

I didn't mean to do that

by MATTHEW MCMANUS



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One of the more confusing laws in the game gets dragged out whenever a player claims that what just happened was “inadvertent”. There are three situations when a player sometimes seeks assistance from the director when they assert that they didn’t mean to do what just happened:

- 1 the bid they made
- 2 the card they called for from dummy
- 3 the card they played as declarer

Before looking at all of these situations in turn, some of the history of inadvertency... Up until 2007, there was this law in the Law Book which said that a player could change an inadvertent call if they did so without pause for thought. What was actually meant by “inadvertent” was a cause for great debate. Some people thought it meant one thing, others something else. In fact when I did some research about the word, there were some subtle differences in its meaning, depending on whether your dictionary was the Macquarie (*Australia*), Oxford (*UK*) or Webster’s (*USA*). Add to that the tribulations of any non-English speaking bridge player or director and you may be able to see why it caused so many problems. So in 2007, the lawmakers removed the word from the Law Book. However, that hasn’t stopped players still trying to claim that what they did was “inadvertent”.

What actually happened is that they just swapped one confusing term for another. Now the Laws say that a player may change an unintended call if he does so, or attempts to do so, without pause for thought. It hasn’t really solved the problem as even amongst senior directors there is much debate about what should be considered an unintended call.

To look at the three examples noted above, let’s consider them in reverse order:

3 Declarer’s played card: If the declarer deliberately plays a card, it can never be deemed an unintended play. The law does not apply here. If you, as declarer, play and face a card from your hand, you can only change it if you have revoked, or if a change is permitted by the director following an infraction by the opponents. The fact that you have carelessly pulled out the wrong card and put your queen, instead of the ace, on the opponent’s king, or if you have “ruffed” with a heart when spades are trumps, is irrelevant. A card played by declarer is rarely able to be changed. And definitely not just because it was inadvertent or unintended.

2 Card played from dummy: The classic case where the director is called for an alleged unintended call of a card from dummy is in the following situation. West is declarer and this is the club suit:

Dummy
♣ AQ

LHO

♣ 32
Declarer

Declarer leads ♣2 from his hand, intending to finesse dummy’s queen. North surprisingly plays the king. Far too often, declarer says, “queen..., I mean the ace”.

For the director to allow you to change an unintended call (whether it be naming a card in dummy or making a bid), you must satisfy him that you never intended to make the call you did. When talking about naming dummy’s card, the equivalent would be that you have to convince him that what you actually said was just a “slip of the tongue”. If there is any suggestion at all that there was a change of mind, no matter how quickly the correction was made, then the director will not allow a change.

In this example, when declarer led the two of clubs from his hand, his intention was clearly to play the queen hoping for the finesse to work. When he called for the queen after North played the king, this was just carelessness. It was only after noticing the king that he quickly changed his mind. If the card which declarer originally named could ever have been in his thoughts to play, then he will almost never be able to successfully claim that it was an unintended call.

The other thing that can sometimes happen is that declarer gets “ahead of themselves” and names a card he was intending to play to the next trick. For instance, playing in no trumps, dummy has the singleton ♥A while declarer holds ♥KQJ109. With the lead in dummy, declarer’s plan is to unblock the ace and then lead a diamond to his ace and cash the rest of the hearts. Unfortunately, he calls for a “small diamond”, and then says, “I mean, the ace of hearts.” It is unlikely that declarer will be able to convince the director that “small diamond” was an unintended call. Playing that card was clearly in his thought process. It was careless that he called for it before cashing ♥A.

When the director comes to the table to rule on a possible change of unintended call of a card, the declarer must be able to immediately say what he intended to play. Otherwise, he didn’t have an intended card to play and so no change will be allowed.

So when can declarer successfully plead an “unintended” call? In practice, it really comes down to when the director is confident that it was a slip of the tongue. For instance, declarer is pointing to a low club in dummy’s hand on the table, but says, “low spade”. I would allow that change. Similarly, declarer has ♦K765 and after ruffing the three little ones, the ace has fallen and the king is now good. He goes to dummy and says, “king of hearts, I mean diamonds”. On the face of it, this very much looks like an unintended call. I would investigate whether there was any way he could have been thinking about playing ♥K (such as leading it to the following trick), but in most cases I would probably look favourably on the claim for an unintended call.

(For those of you interested in where this arises in the Laws of Bridge, we are talking about Law 45C4b.)

- 1 During the bidding:** The final and maybe most common situation where a player may seek to change an unintended call is during the bidding. Although a different law is applicable here (Law 25A), the same principles that I described when talking about declarer naming dummy’s card generally apply. The player must be able to convince the director that the bid, pass or double which he made was never his intention. Again, if there is any suggestion that he may have been considering the call he made, it will be very difficult to get the director to allow the change. If it appears that it may have been a change of mind (no matter how quickly it happened – even if his pen is still on the bidding pad), no change will be allowed.

Some examples: a player who has four spades and five hearts and opens 1♠ certainly looks like someone who was maybe considering a spade bid; after partner’s 1NT opening, a player with five hearts bids 2♦ and hurriedly changes to 2♥ – that looks like he has forgotten that they are not playing transfers; a player with 12 points passes and then wants to change to 1♣ – that sounds like while in the process of passing he re-assessed his hand or recounted his points. All of these scenarios would rarely result in a favourable ruling.

Some circumstances where I have allowed a change:

- a player has an opening hand with five spades and one heart: as he goes to write 1♠, the “one heart” distracts him and he instead bids 1♥.
- the auction starts with 1♠ by the player’s left hand opponent, 2♠ by partner (*a Michael’s cue bid showing hearts and a minor*), 3♠ by the next opponent, now 4♠! The player in question has heart support and was keen to bid game in hearts, but with everyone else bidding spades, he somehow got into the swing of things and did the same. I allowed him to change it back to 4♥ – 4♠ was never in his thoughts.

Using bidding boxes tends to result in an increased number of calls for the director for unintended calls. This is because of mechanical problems such as accidentally pulling out the wrong card, or having another card stuck to the bidding card as you make your bid. If this is honestly what has happened, then a change without penalty is usually allowed.

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There are two other important aspects to this law: firstly, it says the player must change, or attempt to change, the unintended call without pause for thought. However, this does not necessarily mean it has to be instantaneous. The player has to change or attempt to change (for example, by calling the director) immediately he becomes aware that he has made an unintended call. For example, a player meant to pull out the 1♠ bidding card, but as he did so the 1NT card got stuck on top and he doesn't notice. When he hears his partner announce, "15-17", he only now looks down and sees what has happened. By saying something or calling the director immediately, he would be allowed to make a change without penalty, even though the reason he discovered the error was because of something else that occurred. The second significant aspect to the law is that a player is entitled to change an unintended up until the time when his partner next makes a call. That means that even if your left hand opponent has made a call, you can change your unintended call as long as you call the director as soon as you realise what has happened. If the director permits you to change your call, then the opponent can also change his call without any penalty. If however your partner has made a call after your unintended call and before you have said anything it is too late to change and there is nothing you can do about it. If this is the case, it is very important that you don't make any comment or reaction. You don't want your partner – or your opponents – to know that anything has gone wrong.

The laws relating to unintended calls are some of the more difficult ones for the director to administer. Each time they come up, the director has to make a judgement based on evidence which may not be very precise. It is possible that there could be two scenarios which seem very similar in which the director (or directors) made the completely opposite rulings. It is the nature of these laws and the information which the director relies upon and needs to analyse which makes this possible – and in both cases, it may be that the ruling is correct. ♥