



Being Competitive

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 Are bridge players too competitive? What is wrong with a pleasant game of an afternoon or an evening without those who wish to win at all costs?

A I suppose the answer might be 'nothing' and we can all move on, but it isn't quite as simple as that. If you go and play bridge at your local club, the first requirement is that you have a good time. There are things that can spoil your enjoyment. Perhaps you play very badly, perhaps you are unlucky and the opponents drop your doubleton queen having bid a grand slam, maybe an opponent gloats over his good result or summons a tournament director abruptly, alleging you have done something awful. Those events divide into two categories. Those you can do something about and those you can't.

A club that was considering affiliating to the EBU had a major reservation and that was that they would be propelled into a much more competitive world than they wanted. Masterpoints, NGS, unpleasant and over-competitive people. Whatever the merits or otherwise of affiliation the club would still be the same place. If it had visitors (and there wouldn't be many) it is up to the club to set the standards they want and from the point of view of the regular game there is no reason why the mood should change. Quite a few clubs have a free play voucher for those who win the duplicate, a small competitive token. You don't see arm wrestling at the table and 25 calls for the director as a

result and nor should you.

Bridge should be a pleasant and enjoyable game but it is also a competitive game. When at university I was introduced to some game theory in the shape of the 'Prisoner's dilemma'. This sort of thing was well thought of 45 years ago. Essentially it was all about whether you competed or sought to co-operate. It appeared to be in your best interests to co-operate but many participants did not and I'm afraid I fell into this category. I wanted to win. In my opinion if you participate in games you are likely to have a competitive streak. It is all a matter of how you control it. Recently, I was lucky enough to be invited to play some rubber bridge at the Portland Club in London, one of the oldest card clubs in the world. A reasonable amount of money will change hands of an evening but the behaviour of all is impeccable. No-one shouts or complains or moans. If someone does something good he is congratulated and the experience of the evening is a very pleasant one, unless you pick up no cards at all in which case a drink and pleasant company dull the pain.

Too many regulations?

When something goes wrong a common complaint is that there are too many regulations or perhaps that they are bad or unfairly applied. Games need some law and regulation. It is fundamental to bridge that you follow suit, so if you revoke you often gain an advantage that the law will redress. You can argue about whether

the revoke made any difference but in the end it is probably simpler to have a straightforward rule. In the 1940s a revoke cost four tricks, (big punishment element here). These days the principle of the law is more about 'rectification' rather than punishment. Usually a revoke costs one trick but the director can adjust the score if, for example, your revoke cut declarer off from five winners in the dummy.

Generally it is a poor idea to argue about such a situation at the table, not just because of the arguing but because most players don't actually know the law. The worst are those who say, 'We don't need the director because the law is...'. This is often followed by a statement wildly at odds with what the law actually is.

Directors and scorers

In a club the best thing is to have a calm person with some training. Good clubs send volunteers off for a little training. There has long been director training, but recently an introductory shorter course for club directors has been introduced. Anyone from a club, affiliated or not, can attend. Details at <http://www.ebedcio.org.uk/td-training>. We take it for granted that someone will produce a score at the end of an evening and in many clubs this will appear on the internet pretty quickly. Both the scorer and any director are volunteers and help the game go more smoothly for the enjoyment of more players. These days, because most scoring is done by computer and, in many clubs, with

Bridgemates or similar devices, there is also a need for a skill here. EBU clubs can use, for free, a program called EBUScore if they wish (unaffiliated clubs can use it at a modest charge).

The director and the scorer make for a more pleasant game for everyone. No need for dispute, let a director decide. As well as the law about which you have no choice there is a matter of regulation. Do you alert or announce? What conventions may you play? Many clubs have no problem with any of this and simply adopt the EBU position (as a matter of simplicity and practicality), but in theory whilst clubs can't make their own laws anything regarding regulation is up to them. It is up to the regulators to make their regulations understandable, not too complex and not requiring the strength of ten people to pick up the manual. The same applies to other games. Years ago I used to umpire for a pub cricket side. There was a pleasant knock-out tournament which led, if you were moderately successful, to you visiting most of Southern England's minor cricket grounds and enjoying a good tea. It wasn't very serious but all the players wanted an official to sort out any rule difficulty and, other than meeting one umpire who was hopelessly biased, it worked very well.

Dealing with mishaps

The 'pleasant gamers' will tell you that all this competitiveness is responsible for a loss of enjoyment. Can you imagine someone at the local club telling his partner out loud, whilst defending, what cards he holds? That would be received, unsurprisingly, with indignation and an invitation not to darken the doors of the club ever again.

It is a fundamental principle that you make decisions at the bridge table based on 'authorised information'. Partner opens 1♠. You know he has an opening bid and spades is his longest or joint longest suit. That's an example of something you know from totally legal sources and is authorised. We could play at a club for most, if not all, of our life before coming across someone who openly cheats, but people do sometimes use unauthorised

information ie something they know other than by a legitimate bid or play. This is often caused by a misunderstanding of the law, so if your partner follows to a play slowly then it is likely he has not got a singleton. You only know this because he has played slowly and you should not use this information to plan the defence. It is sometimes hard to play completely in tempo and, as a competitor, most do not want the director at the table every other round so tend to let it go.

The opponents open 1NT. Your defence to that is 2♣ shows the majors. You forget, bid 2♣ but only have clubs. Partner alerts and bids 2♥. The alert wakes you up to the fact you have forgotten. If you use the alert to now help you decide to bid 3♣ then you are using unauthorised information.

The pleasant gamer will now say that by calling the director you are spoiling everyone's enjoyment, but in reality if they held themselves to higher standards it should not be a problem. Sometimes, it is fair to say, players who are relative beginners do not understand all this and need some gentle encouragement rather than the full majesty of the law. Most players use their judgement, in the same way as they would not seek to enforce a rule that said you must stick with a card played if it were dropped on the floor by an octogenarian with acute arthritis. In short it is how you deal with problems rather than the problems themselves that make the game a pleasant one or not.

Club environment

The club sets up the right environment, one where good behaviour and fair play are important. They have a director who is trained to help with any difficulty at the table and avoid rancour.

The club has competitions and there may be token prizes (or not). Some players will like to look at the hands after the event and analyse their mistakes, wish to do well and note their progress whether they judge by position, masterpoints or NGS rating. Others will be less concerned. It's a big world and there ought to be room for all of us. ■

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43 TEAMS OF FOUR

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44 GAME TRIES

When your partner raises your suit to the two-level, you have a variety of options available to you. I will talk about major suit game tries and minor suit game tries, when you consider the option of a no-trump contract.

45 DISRUPTING DECLARER

A defender needs to try and predict what declarer might want to do. Your job is then to disrupt declarer's plan.

46 DEFENDING SLAMS

Making the right plays against high level contracts can make a huge difference. Knowing when to attack and when to lie low.

47 OVERCALLING

Duplicate bridge is so much more competitive now and it is important you are part of this.

48 PRESSING THE DEFENCE

As declarer there are ways you can make life more awkward for the defenders, particularly by disguising holdings in your hand for a little longer. I explore a number of tactics that will help you to exploit the defenders.

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