

Bridge Ethics – It's not Poker and It's not Golf either

by Scott Nason
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Poker Vs. Bridge

Use expression, tempo or
body language to fool

Poker

✓

Bridge

NO!

Bluff (i.e., don't have the hand)

✓

✓ as long as
Partner isn't in on it



Golf Vs. Bridge

	Golf	Bridge	Baseball/Football/Basketball
Self-confession	✓	✓	NO!
Gimmies	May be offered	May be claimed, but may be disputed	



A Short List of Dos and Don'ts

1. Do not use tempo, body language, facial expressions, emphasis, etc. to convey ANY information.
2. If your partner does so, it is your obligation to “ignore” it; that is, proceed as if it didn't happen and you learned nothing that you aren't supposed to know.
3. Do not attempt to see your opponent's cards, overhear discussions of hands you are yet to play, etc. If you do, you must either ignore that info or – if impossible – call the Director and explain the situation.
4. It is your obligation to ensure that the opponents are made aware of – or had the opportunity to learn of – your private agreements. This is done via alerts or sometimes by explanations at the end of the auction. Don't reveal your inferences, just your agreements.



Sample Ethical Problems – Failure to Alert

Partner opens 1S. You make a “Bergen” Limit Raise of 3D – promising 10-12 points and four or more spades – and partner does not alert. The opponents ask what it is and your partner says “weak”, apparently thinking that you have a bad hand with long diamonds. He then bids 3S. You?



Ethical Problems – Partner didn't alert

It is nearly automatic that you must pass. And then, once the auction is over and your partner is declarer, you correct the misinformation, assuming that you are correct about your actual agreement. If not, you need say nothing.

You **MAY NOT** act on the information that partner didn't realize what your bid meant.

A possible exception is that you bid 3D, always intending to raise 3S to 4S with a hand that 1) has extra spades/shape, but 2) felt too good for a 4S bid and not good enough for a game-forcing response. And then be prepared to defend the action against pushback from the opponents and the Director.



Ethical Problems – Mistaken Explanation

Now let's turn things around. Partner opens 1S. You hold 1372 shape and make a weak 3D bid. The opponents ask what it is and your partner says "A limit raise with four spades" and bids 3S. Your RHO bids 4C. Can you bid 4D?



Ethical Problems – Partner Misunderstood

Probably not. You told your story the first time – even if partner didn't get the message. If you are bidding 4D because partner might have diamonds and doesn't know you do, then definitely not. If you are bidding 4D to make sure partner – thinking you have four spades – doesn't bid 4S, then doubly definitely not. With eight diamonds ... maybe.

If you pass and the contract is 4C, then what do you do to correct the misinformation.

1. You should not say anything NOW, since that will tell partner your actual hand and help him defend.
2. After the hand is over, you should definitely explain the situation, but the opponents are only entitled to help (relief) if partner's explanation was incorrect under your agreements, not if you simply made a mistake.



Ethical Problems – You forgot!

Partner opens 1S. You forget that you play Bergen raises and you bid 3S. Partner explains that you have 3-6 points and four spades. He raises to 4S, showing a VERY good hand.

You have 12 points and three spades and think there may be a slam. Can you make a slam try?



You forgot – can you “fix things”?

NO. You must bid as if partner knew you had a limit raise, in which case you aren't close to making a slam try.



Ethical Problems – Letting Partner Know

Your RHO opens 3D and you have a very bad hand. You should

1. Pass very quickly, so your partner will know you don't have much.
2. Think for a long time so your partner won't know that you have a bad hand.
3. Take several seconds – about ten – to look like you are considering your options, then pass.



Ethical Problems – When you have no problem

3. Take several seconds – about ten – to look like you are considering your options, then pass.

You are obligated to wait a bit, so as not to convey your lack of any problem, but not TOO long.

- This used to be “requested” by the STOP card, which was played by the preemptor.
- Although the use of the stop card was discontinued, the obligation to take ten seconds STILL EXISTS.



Ethical Problems – Partner's Hesitation

Your LHO opens 3D and your partner takes a long time to think before passing. You should:

1. Pass?
2. Bid?
3. Do whatever you want?



Ethical Problems – After Partner Hesitates

The answer is 3 – do whatever you want – as long as it is not “suggested” by partner’s long hesitation. That is, you are entitled to bid YOUR hand, but not to use the information – known as Unauthorized Information – from your partner’s obvious consideration.



Ethical Problems – Partner's Tempo

You open 2NT and partner bids 3NT.

You play that this bid shows 5S and 4H, but you think he may have forgotten.

Should you alert and reveal what the bid should mean?
Should you pass with four spades? Four hearts? Three spades?



Ethical Problems – Partner “forgot”?

The alert is automatic. You **MUST** alert and reveal what the bid promised.

As far as passing vs. bidding, your obligation is to make sure that you are not acting upon **ANY** hint from partner’s tempo, expression, emphasis that might have suggested that he forgot.

- Two real-life examples ...



Ethical Problems – Now That Partner Knows

You think that he bid so quickly that you are pretty sure he forgot, so you “Do the right thing” and bid 4S. Now partner, having made a mistake, knows you expect him to have five spades, but what if he only has two? Or three?

Can he bid 4NT?



Ethical Problems – What Can Partner Do?

Partner must bid as if you knew he had a standard 3NT bid, in which case your 4S bid would show five spades.

With three spades, it is a no-brainer. Partner must pass. With two, he might reasonably “correct” back to 4NT, but must do so without any hint that he didn’t have 5S and 4H to begin with. And he should be prepared for the possibility that you will think 4NT is ace-asking. But you might now deduce that partner blew it.



Ethical Problems – Partner “forgot”?

And a personal story ...



Ethical Problems – Concealing from Declarer

After opening 3S, your RHO lands in 6S and you lead a heart. Dummy comes with Axxx in spades and you hold a small singleton. It sure looks like partner has a singleton. What if it is the K? How can you dissuade declarer from going up with the A and dropping partner's K?



Ethical Problems - Pretending


You prepare for this and when declarer leads the SQ, you hesitate about 5 seconds before playing your spade and declarer takes a losing finesse to partner's stiff K.

You are a great poker player, but in bridge you are cheating. It is not only unethical, it is expressly prohibited to hesitate with a singleton, in order to "look like" you had a problem. You may take a second or two - normal tempo - but anything more would be a No No!



Declarer's Inferences

Now let's turn it around. You opened 3S, partner bid 6S and YOU hold QJxxxxx opposite dummy's Axxx. You win the first trick in hand and quickly plop the SQ on the table. Your LHO flinches and takes a few seconds before playing low. You know that it is totally unethical and cheating for LHO to pretend to have a problem when they don't. But can YOU take advantage of their hesitation?

While you may not take inferences from your partner's hesitations, it is perfectly okay to infer from the opponents, although the rules make it clear that it is at your own risk. If you misread their problem, that is on you, but they can't intentionally mislead you with their tempo or mannerisms. 

Sample Ethical Problems – Partner's hesitation

You and partner are bidding spades and they are bidding hearts. After you bid 4S, your LHO bids 5H. Partner thinks for about 30 seconds before doubling. You are on the fence between passing or bidding 5S. Should you pull partner's iffy double?



Ethical Problems – Partner's hesitation

Partner's long hesitation suggests that she is unsure, so you take the hint and bid 5S.

NOOOOO.

Partner's hesitation SUGGESTS her uncertainty, so you need to be MORE CERTAIN, in order to pull it. Unless pulling it is clear-cut, you need to pass.



Ethical Problems – What is our Agreement?

Partner makes a bid and you aren't sure what you agreed to. Are we playing 1430 or 3014? Is 2NT after a weak two Ogust or feature-asking?

Is it okay to consult your convention card? Sneak a peak? NOOOO. You must do the best you can with what you remember (unless you are playing on BBO, where looking at your card is permitted.)

What if you are asked? You should answer as best you remember. If you are wrong about what partner intended, that is fine. If you are wrong about your agreement, the opponents may be entitled to protection. And, of course, your explanation is unauthorized information to your partner, who may not take advantage of your mistaken recollection.



Ethics Pays ... Sometimes

Playing against an intermediate pair, I observe the following auction, with our side passing throughout:

1NT-2C-2H-4NT-5C

at which point my LHO hems and haws and makes some faces and finally throws down the 5NT card with a bit of disgust. 5NT should be a King ask, but she sure looks like she is trying to sign off. After my partner passes, my RHO goes into the tank and I prepare to call the director if he passes.

No. He makes the ethical system bid of 6C, showing the CK. LHO now throws the 6NT bid on the table, fulling expecting to go down. I am holding the CA and DK and think she is probably right. But no, with spades 3/3, hearts 3/3 and the diamond finesse winning, they take the first 12 tricks. A top for them and a bottom for us.



Do the Right Thing

One final “suggestion”:

You are a fairly experienced pair and your opponents are not. You have an auction that includes some bids that they likely did not understand, but were not explicitly required alerts. Examples might include minorwood, exclusion Blackwood, 1D-1S-4D (showing 6/4), 1NT-2H (by the opponents) -3NT (denying a H stopper), etc. What should you do?

- It is not correct to alert bids that are not alertable, as that might convey UI to your partner. But at the end of the auction, it is “right” to explain the auction to your opponents.



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Thank You for joining me today

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