



What to do about Slow Play

My name is Jeremy Dhondy and I am the Chairman of the English Bridge Union.

This column is to answer questions or comments about the EBU that you might have.

If you have a comment or a question I would be happy to hear from you. jeremy@mrbridge.co.uk

Q My club has a few players who are very slow and they are spoiling the game for others. What does the EBU recommend in this sort of situation?

A I think slow play is something that is experienced in many clubs and it does cause a problem. The EBU gets more complaints on this issue than anything else at its events (even the temperature). Answers, I think, are both short and longer term. In a major tournament there are quite strict regulations about the speed of play and possible match point or IMP fines if you exceed the time allowed. Two specific cases come to mind. Several years ago in Estoril, in a major European teams quarter final, all eight declarers played in 3NT. Seven went down and the eighth made it. 12 IMPs to his team then, but he took a very long time over the allotted amount and was not only fined 24 IMPs, but also had to read an editorial about the evils of slow play, with himself as an example, in the tournament bulletin the next day. The second saga was a Gold Cup semi final many years ago where the speed of play had been glacial. They would have finished at gone 2.30am, were it not for the fact that they played the final eight boards the same way at both tables forcing the set to be replayed. Now it was 3.55am. That incident led to some much stricter rules about the speed of play, so hopefully this could not happen again. In a Camrose

international or the Gold Cup final, there is a set number of minutes for each stanza of boards and going over that will lead to a fine and eventually, although very rarely, the breakup of a partnership for the rest of the match.

It's not really appropriate to have such rigid rules in clubs, so there is a problem as after all people are coming out for the evening for some enjoyment and a list of offences for which you can be fined doesn't improve the atmosphere. In a typical two-board round, there may be a difficult defensive hand or a declarer play problem that can slow it down. Perhaps you only start to get concerned when it is the same pair time after time.

Keeping up to speed

There are things the club can do, things members can do and even things the slow player can do (see below). The first set of things clubs can do are, I think, to do with how your club determines the general speed of play. At the club where I play most of my local bridge, the game starts at 7pm and everyone has finished their allotted 24 boards by, at the latest, 10.01. I've never seen a problem with slowness and on teams nights you have to play 28 boards in the same time. However, one club, where I play occasionally, starts promptly at 7.38 for a 7.30pm start, players are slow and then disappear to the bar at the end of a round. Small wonder, then, that 24

boards finish at around 11pm. I think this reduces enjoyment for many and some show that by not returning.

The club can assist by having a director who calls the move promptly, perhaps having a clock or computer displaying a count down. If you put 'bridge timer' into Google, you can find free software timers, at least for the first few months, whilst you decide whether they suit your club or not. Try <http://rothwells.weebly.com/timer.html>. Even if you buy one, it is not expensive. That's the mechanical bit and will solve the problem of the occasional drop in speed. Strangely, many players react better to the machine telling them it is time to move than they do to a human being with the same message.

There's slow play and slow fussing

Before we come to the more serious malefactors, it is worth remembering that some slowness is nothing to do with playing the cards but rather to do with all the fussing that goes on before and after the board. I used to play against a pair who would start every round by a. studying your system card and b. enquiring specifically about your defence to 1NT. Nothing particularly unreasonable in that, but there was no evidence that they ever did anything with the information. It seemed equivalent to clearing their throats. They certainly proceeded over 1NT in the same way, however ▶

you chose to intervene. When the hand was finished there would be an animated discussion/post-mortem. Eventually, the score would get put into a Bridgmate and then all the scores would be compared along with a running commentary on how they might have done better together with some acidic comments along the lines of, 'how did anyone let 11 tricks through on that board? Was there a revoke?' Looking at the scores is part of the fun but you have to recognise that if your play is in the slow lane you have an obligation to get on with the other elements of the game. Not letting anyone see dummy until you have entered the contract and opening lead on to your scorecard is an unpardonable sin in my book. Incidentally, if your opponents are slow, avoid entering into a conversation (eg about details of the defence etc) at the end of the first of three boards. As a slow player, even doing something minor like entering the board number and contract into the Bridgmate when dummy can save time.

The slow and the persistent

Having accepted and dealt with the players who are occasionally slow and respond to the gentlest of chivvying,

the club is going to have to decide what to do with players who believe that other competitors may take three hours for 24 boards but they are entitled to 3 hours 20 minutes. When the director has exhausted his options (if he is playing as well as directing he may not have that many), it may be time for the club committee to decide what to do. After all the director is likely a club volunteer and his task is to keep the movement going. Persistent slow play may require a bit more action especially if, for example, there is a rota of directors so it takes some time for the pattern to become noticed. The director, when called, may also have to make a determination of who was responsible and deciding it on the odds, 'You have been slow four times this month therefore it must be you this time also,' is unlikely to go down particularly well. Matchpoint fines are not going to work more than on the rare occasion. They alienate but don't usually make anyone play faster. Whilst you can take a board away, it is contrary to the Law to stop a board which has started (unless players have started it after being told not to by the director). You might allow the board to be played at the end if both pairs want but this won't be a solution if you have to vacate the premises by 10.15pm. You might remove a board from the next

round, but that reduces enjoyment for at least one wholly innocent pair. If you do remove a board as director then you award Av+ or Av- according to whom you hold at fault.

It may be time for the club chairman to have a word with the recalcitrant partnership. For those who are thinking about the poor slow pair who are being persecuted, it is good to remember that there are upwards of 20 other pairs who are having their enjoyment of their game spoilt by finishing late each week or hanging around between rounds. I guess if it comes to it, and this should be rare, it could be necessary for the club and the pair to part company but this is very much the last resort. I think you have to get the pair concerned to accept that they are slow, damaging the enjoyment of others and get them to make a commitment to improving matters. It is to be expected that novice players will be significantly slower and those clubs who have duplicates especially for them often play fewer boards to allow for it, but the most intractable offenders have been playing a long time, are experienced and believe that we all have to accept their pace.

The ten commandments for slow players should help them stay at the club and not aggravate the rest of the membership. ■

Ten Commandments for Slow Players

- Lead first and write it down later.
- Move promptly: if move is called get to the next table swiftly.
- Score swiftly: enter details before the end of the hand if you can and then put in the rest of the detail and offer the Bridgmate to your opponent. eg 'We got 45%,' is usually enough rather than going through how many bid which particular game.
- Catch up: if you are late arriving then you have an obligation to try to catch up.
- Time yourself: in Chess they have clocks but even in bridge you should be aware if you have taken 11 of the available 15 minutes to deal with the first board of two.
- Limit your post-mortem until you have finished all the boards for the round.
- Alert: don't ask every time there is an alert.
- Claim: consider claiming if you have a reasonably easy end position.
- Use your opponent's thinking time: you may be able to plan your own play better.
- If your opponent is going to cash a long suit in dummy, decide on your discards. I bet you've watched someone agonise over their first discard and then when another winner is played do exactly the same again. It can hardly be a surprise.