

Debunking a Fallacy and Being a Better Partner

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“After a player hesitates, their partner must pass”. Hands up if you thought that that is an accurate statement. Given the number of times it has been quoted to me while I have been directing, surely it must be true? However, I can definitely state – and I do not mind if you quote me – that to say that the partner of the hesitator must pass is definitely not correct. I will give an example which hopefully will finally put an end to such nonsense.

With your side vulnerable and the opponent's not vulnerable, you as East hold:

♠ AK4
♥ JT75
♦ KQ97
♣ Q3

In order, this is really what happened at the table...

- Partner opens 1H
- North overcalls 1S
- you bid 3H (strong)
- South ups the ante with 4S
- 30 seconds of thinking from your partner, followed by Pass
- Pass from North
- you Double
- the opponents scream: “Director!”

Is there anything wrong with this scenario? Have there been any infractions?

1. Well, partner did think for a long time over 4S....But I trust that you will recall from the two previous articles: just because of player thinks for an extended time and then passes, no infraction has occurred. There is no reason to call the director.
2. You didn't pass after your partner's hesitation. The opponents seem to be proponents of the opening statement: “After a player hesitates, their partner must pass”. However, it is only an issue if you have taken advantage of the unauthorised information you got from your partner's hesitation. At this exact moment, the opponents cannot know whether or not this is the case – they don't know what is in your hand. The appropriate moment for them to call is when they see what is in your hand. If the board is played in 4SX, that will be when the hand is completely over.

Let us assume for the moment that at the end of the hand (4SX went down three), they do call the director back. What happens now? Following the procedure detailed in the previous article, the director will enquire as to whether there are any logical alternatives to the call you made. Specifically in this instance, is pass a logical alternative to double? But is passing even a possibility on your hand? Your partner opened, you have 15 points, you must do something – 4S has clearly been bid as a sacrifice. What was partner thinking about? Your spade holding indicates that he is likely to hold at most one spade – maybe even a void. He was considering whether it was safe to bid on to 5H. In the end, his pass indicated that he wanted to leave the decision up to you. Passing is not even close to a logical alternative and the director will let the score stand.

For East to pass in this position would be wrong. To think that he was acting ethically in so doing would be very misguided.

Being a better partner

While I have tried to stress that under the Laws there is nothing wrong with hesitations per se, there is a very real downside. When you take quite some time to consider your call and you then pass, you are placing your partner under significant ethical strain to not take any notice of the fact that you clearly have something to think about. If you do find yourself in a position where you have thought about your actions for longer than normal, you should strive to come down on the side of action rather than inaction. The motto of a better partner could be: “**When in doubt, don’t pass**”. Have a look at this example taken from a recent game. Sitting South you have a reasonably good hand and are all ready to open 1S, when the pesky right hand opponent, East, opens 3D in front of you. You are vulnerable with:

♠ AKT87
♥ Q654
♦ 82
♣ KJ

Now, you do have 13 points and a good spade suit – that points to bidding. Then again, you have hearts as well as spades so maybe you should be making a takeout double. On the other hand, the almost balanced shape with no singletons and the ugly king-jack doubleton in clubs makes action far less inviting and maybe quite dangerous if West is sitting over you with all the points. What to do? Well, it’s not an easy decision. Nobody would blame you for taking your time weighing the pros and cons. In the end, you decide to pass. West passes and it’s North’s turn to bid – here is his hand:

♠ Q92
♥ KJ2
♦ AJ3
♣ QT32

It is an opening hand, but not particularly attractive. Very balanced, only one ace, no major suit. Most expert players would probably pass out 3D when it is passed around to them.

But look at the two hands together. NS are likely to make 4S and yet they defend 3D. Who should have taken action? After South thinks for a while and it comes back to North, North knows that his side almost certainly has the majority of the points. So, it is tempting for North to take some action. However, having seen these last couple of articles, I hope readers realise that the unauthorised information North has from South’s hesitation prevents him from taking a borderline action here. That means one of two things has to have happened before:

1. South needs to pass over 3D in a normal tempo. (That doesn’t mean quickly, it just means at a tempo which doesn’t suggest that he has a real problem in deciding what to bid.) If he doesn’t convey any unauthorised information, then North is free to do whatever he likes – no matter how ridiculous! However, we have already determined that for South to bid in tempo will be very difficult given his hand. OR
2. South needs to have taken some affirmative action (ie. other than Pass) after thinking for a significant time.

So it all depends on South really. South can make it easier for his partner by not passing after thinking.

This is what I mean by being a better partner. Sometimes when you stop to think, you will end up deciding that it is safest to pass. But you need to be aware that it may not be that safe at all. Your break in tempo will preclude your partner from taking a borderline action and you will end up defending when you should be declaring. After thinking for longer than normal, you should strive to make a bid or double whenever possible. Occasionally, it won’t be that good and you may suffer a penalty, but in the long run, you will make it easier for your partner – and isn’t that what good bridge is about? ♥