

Nothing to think about

by MATTHEW MCMANUS



Matthew McManus has been the Chief Director of the NSWBA since 1995. He officiates at a number of events around the country and in New Zealand in his capacity as a National Director, and is a very occasional bridge player.

You are defending 4S. Declarer wins the opening lead and draw trumps. He then plays on diamonds by leading the jack from his hand toward dummy's:

Dummy
♦ K732

You

♦ J
Declarer

I will now give you a number of different diamond holdings. Your job is to:

- (A) decide which card to play; and
 - (B) rate how difficult your decision was (1 = easy, 2 = moderately hard, 3 = very hard).
- 1) ♦ A654
 - 2) ♦ Q54
 - 3) ♦ 654
 - 4) ♦ 4

1 There is no right answer – either the ♦A or the ♦4 might be right. So if you thought that this was a tough decision you were right to rate it 3 – very hard. If declarer has the singleton J, then the ace is probably right. With just one diamond, declarer is odds on to rise with the ♦K if you play small, thereby losing no diamond tricks. But say declarer's diamonds are J10. Then he has to guess whether to play you or partner for the queen in order to lose only one trick in the suit.

2 Again, no right answer, but this time, the ♦Q is probably the right play. I would rate this one 2 – moderately hard. You will solve declarer's guess if he has ♦J10, but if you don't play the queen and he has ♦J6, he will have pulled a "swifty" and made a diamond trick when he has no right to.

3 The right answer is either the ♦6 (if you are playing reverse count) or the ♦4 if you play natural count or you don't play count signals. This one rates an easy 1 on the difficulty scale.

4 No prizes for the right answer here – you only have one card to play. Hopefully everyone gave this a 1.

In particular, I want to talk about problems 3 and 4. In both these circumstances, you have an easy decision as to what to play. The Laws require you to play in normal tempo. You are not allowed to try to bamboozle the opposition by means of the speed with which you play a card. If you have no legitimate bridge reason for thinking about what card you are going to play and the opponent may be deceived by it, the director can award an adjusted score. That means if you get a good score because of the deception, the director will take it away.

The great majority of players are not guilty of any deliberate trickery here. However, under the laws of bridge even if you accidentally lead the opponent astray by an unwarranted slow play, the director will award an adjusted score. Let's assume that in # 4 above (holding the singleton four), the time comes to play it. If you do play it slowly, consider what it looks like from declarer's point of view. You "obviously" have choice of cards to play and have eventually decided on the ♦4. Now it may be the case that you may have got yourself momentarily distracted and so delayed playing the four. You may have been thinking about what to play next, or wondering about why your partner didn't take his ace at Trick 1, or you may be thinking about how hungry you are and wouldn't be good if the director called the lunch break now! In none of these cases are you trying to deliberately deceive declarer. However because of your behaviour, declarer is led to think that you had a difficult decision. If he goes astray and there is the possibility that he may have done better, the director will probably change the score. There is no suggestion that you were intentionally trying to fool declarer. If the director does award an adjusted score, you should accept it with good grace and be more careful in future. All players should know to be particularly careful to play in tempo when holding a singleton.

... You turn the card over when you are ready. In this way, the opposition are not misled about your play to this trick.



So, is there anything you can do to alleviate matters if you find yourself in such a situation? The answer is Yes. Look at these two scenarios...

1 You don't have a significant choice of what card to play to this trick, but you are worried about how the hand might play out in a few tricks time and so would like to think about it now. Place the card you intend to play to this trick face down on the table and announce that you would just like to think about the hand. In this way, the opposition are not misled about your play to this trick – you just turn it over when you are ready.

2 You suddenly realise that you have delayed the play of a card and you haven't had any reason to do so. It may be that you were thinking about another trick. Or it could be that you thought you were about to discard and suddenly unexpectedly find a card of the suit led. Or you might be going to take a card from your hand and you fumbled about so that it appears that you are making a choice of which card to play. Or it could have been that you were looking out the window and not concentrating, and everyone thought you were mulling over what to play. By making a comment along the lines of "Sorry, I didn't have anything to think about", you can lessen your unintended swindle. In some cases, this will give the opponent a clue as to how to play the hand, but that is the consequence of your previous action.

Perhaps the most important message to be learnt is that if the opponents do call the director and he does award an adjusted score, there is no suggestion that anyone is cheating. An innocent player has been innocently deceived by the careless actions of another. The purpose of the laws is to try to put things right in such a situation. ♦