

Warwick Regional, 2012 – Unauthorized Information

	♠ J 7 4	
North Deals	♥ K 10 8 7 4	
Both Vul	♦ 8	
	♣ K Q 5 3	
♠ A 10 8		♠ 5 2
♥ A Q J 9 3		♥ 6 5
♦ A 7 6 5		♦ Q J 4 2
♣ 2		♣ A 9 8 7 4
	♠ K Q 9 6 3	
	♥ 2	
	♦ K 10 9 3	
	♣ J 10 6	

NS 2♠; W 2♥; NS 1N; EW 2♦; E 1♥; EW 1♣

	West North	East	South
	<i>Pete</i>	<i>Gary</i>	
	Pass	Pass	1 ♠
	2 ♥ Dbl ¹	Pass	Pass → 3 ♦ ²
	Pass	3 ♠	All pass

1. negative (long hesitation)
2. South passed; director required change of call

After my 2♥ overcall, North thought a long time before doubling. South then passed smoothly. I called the director, just to be protected. Ascertaining that North-South were playing negative doubles, as marked on their card, the director took one look at South's hand, and told her to pick again. We set the resulting 3♠ contract one, +100.

After the play, discussion made it clear that neither opponent thought she had done anything wrong. North said she wanted to try for penalties, planning to show her 3-card spade support, if necessary. South's pass of the negative double (a takeout double by responder), reading the slow double, was blatantly unethical. The slow pass is not unethical, assuming no intent to use the slowness to communicate to partner.

Here's an old story about social bridge, totally against the rules: when opening a short club, the player says "a club", but with a real club suit, it's "one club;" finally, with a big hand, it's "I'll start with a club."

Any mannerism, inflection, or timing of a bid or play may communicate information to the rest of the table. That information may be used by the opponents at their own risk, but it is *unauthorized information* for partner. It is unethical to make a choice of plausible actions suggested by unauthorized information. (It is also unethical to bait the opponents with false mannerisms, etc.)

It is appropriate to call the director at the point an infraction is suspected. Get help, don't get angry. (In this case, the laws state to call when play ends, but that calling earlier or later is not an infraction.)

While I can make 2♥X, there is no guarantee that I would. Par is 2♠S, -110, so we did fine. I was content with the ruling at the table, and I made that clear when I posted an early version of this article to mitdlbc-discuss@mit.edu. I have incorporated above many comments from the lively discussion. Several people

pointed out that there was no justification in the laws for the director's "pick again" ruling. Tim Frances-Wright commented in detail:

North has every right to pass here in the hopes that partner can double. It's gambling bridge, but it could pay off if (say) East has the three missing hearts, or if you overcalled on AQJx and East raises on three small. Then North could double for blood even if South passes.

Doubling here is anti-system, but North is allowed to make that bid, even slowly. The problem with doubling slowly is that it passes information to partner.

There are two laws that should constrain South here. Law 73C says she "must carefully avoid taking any advantage from that unauthorized information." If she thinks that the slow double might be for penalties, she cannot violate her system and pass with her hand.

Law 16B1 says she "may not choose from among logical alternatives one that could demonstrably have been suggested over another by the extraneous information." A logical alternative is an action that "among the class of players in question and using the methods of the partnership, would be given serious consideration by a significant proportion of such players, of whom it is judged some might select it." Here, the slow double shows that it is not a classic negative double, and I would rule that the slow double could demonstrably show hearts. (The laws before 1997 had weaker language than "demonstrably.") Here, it's hard to make a list of logical alternatives besides 3D, but the ACBL Laws Commission has, reasonably, opined that an illogical alternative picked at the table are included in the logical alternatives.

It is easy for players, especially novices, to run afoul of Law 16B1 because coming up with the logical alternatives on the fly is not always easy, and deciding whether UI suggests one over another is not always easy, and deciding what one's peers might do is not always easy. But Law 73C is something that no player should be violating--it has a lower standard to meet, and South utterly failed to meet it.

Alas, someone else who failed to meet their standards was the director. He cannot roll back the auction here (he could in the case of misinformation by you and Gary but that's not the case here).

The first reason not to do it is that you might make 2HX--you are allowed to benefit here, and the director took that away from you. Allowing South to withdraw a bid, while it would not matter here, could pass UI back to North in similar situations on other hands.) I think you're a favorite to make 2H here.

The second reason is that the director is supposed to assess whether you were damaged after the hand. And redress for that is complicated in the ACBL--N-S are supposed to get the most unfavorable result that was at all probable had the irregularity not occurred, and E-W are supposed to get the most favorable result that was likely. I think here, that both sides will get 3S-1, but it's possible that they deserve 3S*-1. The director will need to ponder these possibilities, and should not be punting them by rolling back the auction.

The third reason is that the director should be assessing a penalty on N-S for the blatant use of UI. It could be as mild as a stern warning or as severe as a fraction of a top board. (I would impose the former on a pair of relative novices.)

Finally, one thing to note is that it is correct to call the director as early as the time when North makes a very slow double, but the 2008 Laws allow the contestants at the table to agree about the break in tempo (16B2, which is technically about reserving one's rights to call the director later).

In my posting to the list, I used the C-word, which commenters and I agree was inappropriate. Gary Schwartz, my partner at the table, noted:

The director made the right ruling for supervised play, which was about right for the NS skill level. Unfortunately the event was a regional open pairs.

I hesitate to say the south player was unethical, because I doubt that anyone ever told her what constitutes ethical play. (And the director missed his chance to be the first.) So while "cheating" is an appropriate choice of words for what south tried to do (take advantage of partner's tempo), a distinction should be drawn between cheating that takes the form of unethical play by the clueless, and deliberate, premeditated, illegal action (a la, say, Steve Sion or Moses Ma).

Steve Willner's *Unauthorized Information at the Bridge Table* on our site is an excellent introduction to this topic.
- Pete Matthews