

System Cards

Mike and Sarah Amos offer some advice

If TDs tell players that their System Cards are incompletely or poorly filled in the players sometimes react quite strongly, suggesting that we are picking on them and being pedantic and over-officious. We don't go looking for examples of poor CCs, but we do come across them every time we direct, as we try to solve problems that arise. Although the primary purpose of System cards is to disclose your methods to your opponents, we are quite convinced that partnerships who have filled their cards in fully are much less likely themselves to forget conventional bids and meanings and get into a muddle.

More than a few times in the last two or three months, both Mike and Sarah have been confronted by a situation in which a non-offending pair claim to have been damaged by some action of their opponents. Yet their own system cards were so inadequate that it was impossible to tell if their methods were what they said they were and if the damage had resulted from their opponents' actions or from their own.

If you are a moving pair, it is courteous to offer your CC to your opponents as you arrive at the table. If you are stationary, you should do the same. System cards are often found under tea-cups, bidding boxes or in handbags. They are not much use in these places.

We are well aware that system cards can be used to bamboozle and confuse opponents and to intimidate the less experienced. That's why WBF System cards are not allowed in most EBU events, including here at Brighton. The EBU Policy on WBF Conventions Cards has remained unchanged for many years and is clearly set out in the new Blue Book.

Please note that the WBF cards are only for use in international events, trials etc. They may be used in Level 5 events but their use is not permitted in EBU events below this level.

What is the thinking behind this regulation? System cards are to help your opponents discover and understand your methods. Inexperienced players in particular will often need to rely on them more heavily than tournament regulars. The standard EBU cards are familiar to most players; it is the unfamiliarity of the WBF cards which is the issue. Less experienced players may be unable to find easily what they want to know and may be unwilling or embarrassed to ask. In our experience there are two groups of players who may be using WBF cards in this tournament. The first group are overseas players who may be unaware of our regulation. In this case, you should ask a TD to explain to them that they are expected to have EBU cards, but perhaps at the beginning of the tournament be prepared to show some tolerance and patience to make our visitors feel welcome. The second group are very experienced EBU members who participate in international and overseas events. Again your best approach is to ask a TD to ensure that the situation is rectified. All TDs have been told to enforce this regulation.

Naming rather than describing conventional bids

The most common failing on system cards is that methods which require explanation are merely named. There is no excuse for this. Apart from the difficulties that it creates for opponents, and the discourtesy involved, it makes little sense for the partnership itself. There are a number of common situations where conventions are forgotten or misexplained and so frequently lead to TD rulings. These are the very same conventions that are just named on CCs rather than explained as the regulations require. We'd bet that the average TD, at Brighton will see examples of mistakes made with two-suited overcalls and the players' CCs will merely have the dreaded words **Ghestem** or **CRO** or in one of Mike's favourite examples something like **Modified Wemble**. We are quite convinced that if the details were filled out, players would review their own system cards at the beginning of sessions and be reminded of their agreements, thereby making mistakes less likely to happen.

It may be worthwhile checking if your cards are up to scratch in these areas.

- 1 **Two-suited overcalls** – In the immortal words of John Pain “I had two suits and I guessed ‘em”

When a problem arises players say “Oh there's no room to write all that stuff on the card”, but this just isn't true if sensible and common abbreviations are used.

The example on the EBU site <http://www.ebu.co.uk/laws-and-ethics/convention-cards> of a Standard Benji Card shows how a simple but clear explanation of Michaels cue-bids can be achieved in a couple of lines

2 suited overcalls 1m 2m shows 5+ -5+ in majors; 1M 2M shows 5+ -5+ in other major and a minor. 1any - 2NT shows 5+ - 5+ in two lowest unbid suits.
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1m is an abbreviation for 1 of a minor - 1M for 1 of a major. If the partnership had any agreements about strength that could also be included. Try to avoid words like Weak and Strong. What one player means by “Intermediate” may be regarded as “Weak” by another. “9-13” or “a good suit with two top honours” are the sort of descriptions that are more helpful.

- 2 **Responses to 1NT after intervention** - many accidents occur after 1NT is doubled. The stakes are high, but many partnerships seem unclear and their cards are often silent. The design of the system cards is such that these common situations where mistakes occur have generally been given space, so that explanations may be given (and perhaps remembered 😊) A few words “all bids natural” or “system on” will make it clear. The single word “Lebensohl” fills the experienced TD with almost as much dread as “Ghestem”.

- 3 **Defences to 1NT** are frequently poorly explained. “Astro, Aspro, Aspstro” Help! “2♣ = H+another” or something like that is what we need. If you have different defences to Weak and Strong NTs there is a space on the card to indicate this, but you might indicate what you think counts as Weak and what is Strong. Clarify these agreements and write them on your CCs
- 4 **Defences to different types of 1♣ opener** Some pairs have different ways of dealing with natural Club openers, Strong Clubs, Short Clubs, Polish Clubs and mix-ups frequently occur. The new announcements and alerts should help you to decide what your opponents are doing. The CC provides you with a space to indicate what you are doing in defence.
- 5 **Agreements about doubles and redoubles** It’s surprising how often this section is left blank. Do you play support Doubles? When are doubles for penalty? When are redoubles SOS?
- 6 **Opening Leads and Carding Methods** We suspect that for many partnerships this sections of the card is often inadequately completed. Mike discovered recently a regular pair – both Grand Masters – who said “We never lead 4th highest against a Slam, we just lead our smallest card”. Yet this wasn’t on their card, although it had been their method for many a long year. We don’t think they intended to be unethical, but concealing agreements in this way is definitely improper. It transpired that they also played “Ace for attitude and King for count”, but again this wasn’t on the card. Your opponents should be able to discover your basic methods and when alternatives are used.

This isn’t a witch-hunt. No one is out to get you. What we are trying to do is to make the game fairer and more enjoyable for all. We are convinced that better filled in system cards will lead to fewer mis-bids and mis-explanations for yourselves, as well as better disclosure for opponents, so it’s well worth the effort. Remember that partnerships are expected to have two identically completed cards, so if your partner is likely to lose his or hers, you’d better have a few spares!

If you want help filling in your card or opinions about your current cards, ask a TD. Mike and Sarah will be around both weekends at Brighton and during the week and will be more than happy to make suggestions about improvements and clarifications.