

ZERO TOLERANCE REVISITED - WE CAN DO MUCH BETTER

by Peter Morse, President, ACBL Unit 430

When the ACBL introduced the Zero Tolerance Policy (ZT) a number of years ago, it was intended to create a much more pleasant atmosphere in ACBL Tournaments, including NABCs. It was then picked up as a standard by many (most) clubs. The stated objective of the ACBL at the time of introduction was 'to eradicate unacceptable behavior in order to make the game of bridge more enjoyable for all'.

The following were given as examples of behaviour that will not be tolerated:

- Badgering, rudeness, insinuations, intimidation, profanity, threats or violence.
- Negative comments concerning opponents' or partner's play or bidding.
- Constant and gratuitous lessons and analyses at the table.
- Loud and disruptive arguing with a Director's ruling.

The Policy went on to state that if a player at the table behaves in an unacceptable manner, the Director should be called **immediately**. Annoying behavior, embarrassing remarks, and any other conduct which might interfere with the enjoyment of the game for others is specifically prohibited by Law 74A. Law 91A gives the Director the authority to assess disciplinary penalties. But this rarely happens and the problem expands, especially in the actions of result oriented players

At the time ZT was introduced, there was usually an announcement before tournaments (and some club games) that the Zero Tolerance Policy was in effect. Over time, these announcements have dwindled and in many cases have disappeared entirely, although the ZT Policy actually remains in effect at ACBL sponsored events. But some clubs, with considerable effort by the club owners and Directors and by the players themselves, have maintained a clean, friendly environment while still producing a strong competitive bridge game. Others, 'not so much', as the following examples taken from local club games over the last couple of months indicate:

- (a) While my partner was in the middle of playing a doubled contract as declarer, her right hand opponent made a disgusting vulgar comment without any provocation or incentive. This totally destroyed her concentration, and caused her to leave the game shortly thereafter. When the offender got around to offering a half-hearted apology a couple of days later, he turned the situation around by suggesting that 'there would not have been a problem if you weren't so sensitive'. It had been reported to the Director who mentioned the events to the club owner, who didn't seem overly concerned, suggesting that 'that's just "Charlie", he always talks like that, and his (female) partner (that day) tolerates his language'.
- (b) A partner of mine, while playing against much less experienced players, after his LHO had made a 'slow pass' and while his RHO was contemplating a bid, offered an intended friendly word of advice "you realize that if you bid I am going to call the Director". When his RHO then did justifiably (in her mind) make a bid, he shouted "DIRECTOR" and she broke into tears. While there is nothing wrong with a Director call by my partner in this situation, the earlier threats / intimidation are inappropriate, especially by an experienced player to an inexperienced player. It may be unrelated, but I have not seen the offended player back at this club since the event described above.
- (c) One local expert has a tendency, whenever in a disagreement with either a partner or opponent, to raise his voice and keeps on raising it as the discussion ensues, thereby disturbing the players at all the surrounding tables.

- (d) While playing in a club game, I reached 4H in a competitive auction in which my RHO had bid spades at his second turn after his partner had competed in another suit. After the first few tricks it became apparent that RHO had at least 9 and likely 10 cards in two non-trump suits including the one he had bid, and not many high card points given his late entry into the auction. Missing four trumps to the Q, I elected to finesse against LHO, which was successful in uncovering a 3-1 trump split, and the contract was made. When the machine results showed some pairs had gone down, likely by playing for 2-2 trumps, my RHO indirectly accused me of cheating when he bitterly admonished his partner to 'hold your cards so they can't be seen'. The partner suggested this comment was inappropriate, to which RHO replied "No, Peter's a big boy, he can take it".
- (e) A regular partner of mine, playing with another player, made a 1NT overcall. At the end of the hand, when she had achieved a good result, one of her opponents scoffed at her overcall with 'that's a terrible 1NT overcall'.

These situations happen frequently, often when a player or pair think they have achieved a poor result on a board. Rather than examining their own actions or bidding options, there is a tendency to blame their opponents. In many cases, the opposition bid which they subsequently ridicule could easily have been doubled for profit or used as the basis for a cue bid. But it is easier for them to place the 'blame' on the opponents. In other cases, they are just trying to show off what they think they know.

When these extraneous comments are made by so-called experts, it is common for less experienced players not to take any action (such as calling the Director) and the offensive comments continue to be made by these 'experts'. A further problem is that newer players see this take place, and think it is acceptable action to critique their partner's or the opponents' bidding or play at the table. And an additional problem is that some Directors rarely apply penalties to repeat offenders, perhaps because that is their club's attitude to ZT offenses, or because they don't want to upset regular players at the club.

But these inappropriate actions continue, in part because many players, even though offended, don't 'rock the boat' when they occur. If players call the Director more often after being subjected to profanity, critical comments or rude behavior, we will see a decline in that offensive behavior, especially when material penalties are applied by Directors to repeat offenders. If a player behaves in an unacceptable manner, the Director should be called immediately. It then becomes the responsibility of the Director or Club Owner (in extreme cases) to take appropriate action.

Fortunately some club managers and Directors make table behavior and manners a priority, and continue to draw players into the game because of their pleasant atmosphere. In some cases this requires the occasional 'chat' with offenders. I recently had the pleasure of attending the AGM at the Duplicate Lite Bridge Club in Surrey, where it was refreshing to hear the discussion about the positive attitudes prevalent in the Club, and the occasional different atmosphere which occurs when some rude 'experts' show up for the monthly club championship games.

But we continue to lose players at other clubs because of the 'poisoned' atmosphere brought on by repeated ZT offenses. Players rarely announce that they are leaving, they just come back less frequently or not at all. We have not yet noticed a falloff in table counts at our Sectionals, primarily because the number of new players starting to play in some of the popular clubs has offset any losses.

But the Unit 430 Board is very concerned with the ZT problem and has decided to request our Directors to enforce Zero Tolerance at all Unit 430 sponsored-events.

This includes our Sectionals, Future Stars (non-Life Master) Sectionals, 199er Sectionals, Monthly Unit Games and Mentor-Mentee Games. Repeat offenders will be subject to penalties which may involve matchpoint penalties, suspension from participation, or expulsion for serious offenses.

If you experience someone exhibiting discourteous behaviour in one of our events, please call the Director immediately. If it has become necessary for you to do so, you may simply state that “this player is interfering with my enjoyment of the game” and describe why.

The Unit Board cannot control the behaviour standards in local Clubs, but we hope that by changing the tolerance for ZT offenses at our Unit sponsored events, the behaviour modifications which we seek will carry over to Club games.

When researching some material for this article, I came upon the following list entitled ‘How to Be a Good Partner’, written by popular author Marty Bergen more than 30 years ago. It is worth repeating.

1. Remember that this is only a card game. Have a good time and make sure partner does too.
2. Don't give lessons to partner or opponents, unless you are being paid to do so.
3. Like partner and root for him/her 100 percent. Remember you and partner are on the same side... and [partner] wants to win as much as you do. It's also OK to be nice to a partner you happen to live with.
4. When you choose to play bridge with someone, it is unfair to get upset when he/she doesn't play any better than usual.
5. Never say anything to partner unless you would want him/her to say it to you. Never “result” (criticize partner for a normal action that did not work this time).
6. If you feel the urge to be nasty, sarcastic or critical, excuse yourself and take a walk.
7. When you have time between hands, try to discuss topics other than bridge. Never discuss a hand just played with your partner, except to clear up a misunderstanding in bidding or defense agreements.
8. Think twice before verbally analyzing a hand (you may be wrong). Never assume partner made a mistake until the hand is over and you have time to think it through.
9. When asking another player about a disaster, ask about **your** hand, not partner's. Don't ever criticize or embarrass partner in front of others. Never side with an opponent against your partner.
10. If you are too good for a partner, or don't enjoy playing with him/her, choose someone else next time rather than being a martyr (but don't ‘dump’ a partner unless you are sure).