait, there's more that you get. The same is true about ethical practices. Everyone wants to have a pleasant experience. Yes, it is a competitive game, and it is ok to try and get the best score possible on every deal. But, you have to be **nice!!!**

Nice to partner, **nice** to the opponents, **nice** to the director. Whether you are having a good day, bad day. Maybe **respectful** is a better adjective. I sometimes catch myself getting too competitive, and it creeps into my behaviour, and not in a good way! I try to consciously think, ok, be nicer!

Respect Partner

Partner is trying their best! Here is a common scenario:

You are defending a contract and partner makes a mistake. You signal to partner, and the table, that you were not happy with their play. This could be evident from:

- A noise you make.
- A face or other body language.
- Words you say.
- Throwing the card you played to this trick down, instead of placing it gently on the table.

Do not react to partner's play in the moment (there is always later to discuss 😊), and act and play as you have to all the other tricks. Everyone should know treating partner or the opponents in this way is wrong. The following are other behaviours which are equally as inappropriate.

Example of unethical behaviour of which you may not be aware

There are many things that many players do when we play at Soul Sanctuary that you may not be aware are taking away the enjoyment from partner or an opponent. Here is a partial list. I invite you to grade yourself on how you do, and strive to correct any inappropriate behaviour.

1. The director has called the round, and as E-W, you **continue to sit and not move to the next table**. I am not saying stop all conversations immediately when the director calls the move, but be aware and take ownership in moving the game on.
2. **Pass a board when you are late**. It happens, for whatever reason, that you are still bidding the 2nd board, when the director has called the round. Take a second to pass the board(s) you have played to the next table, so they are not penalized by your slow play.

3. **Limit social interaction with the opponents until after you have played the boards.** Yes, we are playing against friends and we want to greet them and maybe make a brief comment on the day. But that's it! Play the boards. Sometimes they can be challenging, and you want to devote time to playing, in a timely fashion.

Duplicate Bridge is a timed event! Chat with partner and/or the opponents further if you have time **after** playing the hands. Some decisions are tough – think about and make a choice and move on. Waiting 5 more minutes will not make the problem disappear!!

4. **If you have not started the last board, but the director has called the round, do not start the board, in an attempt to avoid a late play.** By doing so you are ruining the enjoyment of ALL players, by causing unnecessary slowness for everyone!
5. **Don't stare at an opponent.** This might occur when they are taking a long time in a play or call. It is disrespectful and rude. A better action is after a few minutes, remind them it is their call if you think they may not be aware of it. If you think they are taking too long, don't stare, but say 'Director, please.' In that way you protect your rights from another player's time consuming actions.
6. If you are **North, enter the score** and get your opponent's approval, before entering the score in your private score, or discussing the hand with your partner.
7. In a similar vein, if you are on lead after the auction is over, make your lead before entering the score in your private score. This gives declarer (and your partner) an opportunity to plan the hand while you are writing.
8. Cease/wrap up all discussion with partner when the new opponents arrive, or you arrive at the next table. It is **never** ok to discuss a Board from the current session.

9. Don't touch the bidding box until you have decided what to bid.

10. When explaining what bids mean, try to be complete in your explanation, and it is better to give fuller explanations.

Example: If partner opens 1NT and you respond 3♣, and your left hand opponent asks, 'What is 3♣?' Against very experienced players, it might be ok to answer, 'Puppet Stayman'. But playing against most players, the following is a much better response:

'It says nothing about clubs, but is game forcing and asking partner if they have any 4 or 5 card majors.'

I hope this information is helpful. If you have any questions you can reach me at kimmie85257@hotmail.com. I would be more than happy to discuss any of the above.