

So you think you're a fast player? Try this quick quiz...

by MATTHEW MCMANUS



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For bridge players

The major complaint that directors have to deal with is slow play (although air-conditioning does come a close second). Whether it's because there's no time to play all the boards, whether it's players waiting for a table to finish so they can move there or because most of the players are hanging around for tables to finish play so the director can make the draw for the next round, slow play is the main cause of discontent for most players. So, if you are brave enough to take it, here is a quiz to see if you are one of those players who cause dissatisfaction...are you ready to start?

1 Are you ready to start?

One of the very obvious things that I observe is that players who are notorious for their slow play are also typically those who, when the round or match is starting, are making a cup of tea, chatting with friends, arguing with their partner or team mates – anything but being ready to commence play. If you do have a reputation as a slow player, how about trying the effect of sitting at the table before the director hands out the boards, all set to start play immediately? Those extra couple of minutes will make a difference.

2 Are you carrying too much weight?

No, I am not being personal, but like a racehorse which is handicapped to slow it down by having to carry additional weight, a lot of slow players add to the delay by what they have to transport when they get up to move to the next table. A coat or jumper, a bag, a book or magazine, a score book, a pen, a glass of water or cup of tea, and various other paraphernalia. Why not try the effect of travelling light? Put as much as you can away in a corner before the start of the session.

3 Are you guilty of “scoring on the green”?

Golfers will know that one of the big no-no's is scoring on the green. That is, filling in your scorecard immediately after putting out, rather than moving off the green so that the group following can hit up. Bridge has its own version of this. It can be the players who are running late filling in personal scorecards before moving on. But there are other instances. Looking at the travelling score sheet to see what others have done, or inspecting the Bridgemate to see your percentage on the board is a privilege, not a right. If you are running late and other players are waiting to come to the table, you have lost that entitlement. The director, if he is on the ball and able to do so, should take responsibility for entering the score on the traveller/Bridgemate, so that EW can move on and NS can start play in the next round. (Of course, playing directors are unlikely to be in a position to do this – one of the reasons why it is even more difficult for playing directors to keep a track on slow play.) Similarly, spending too much time poring over the results at the end of a hand, and engaging in lengthy post mortems with partner, is a significant cause of slow play.

Furthermore, there can be similar problems during the play of the hand. Some easy directions: if you are on opening lead, NEVER fill in your personal scoresheet until after you have made the lead. If you are dummy, ALWAYS put your cards down on the table immediately after the opening lead is faced. If play is being delayed by having to enter the data in the Bridgmate, try this procedure: after dummy's hand goes down, give the Bridgmate to dummy, who can then enter the board number, the contract, the declarer and (if recorded) the opening lead, before handing the unit back to North or South. At the end of the hand, it is then a simple matter of entering the number of tricks and having the score confirmed by the opponents. Finally, at the end of the hand, after the number of tricks is agreed, the very first thing you should do is to put the cards back into the board. If the director does need to move the board on, it will greatly speed things up.

4 Do you feel bad/remorseful when the director says “take an average”?

4 If I had a dollar for every time I've been told, “it wasn't our fault”, I wouldn't be directing, I'd be living in the lap of luxury on the Riviera!

There are two possibilities: one – it really wasn't your fault. In that case, it will be a very rare occurrence for the director to say, “take an average”. As it is so uncommon, it will hardly make a difference to you, and you will understand that what the director is doing is for the benefit of the game, keeping it moving and making things better for everyone. However, if it is happening to you a lot, you need to ask the question, “why?”

The standard amount of time allowed per board is about 7 minutes. That means, each player has about 2 minutes per hand to consider their bids and plays. (The reason it doesn't quite add up is that dummy doesn't need any thinking time during the play period.) Of course, occasionally there will be particularly difficult problems when you may need to take extra time. That is not an issue. However, if you are consistently taking more than your fair share, that is a big problem. Apart from being discourteous to the opponents – and any one who has to wait for you to finish – it is a significant breach of the proprieties of the game. In tournament chess, a player who exceeds the time limit automatically loses the match. The penalties usually imposed in bridge (on the rare occasions that they are implemented) are usually of far less significance – often just getting average minus on a board.

Experienced directors know who the slow players are. Apart from having to consistently hurry them up, directors regularly receive complaints about having to play against “so and so, who is so slow”. When the same names keep coming up, the pattern and the truth is pretty well established. When these players react with comments like “we weren't slow” or “it wasn't me”, either they are being disingenuous, or are unacceptably unaware of their behaviour. In either case, clearly something needs to change for the good of the game and the enjoyment of all.

5 Are we done yet?

5 The fact that all the boards have been played is not a good indication that play has been timely. The biggest grumbles that the opponents of slow players have involve being pressured to rush through the last couple of boards because of the amount of time that has been used up earlier. A far better test of whether you are slow is to monitor where you are midway through the round. When the director says, “we have reached the half way point, you should have finished ___ boards”, have you completed at least half your boards? If the answer to this is “no” more than 25% of the time, you cannot keep blaming your opponents – you are a slow player.

How did you go? I expect you passed. But maybe you may know of someone else for whom this article might be useful? Your partner perhaps? Remember that saying, “it's not me, it's my partner” is not really an excuse. Bridge is a partnership game. If your partner is to blame for making the game less pleasant for others, then at some point you have to take responsibility as well.



For directors and club administrators

Slow play is the bane of all directors - and of clubs. There are several aspects to answering your query... If there is a timer in operation and slow play continues to be a significant problem, then it is appropriate that the Club Committee should come up with an overriding rule to be applied. (Whether it should be applied at all sessions is something the Committee should also consider - for example, it is probably best that significant leeway is allowed for sessions predominantly composed of new or inexperienced players.) My feeling is that the best rule to be applied is that no new board may be started after the warning bell has sounded. Depending on the circumstances of the club, the warning bell may be set at something between 3 and 5 minutes before the end of the round. It would be preferable not to stop a table playing a board once the bidding has commenced.

Without a timer in operation, it does become more difficult as the director needs to make a judgement as to whether to allow a table to play a board. If the director is also playing, this problem is greatly magnified. When the director is not playing, he is able to be more diligent in monitoring the possibility of slow play. Reminding players of how much time they have left, letting a specific table know that they are running late, stopping a new board from being started if it is too late, filling in the score for slow tables while the EW pairs move on are all useful in minimising slow play. But if the director is playing you are far more reliant on the players being helpful and monitoring their own speed of play. This can sometimes be "a bridge too far"! I have attached an article I wrote about slow play, which is primarily aimed at players. You may think it useful to distribute to your members. I know that a number of clubs have done so with some positive outcomes. 