

Sailing close to the wind

"Latty is sailing very close to the wind in the way he runs that club," was loudly proclaimed elsewhere, so let me reply and explain why I chose to operate as I do.

Having taught bridge for many years it became increasingly frustrating and depressing as to how few students went on to play duplicate. Oh yes! They loved their classes and their social rubber bridge, but duplicate, in a club? No thank you! Even when one could find a club that would welcome relative beginners the first experience was usually enough to persuade them they had made a big mistake!

3% ATTRACTION?

I think I am right in saying that a few years ago it was estimated that only three percent of beginners went on to play duplicate. Even if the figure was six percent think what that means in terms of numbers of beginners lost, not only to duplicate but also to the English Bridge Union, and if, as is more likely, the figure is only two percent, well.

But it is not only beginners who fail to play duplicate bridge: there are untold numbers of those who would love to have played and, indeed, many tried, but were frightened off by the attitude of other players and by coming up against a vast array of artificial bids of which they had neither a wish to play nor hope of understanding.

CLUB ESSENTIALS

So in an endeavour to open up this game of duplicate bridge to the many bridge players who have been turned away or scared off, and to permit those who do play to be able to fully enjoy the game, at the start I determined several factors which would govern how the club is run.

ONE. There has to be a friendly atmosphere, without unpleasantness or gamesmanship and without fear of being told how one should have bid or played.

TWO. The Director - whoever that might be at any time - has to be in total control, which means that players are not permitted to argue or dispute a ruling on any matter at any time, although they may appeal a ruling and are welcome to query anything at the close of play.

THREE. Players should have rulings given which are basically correct and not some fantasy of an unknowing Director. Unfortunately this sometimes means the EBU have to be consulted, but not very often.

FOUR. Directors shall take into account the nature of the session being played and the standard of the players concerned. We do not want to play as if it were an international event and be told to erect screens from floor to ceiling so that players cannot see their partners.

FIVE. There must be a restriction on what conventions may be played. I confess I was hesitant in applying this but any doubts I had were quickly dispelled.

SIX. We had to be honest in what we were seeking both to provide and achieve and that there would be no compromise - not always easy, but seeing it in practice and the pleasure it brings makes it all worthwhile.

Let me come onto some specifics.

RESTRICTED CONVENTIONS

I know many players love their conventions, and why not? But where does one draw the line?

Can it possibly be fair that the vast majority of bridge players wishing to play duplicate should be liable to come up against the incredible array of complicated bidding systems that are now so prevalent in duplicate bridge from international matches to local club duplicate? And bear in mind that even with all the conventions now permitted the EBU encourage players to submit yet more for their consideration! What nonsense it all makes for the teacher who stands before a new beginners` class and seeks to sow the first seeds of interest in duplicate bridge into the minds of the students.

Interesting, is it not, that The Portland Club, probably the world's premier Rubber Bridge Club where they play for high stakes, permit virtually no conventions: it would appear that players win or lose by their own ability and not by bewildering the opponents into confused submission. The Laws Of Duplicate Contract Bridge 1997 are copyright of The Portland Club.

COMPARISONS

When others seek to throw scorn on what I have said they often quote other sports, golf in particular. But when you go onto a golf course you can be sure of exactly what you are up against: a certain number of holes, an opponent who is only allowed the same number of clubs and a ball similar to your own, and you have to play on the same course.

How different is Duplicate Bridge where, when you sit down at a table, you have no idea what you may be up against. All right. So you can ask to see the opponent's convention card - and find they are playing some complicated conventions you never heard of. What are you meant to do? Go into a huddle with partner and work out a means of defending against them? And how long is that going to take and what Director would be prepared to accept the delays? A game, did you say? A sport? Perhaps we should do as they do in some major competitions and legislate to compel players to exchange convention cards days in advance of the event.

Suppose at golf you find the opponents have introduced a new type of ball. You do not have to use it but they will. It is actually not quite round in shape, more oval, but with a square side to it. It is not actually aimed at the hole and you will not know where it is going until it lands in the hole. All very confusing, I would suggest. Not fair, did you say?

And by the way. Does the English Boxing Union permit special and confusing types of gloves to be licensed, and do the Chess authorities permit special interpretations as to how a Knight may be moved?

THE LAWS

There have been those who have been quick to condemn me for my views on the Laws. All I can say to them is that they should wake up to the realities of life at a bridge club: I do nothing that I have not experienced at most clubs at which I have played - except apply a strict Zero Tolerance Policy, and that, unfortunately, some players do not like.

All right. So I say re-deal hands thrown in on the first round; so I query the necessity of showing the stop card; so I cannot see any harm in saying to a newcomer to duplicate to take back a bid he obviously did not mean to

make. For instance: a member brings along a newcomer, who, like many newcomers, is very nervous. The member opens Two Clubs and his partner passes. Every one looks at the newcomer. He then realizes what he has done, goes bright red, and stammers an apology. Are you really going to make the pass stand? Oh yes, you will probably get a top, but if that is how you want to gain your Master Points I can only feel sorry for you - and for this game of duplicate bridge.

CONVENTION CARDS

Why kid ourselves that convention cards are sacrosanct? I doubt if I have been asked for mine five times in the past five years, and cannot remember the last time I looked at an opponent's. The only time I remember asking for the opponent's card he said he did not have one but his partner did but it probably was not what they were playing! And they were county players! And they were not penalized when the Director was called; instead, my partner and I were advised we could take longer so as to pass their one card between us. No. I do not lie. And I have to say that on the rare occasions an opponent has picked up my card one cannot help but feel it was for effect rather than guidance.

Surely it is better to tell the opponents the value of your one no-trump opening and then alert all conventional bids. My regular partner and I always tell our opponents we play the variable no-trump without being asked or waiting for them to look at our cards. Not what the Laws decree but surely reasonable.

I have taken much interest in other's convention cards this past few months and I can categorically say that very few pairs have "identically completed" cards. And that is what the laws, through the Orange Book, say they must be. Keep your eyes open and see how many players have "identically completed" cards. What is that I hear? Me? Being pedantic? Now who's talking?

PERHAPS

I will probably get the usual flack for what I now write but at least I am trying to be honest, to bring newcomers into this game and to encourage back those who gave it up as a lost cause.

I have no ulterior motive. As I said near the start, as a teacher it is just so frustrating that so much about duplicate bridge - and some of those who play it - appears to be designed to make it impossible for many who would like to play duplicate to actually do so, and I am long past the days when I might have welcomed the opportunity to play a part in the administration of the game. But somehow, somewhere along the way, duplicate bridge has lost touch with the rank and file bridge player.

On the other hand, perhaps it never was in touch, perhaps the game was not meant to be socially acceptable, but if that is so then perhaps with a new General Manager we shall see changes. Perhaps? Let us hope so.