



Please Stop!

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 Why is it we have the Stop procedure and would the game be better if we scrapped it altogether?

A Saying, ‘Stop’ or using a card from the bidding box when making a jump bid has been a part of club and tournament bridge for over 40 years but it still causes players angst. In a recent tournament the player on my right jumped without using the Stop card or saying, ‘Stop.’ I had a difficult problem. I asked him after the hand why he didn’t use the Stop card and he replied, ‘Because I don’t agree with the Stop procedure.’ Given it is currently a regulation, that doesn’t place him in the strongest position. Obeying only the laws and regulations we approve of is not a sensible strategy. I imagine telling the local magistrate that I don’t agree that the speed limit in my village should be 30mph would not go down well, no matter how many cogent reasons I thought I had. He is not alone in his view and at least one player who currently plays for England has trouble producing a Stop card in tournaments and that is not because he forgets. (In international play it is irrelevant because the game is behind screens and you are not aware of how long your partner or opponent has taken.)

Your right hand opponent opens 3♥ which is a normal pre-emptive bid and

you hold:

♠ 9 8 7
♥ J 3
♦ K J 7 5 2
♣ 7 6 5

You have nothing to think about so pass fairly quickly. Now you hold:

♠ K Q 7
♥ J 3
♦ K J 8 6
♣ Q 10 4 3

You have a minimum opening bid but only three spades and there is significant risk in being pushed to the four level if you have no fit. You think for a while and either double if that is your thing or pass if you are not so brave (and no-one could reasonably criticise a pass on this hand). Of course you should take your actions on both hands at the same tempo.

One fundamental in any game of bridge is that when you decide what to bid you should do it based on your hand, together with available evidence from the bidding, and what your partner or opponents have bid. That is called authorised information. If you take into account the tempo of partner’s

action then this is an example of what is called ‘unauthorised information’ and you simply are not allowed to use it. The origin of the Stop procedure was to seek to reduce this by getting a more even tempo. Of course if the Stop card is produced and you look at your watch, yawn, feign disinterest or ignore it then the attempt to improve tempo is defeated.

Regulation



Here is the regulation that currently applies in England:

Before making a jump bid (ie a bid at a higher level than the minimum required) a player must place the Stop ▶

card in front of him, then place his call as usual, and eventually remove the Stop card. His left-hand opponent should not call until the Stop card has been removed. The Stop card should be left on the table for about ten seconds, to give the next player time to reflect. It should not be removed prematurely.

After a jump bid the next player must pause for about ten seconds before calling. It is an offence either not to pause or to show indifference when pausing. If the Stop card has been removed prematurely or has not been used, an opponent should pause as though the Stop card had been used correctly.

Problem 1 tends to come with those auctions where it seems unnecessary. If the opponents start:

West	North	East	South
	1♦	Pass	2♠ (Strong)
Pass	4♠		

then few would dream of coming in at this stage. Similarly a simple auction by the opponents of:

West	North	East	South
	1NT	Pass	3NT

is also fairly unlikely to attract action. The answer to these situations is first, that it is easier to have a simple blanket rule with no exceptions. Writing the exceptions would be quite difficult. The second reason is that just because people are not thinking about bidding doesn't mean they don't have a problem. You hold:

The opponents bid 1NT-3NT and it is your lead. You might decide to lead a heart simply because it is the fourth highest from your longest and strongest suit. Alternatively, given partner has most of your side's points, you might try a spade. If partner habitually passes quickly in this auction but on this occasion thinks for a while, he might be thinking of

doubling (more likely this than he is thinking of bidding). If you now lead a spade when he has passed out of tempo, you may be guilty of using unauthorised information. It is also likely you will end up getting ruled against if the director is called and the facts established.

Over the pond

The ACBL (American Contract Bridge League) have just decided to remove the Stop card from all its bidding boxes from January 1st 2018. This will apply at all its tournaments. ACBL clubs, as in England, can decide for themselves. The removal doesn't mean that the obligation to bid in tempo has been removed. In their opinion the pluses of playing the card do not outweigh the minuses. Of course if everyone did bid in even tempo no matter what the auction and players did not take advantage of hesitations, long pauses or even instant action we would not need any Stop cards at all.

Here is another auction:

West	North	East	South
1♥	4♠	?	

Now perhaps you would like to think of bidding or doubling. Partner might wish to re-open. If you pass very quickly then you are in breach of the regulation and partner knows (and shouldn't) that you were not close to taking any action. If on the other hand you think for a long time and then pass, partner knows it is likely you have something to think about, encouraging him perhaps to take action based on unauthorised information. Much of this is sub-conscious. Very few players deliberately set out to take advantage, but if there is a problem will show you their hand and say how 'obvious' it was to take the action they did, oblivious to the fact that their partner's hesitation or lack of it made a difference.

One disadvantage of the Stop card procedure is that it is one more thing (amongst many) for beginners and those new to duplicate to learn and manage. Beginners almost never deliberately take advantage of any

unauthorised information. They don't know how. If we move to the world of automated bridge at some time in the future then the electronic brain will be able to deliver bids to us in regular tempo as happens in online bridge already.

It's possible to abolish the card but still require people to pause as is being suggested in North America. The question, perhaps, is whether appropriate tempo will happen as often if the card is scrapped.

Should we change?

What should we do in England? I think the first requirement, whether we use the Stop card or say 'Stop', is to have something which persuades us to bid in tempo. Nearly everyone accepts that in the play it is wrong to think with a singleton except perhaps at trick one. Acceptance that there is a requirement to bid in tempo has been harder to achieve over the years. 'Why should I pretend to think when I have a balanced one-count?'

It's not a bad idea to have a discussion as to whether we retain the card or not. Whatever we decide I think it is better if we have a default. Whilst clubs are free to do their own thing with regulation (but not the law) it is rarely a good idea to set up a situation where one uses the Stop card in the club played in on Monday but not in the one played in on Thursday.

If we were to scrap the card (and the words) we would have removed one piece of regulation and helped those joining the game, but would we make a lot of auctions more difficult? It's worth remembering that, currently, if someone fails to use the Stop card then he may have breached a regulation, but you as the next player still have an absolute obligation to bid in appropriate tempo.

Your view?

So what do you think about keeping the procedure, whether it involves the Stop card or just the words? ■