

Alerts and Unauthorized Information - By Peter Morse

(from the Winter 2013 Matchpointer)

In the past few weeks I have had several experiences where players, having passed throughout the auction and sitting in the pass - out seat when their partner would be on lead, either decided to ask questions about the auction or looked like they were ready to do so. When I (or my partner) have suggested that perhaps they should wait to ask their question(s) until their partner has led face down, this has been met with "oh no, it is my turn to bid and I can ask anything I want". In a couple of cases, they were less experienced players who perhaps had learned about this aspect of the game from other novices, but two others were very experienced players, who had many masterpoints to their credit. The thought that their questions may pass unauthorized information (UI) to their partner was either being ignored or had not entered their mind

While most players are not thinking about passing unauthorized information (UI) to their partner when they ask a question, there are some who, not having bid "their" suit earlier in the auction, will then pick one of dummy's bids as the subject of a question. My favourite one of these occurred about 10 years ago when a very competent local player, following an auction that went 2C - 2N - 3N (opponents passing throughout), then sitting behind what would be dummy, decided to ask whether 2C was a strong 2 club bid, and his partner duly led a club, ultimately defeating the contract, when the opening leader's hand held about 10 other cards that made more sense as an opening lead. I have also once witnessed the other side of this type of situation when a player asked an equally inappropriate question, and his partner, with a natural lead in the inferred suit, refused to lead it and later chastised his partner, as the question had, in effect, taken away his natural lead as an option

Law 16 A of the Laws of Duplicate Bridge tells us that extraneous information can be given by "a remark (including an alert or an announcement), a question, a reply to a question, or by unmistakable hesitation, unwonted speed, special emphasis, tone, gesture, movement, mannerism or the like." In practice, extraneous information from partner nearly always will result in Unauthorized Information

But with the number of alertable bids these days, what is one to do if you have a question, either because you are thinking of bidding, or because the implications of some bids are unclear? There are a number of steps you can take to avoid Director calls, hard feelings or other equally embarrassing outcomes

One option is to say, "could you please explain the auction" either when you are on lead or when your partner has led "face down". (As an aside, it is always advisable to lead face down, in case partner does wish an explanation of the auction.) It is not good practice to specify a particular bid, or point to a specific bidding card to ask what the meaning is. These and similar other practices frequently cause UI to pass to your partner

The declaring side can help the defenders avoid asking inappropriate questions, especially if they have had a complex auction, by asking whether the defenders would like the auction explained before the opening lead is made

Another option is to recognize that, if it is one of dummy's bids that you wish to question, the dummy will be exposed as soon as the opening lead is made, and certainly before you have to

play to trick one, so there is no need to ask a question to clarify your understanding of dummy's hand. But what about bids that have been alerted during the auction? This is where you need to be very careful about asking questions to avoid passing UI. A simple "Please explain" may be quite acceptable, especially if you do it right after every alertable bid, but this will often slow down all auctions unnecessarily, and is not recommended

Where problems start to arise is when you ask only about certain bids, and a regular partner learns (often subconsciously) that you only ask about suits in which you have interest. Rather than asking about every call, ask about the rare ones you truly need to know about, perhaps because you are contemplating action, and a small number of other random alertable calls

Players, especially novices, often ask questions during an auction simply because they are interested in what the bid means, or because it is a convention they don't play and they would like to know about it. If the answer is not going to affect your bidding or play on the current hand, these questions are best left until after the hand, or between rounds. Most good players will be happy to take the time to explain, except perhaps in the rare situation when one or the other opponent has made a mistake and is a little touchy about it being probed

To be clear, asking about alertable bids is completely appropriate at times, especially when you are thinking of bidding. The UI that the question might generate is not an offense, but acting on it is, and now your partner, in receipt of possible UI may be restricted as to his/her actions. This sometimes means passing when you would otherwise have made a call or not leading a suit (that your partner has drawn attention to) which you were intending to lead, if you have a logical alternative lead. The Rules state that "Partner may not choose from among logical alternatives one that could demonstrably have been suggested over another by the extraneous information." Another no - no is to ask whether a bid is a specific conventional bid, as in "Is that Stayman?" or "Does that show clubs and hearts?" as this action may pass UI to partner. Also, there are many variations of commonly named conventions, and if you ask, "Is that bid Stayman?" you may get a simple "yes" answer when in fact your opponents play it slightly, or significantly differently than you do. I learned this a number of years ago, when picking up partners at several NABC's. Virtually every named convention has a "reverse" or "modified" version.

Rather, by asking your opponents to explain a bid, you should be provided with full disclosure and an explanation of any nuances. If a specific bid is relevant to your bidding interest or, after the auction is over, perhaps to your selection of an opening lead, again simply say, "please explain" the auction, not "what does the 3H bid show?" It should be noted that if your opponents have failed to alert a bid that should have been alerted, your side will often be given a more favourable result, if it can be demonstrated that you would/could have taken additional bidding action, or made a different lead if the proper alert had been made. Always in this situation it is best to call the Director after the hand (in some cases immediately after the auction) and let him/her determine the appropriate sanction that will be applied

In some cases the Director may award an adjusted score, in part based on actions taken at other tables, or by surveying a couple of players who had not played the hand

There are many other situations where UI can be created, for instance by hesitation or by picking up on partner's failure to alert one of your bids or by overhearing of a discussion of results at the next table when you will soon be playing a board. For some reason, where

travelling scoreslips are used, there is very little post hand discussion as all players can usually see the previous results. But these days, with the scoring machines, there is more 'reading off' the results by one player, and voices do carry to the nearby tables

There are also times when UI is created, ethically and legally. When this happens, being in receipt of the UI is not an offense, but, again, acting on it is and you must take extra care not to take advantage of the UI.