



Is There Too Much Regulation in Our Game?

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 I enjoy playing bridge, but it seems to me there is too much regulation in our game which spoils enjoyment. Do you have any comment?

A One of the characteristics of a sport or game is that it has a set of laws or regulations to govern it, so you can't play an organised game and get away from it all. However, that doesn't mean there should be 500 pages of laws and regulations.

Laws and Regulations

First there are Laws and they cover bridge wherever it is played. From time to time, the EBU is blamed for some aspect of them that someone doesn't much like, but they are produced by the World Bridge Federation and updated once every ten years. The next update is almost upon us and will apply from September 2017. Laws cover such things as revokes, leads, bids out of turn and insufficient bids or calls. There is a separate code for rubber bridge, although it is quite similar to the duplicate code.

One example of the 'bad' law is given by the regular correspondent, who does not see why there is a law that prevents a redeal if everyone on the first round passes. A player at the table may have passed accidentally with an opening bid or he may be quite conservative about what he opens. There may be

people playing a mini no-trump or something else which means they open a weaker hand than some. Why should it only apply to the first round? I recall playing in a tournament many years ago when a board was passed out on the final round. The previous results were another 10 pass outs and +1,100 for North South and -1,100 for North South. Not everyone takes the same view of a hand. Occasionally, you might be deprived of 1/24th of your allotted boards, but not many boards are passed out at all tables.

In addition to the Laws, there are also Regulations which apply individually as each country, county or club see fit. These apply to duplicate bridge and, unlike the laws, clubs can decide for themselves how many of them they implement. However, few clubs, affiliated or otherwise, want to write their own regulations; they prefer the national organisation to do the work. There are examples of regulations which are clearly not going to be used by many, if any, clubs. A good example of this would be the regulations for playing behind screens. There are regulations concerning what you can agree to play.

When I started as Chairman of the EBU's Laws and Ethics Committee there was a booklet of 72 pages covering this. I thought this was an example of too much wordiness and complexity and, in recent years, it has halved in length. One reason for this is that it is no longer necessary to regulate

what happens deep into the auction. Typically, it is only an opening bid or perhaps the first response that really causes much need for regulation.

A good question is why there should be any regulations at all covering this area. If you play a relatively short round of two or three boards against a pair, then it is unfair to expect you to have to defend against very complicated systems. Some systems are regulated so they can only be played in high level tournaments.

Some players would like to restrict still further what people play and it is not uncommon to find, in the EBU postbag, suggestions that all players should have to play a weak no-trump and four-card majors, because that is what is traditional in the UK. In my opinion, you may be better at bridge than the next person because you defend better or play hands better, but you might also have an advantage because you and your partner have some agreements that you have worked out and discussed. In England, traditionally there has been more variation in this area. The reason why most players play a take-out double of pre-empts in 2017 is because they have been persuaded it is a better and more flexible tool. Fifty years ago, it was common to play double for penalty and there was a raft of conventions such as FILM, Lower Minor, Fishbein and Herbert that people played. In other words, bidding can develop and has done so. It is right to have some

regulations so that it doesn't become unrecognisable as bridge. Players should not use destructive weapons in order to easily inconvenience opponents; however it is right to allow bidding development.

I predict that in 25 years time that the dominant system in the UK will have become the same as much of the world and that is strong no-trump and five-card majors. Keep the magazine and see if I am right!

Fairness

If you and your partner have an agreement in any aspect of your bidding, then it is fundamental that your opponents are informed, hence the idea of system cards, alerting and announcing, all of which are covered by regulation. Announcements, which are now about ten years old, cover some common positions. If for example, you open 2♥, then your opponent's next action, if any, may depend on whether your bid is natural or weak, strong or somewhere in the middle. He is unlikely to care at this stage about the exact point range eg 5-9 or 6-10 etc, so your partner simply says, 'Weak,' if it is a weak two.

Announcements, like all new ideas in bridge, had some vociferous opposition at the start which went from talking of discrimination against those hard of hearing to all sorts of technical arguments, but in truth, knowing what your opponent's no-trump range is and a few other minor things has made life easier and removed the need for detailed system cards on a club night. The number who sit down and give a brief precis of what they play has also increased markedly. The problem of overhearing has not proved to be difficult in any club I've played in. Usually it is comments such as, '6♠ is completely laydown,' bellowed at 115 decibels that attract the attention of other players.

Stop and Double trouble

I recently got a letter lambasting the EBU and other bridge organisations for having a procedure where you had to produce a stop card before making a jump bid. Imagine your left hand opponent opens 3♣. If your partner

passes immediately you may draw a conclusion about his hand type. If, on the other hand, he takes a long time and produces a 3NT bid, you are likely to know it is not a 19 count with a balanced hand and a double stop. A fundamental tenet of the game is that you should only be able to know about your partner's hand from his bidding. Anything else is unauthorised. These who don't like stop cards usually produce an auction like 1NT-Pass-3NT as their example, where it is pointless. If the next hand passes at the speed of light he, of course, has nothing to think about. If he takes a long time and then passes, he was probably thinking of doubling but would need a particular lead to defeat the contract. Giving him a few seconds to make his decision without it putting a strain on what you lead is, in my opinion, an improvement.

Scotland and England/Wales have differing ideas about whether you should alert if your partner doubles. In Scotland it is easy. You don't alert any double. That makes writing the regulation exceptionally easy and simple to understand. As that would take several pages out of the regulations, why don't we all follow suit? The main reasons are having to ask and give away your hand eg the sequence 1NT-Dbl-2♣-Dbl. If the second double is for take-out, you may wish to take one action and if penalty, another. If there are no alerts, then you have to ask each time and risk giving information to partner. Similarly, it starts 1♠-Pass-4♣-Dbl. 4♣ is a splinter bid and the double suggests partner leads a diamond. Not all that common but how would you ever be expected to guess this if there was no alert?

So it comes down to simplicity of regulation against disclosure and fairness and it isn't so simple. Not many club players want to sit there for an evening hearing every single bid, double or pass alerted, so a balance needs to be struck.

When the going gets tough?

Away from the nitty gritty of alerts and stops, there are regulations to

maintain the fairness and pleasantness of the game. We don't want to drown in regulation and red tape, but if there is a dispute, it is good to have some regulations to fall back upon.

You have to arrange a match in the County League. You offer several dates to the opponents and they fail to accept any or propose any of their own. What happens? Or you try to qualify for the final of the club pairs. 16 pairs qualify. You are equal 16th. How is the tie split? Or you enter the wrong score on to the traveller or bridgemate. Can it be corrected?

All of these problems and more can be covered with simple regulations which you rarely have to apply, but are useful when there is a difficult situation.

There is a difficult player in your club. He upsets players almost every week. Can your club ask him to leave? It may depend on the regulations your club has. My experience of these matters is that when a club does wish to go down this route, they usually have good reason, but far too often they have no proper constitution or process that would resolve the issue. The typical volunteer on a club committee does not wish to be presented with a letter from an aggressive solicitor demanding his client be allowed to play. At this point, people will typically say, 'For goodness sake it is a game, after all.' True, but having some regulations stops the very small number disrupting what should be your pleasant afternoon or evening at the club.

What's the answer?

My answer is a light touch. Club bridge does not need lengthy tomes of regulations. The law makers and regulators should make it their business to have as light a touch as possible and not say in 800 words what can be said in 50.

Our game runs better when there are some sensible and understandable regulations. Administrators must know all the regulations but players must also be aware of what the main regulations are. The minutiae they can leave to the director. I would say that is what they are paid for but, of course, many are long suffering volunteers. ■