

A BID OR NOT A BID? ---THAT IS THE QUESTION

In the early 1990's, I attended a North American Championships with my favorite partner. We entered the Red Ribbon Pairs, and we started out quite successfully--in fact, after the 1st day of the event, we had qualified for day #2 as the leaders of the event (that was back in the days when I knew how to play bridge). At the end of the session, the Director-in-Charge of the event informed us that we could arrive early the next day for a lesson in the use of bidding boxes, since we would be using them for the finals of the event.

This was my first introduction to bid boxes, and, after using them for the first session, I decided that this was the best innovation since sliced bread. I loved how they eliminated the need for constant reviews of the auction and confusion over what had actually transpired at the table. I came home from that event determined to introduce them to my local club and unit--even though they were practically unknown outside of National events. When I moved to Florida, I decided to make my club the first locally to use bid boxes for 100% of the games. Although the naysayers cried that people would never accept "those infernal things", many bridge players nowadays wouldn't even know how to bid verbally anymore. I can't think of a club anywhere in Florida that doesn't use them.

Of course, some of the rules and laws associated with the game had to be modified when bidding boxes came into widespread use. The first issue was to determine when a bid had actually been made. According to the laws, bidding verbally, a player's call (calls include bids, doubles, redoubles and passes) has been made if it is made in accordance with the appropriate regulation---for instance, a legal bid consists of a number of odd tricks (1 thru 7) and a denomination (a named suit or no trump). So, if a player says "1 heart" and this supersedes the immediate previous bid, it is a legal bid and it may not be changed unless the call that is made is inadvertent and is done so "without pause for thought".

When is a call considered to have been made using bidding boxes? Under ACBL regulations, a call is considered made when a bidding card is removed from the bidding box and held touching or nearly touching the table or maintained in such a position as to indicate the call has been made. So, the act of removing a bidding card from the box does not constitute a bid until it has been placed in one of the positions listed above. So, if a player removes the 1 club card, but does not place it anywhere near the table, and then changes it to 1 no trump and places that bid on the table, the 1 no trump bid stands. However, the removal of the 1 club card from the bid box is unauthorized information. The partner of the 1 NT bidder is not entitled to the information that partner was thinking about bidding 1 club and may take no inferences from this information. So, if responder bids a club slam with a 5 card club holding, and his bidding sequence does not indicate that his partner has 3 clubs, he may have used the unauthorized information that his partner has going to open 1 club, and that may subject the hand to adjustment by the Director. (By the way, the 1 club card that was pulled from the bid box is authorized information to the other side.)

A simple rule to follow when deciding what to bid is the one that I suggest when I'm called to the table

in such situations. I always ask that bidders think with their minds, not with their fingers. Fingering the bidding box is usually done quite innocently, but this simple act can cause many problems at the table. Please make your decisions before touching any bidding cards.

Another common situation that occurs with the bid box is the situation where a bidder pulls out a card, makes his bid, and then realizes that the incorrect card had come out of the box. What do the laws say about these situations?

Once again, we run into "inadvertent" and "without pause for thought". If the error is ruled by the Director to be inadvertent (for instance, opener bids 1 spade with a singleton spade and 5 hearts), this would constitute a mechanical error in taking a card out of the box. In such cases, the Director may allow a call to be changed until the bidder's partner has taken a call. According to regulations, the onus is on the player to convince the Director that a mechanical error has occurred. Calls from different parts of the bid box are rarely to be considered mechanical in nature--so if you pull 1NT and then try to change the call to Double---it would take a lot of convincing to make me believe that you reached for Double and mistakenly pulled the 1NT card. (In fact, you'd probably be have more success trying to win the lottery without buying a ticket.) I must be convinced that this was "a slip of the finger" and not "a slip of the mind".

There's an easy solution to the problem of pulling the wrong bidding card. Simply look down at the table after you've placed a bid on the table. Then, if the card isn't the one which you think you've made, call the Director at once.

For my part, I think that the bidding box is the best thing that has happened to duplicate bridge in the 20+ years that I've been playing. My colleague, Karl Miller, may not always agree (he's responsible for transporting 300+ tables of bidding boxes from regional to regional). But otherwise, the introduction of bidding boxes has made a great game even more enjoyable for the majority of our players.

And, just in case you're curious, partner and I dropped from 1st to 24th on the 2nd day of the Red Ribbon Pairs---damn---it must have been those silly bidding boxes that caused it.