

Making the Decision after a Hesitation

by MATTHEW MCMANUS



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In the previous article, we started looking at how the director proceeds when he has been called to the table following a hesitation.

To recap the points previously made:

- Hesitations (or “breaks in tempo” as they are referred to in the Laws) are a perfectly normal part of the game. The player who thinks for a while before making their bid has done nothing wrong. There is no reason to call the Director just because there has been a hesitation.
- Hesitations constitute what the Laws call “unauthorised information”. Unauthorised information can arise from a number of different sources; some of them from less desirable and inappropriate actions (eg. comments, remarks or gestures); others as a normal consequence of the game (eg. alerts, responses to an opponent’s question and hesitations)
- When a player has unauthorised information, he is not permitted to use that information in deciding on his subsequent actions. To quote the relevant law: “partner may not choose from among logical alternatives one that could demonstrably have been suggested over another by the (unauthorised) information.”

We previously used this example:

W	N	E	S
	1S	P	3H!
P	3S	P	?

signed off in 3S after a considerable time →

Bergen Raise = 4 card spade support + 10-12 points →

At the table, South now bid 4S, which made 10 tricks. The opponents were concerned that South bid on after the break in tempo before North signed off in 3S. The Director was called.

First, the Director establishes the facts, including that there has been a break in tempo. Sometimes this is not always immediately agreed and the Director needs to do a little more digging to determine what most likely occurred. For the time being, we will assume that there is no dispute on this point. Next, he will ask South why they bid on after North’s sign off. As I mentioned last time, South’s argument usually goes something along the lines of “I was always going to bid 4S – look at my hand. I didn’t take any notice of partner’s hesitation”. (By the by, this is sometimes one of the ways in which the director discovers that the disputed hesitation did actually occur!)

So, armed with this information, the director goes away to consider his ruling.

- First, what actions would be possible/logical for South? Here, they are Pass and 4S.
- What did the unauthorised information suggest? Here it is quite obvious, North has a borderline hand, unsure whether to play partscore or game. (There will be circumstances where this is not so clear.)
- Did the unauthorised information suggest that 4S might work out better for NS? Yes

As a consequence of all this, the director will determine that South may have used the unauthorised information in deciding to bid 4S. As this is in breach of the Law (specifically **Law 16**), the director awards an adjusted score of the likely result had South not taken the disputed action.

On this board, the Director would award an adjusted score of +170 to NS.

Often, that's only the start of the Director's problems!!!! When the Director returns to the table to give the ruling, South can be most unhappy. Again, they will say, '...but I would always bid on that hand. The hesitation made no difference to me'. I try to pacify them by attempting to explain how the law works....

Once there has been a break in tempo (*unauthorised information*), it is no longer relevant what the particular player may or may not have done. What the Laws require is that the director consider what other players (of the same standard) would have done in the same situation. This relates to the consideration of what are the logical alternatives for South.

If the director considers that a significant majority of players would have also bid 4S on South's hand, then he will deem that there are no logical alternatives to South's action and will allow the score to stand. However, if the director believes that a significant proportion of players would give serious consideration to an alternative call (namely, Pass) which will be less successful for NS, then he is required to award an adjusted score.

The primary challenge for the director often relates to determining whether or not there are logical alternatives to the call made. In order to assist him, the Director has the power to ask other players not involved for their opinion. This would entail showing them South's hand and the given auction and asking what action they would take after partner's signoff, and what calls they would seriously consider. If a significant proportion would consider passing, then it is considered to be a logical alternative and the director will adjust the score. The Laws don't say what a "significant proportion" is, but directors generally work on the principle that if at least one in four players would give serious consideration to a call, it should be considered a logical alternative.

In the final article in this series, I will look at some common misconceptions about the laws on hesitations, and make some suggestions about how to be a better partner. 