

They haven't got what they said they did – Will the Director help us?

by MATTHEW MCMANUS



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One of the times you hear a plaintive cry for the director is when it turns out that the opponents don't have what the auction suggested they should have. It could be that a player only has four hearts when he should have five. They may have shown 15-17 high card points and they only have 12. They may have shown 6-10 points and they have 13. Or it may be the case that they have something absolutely different to what you expected them to hold.

So, how did your expectations arise? It may be because you read the opponents' system card. Or because you asked a question during the auction and were told something that turns out to be wrong. Or there were no alerts at all and a player turns up with something totally unexpected.

If you get a bad score because they didn't have what you expected, will the director help? The answer to that is, it depends. In general, there are three different scenarios which the director might need to consider. I will look at each of these in turn in the next three articles –

1. The explanation which you received was according to the oppositions' agreements, but the player has deliberately chosen to deviate from the system.
2. The explanation which you received was according to the oppositions' agreements, but the player has accidentally deviated from the system.
3. The explanation which you received was different from the systemic agreement.

The Laws require that the opponents get a correct explanation of your systemic agreements. If this has been done, then, on the face of it, there is no infraction and so there is no room for the award of an adjusted score. So generally in Case 1 the answer to the original question is "no". However, the Director does need to do a little more digging before leaving it at that... to be investigated further below.

CASE 1 – A DELIBERATE DEVIATION FROM THE SYSTEM

This occurs when a player consciously chooses to depart from the agreed system. The most important factor connected with this is that his partner must be just as much "in the dark" as the opponents. Typically, although not always, this occurs when a player makes what is known as a psychic call or a "psyche". The Laws define a psyche as "a deliberate and gross misstatement of honour strength and/or of suit length." Thus a call which just shades the expected high cards by a couple of points would not be classified as a psyche.

The psychic call is part of the game of bridge and it is not permitted to make special regulations prohibiting the use of such bids. My experience at Congresses in NSW is that they are not that common and have never caused any real issues. I have however heard of some clubs where a particular pair or player delights in psyching, causing a fairly high level of disquiet amongst the other players. What follows is relevant for dealing with such players:

- i) The Laws permit that regulations be made which prevent the psyching of conventional bids. For instance, the ABF systems regulations outlaw the psyching of strong conventional calls. (So, for example, you can't psyche a strong 2♣ opening or Precision players cannot psyche 1♣.)
- ii) A pattern of psyching in particular circumstances builds up what is known as an implied partnership understanding. This means that it is considered to be part of the partnership's system and therefore needs to

be alerted. Furthermore, once there is deemed to be an implied partnership understanding it may also mean that the agreement falls outside of the allowed systems. For example, consider a player who opens the bidding with 6 points. Thus, although in the first instance, there is no immediate issue with such an action, once a pair does it a couple of times, it would now become illegal.

- iii) A player who randomises the results by the overuse of psyching is in breach of the laws. Thus, it would be possible for a club to make a regulation which, for instance, limits the number of psychic calls to a partnership to, say, two per session.

Advice to the director when a psyche/shaded call is drawn to his attention....

1. Enquire of the pair as to whether this has happened before in the same or similar circumstances. If the answer is “yes”, then you need to tell them that they are now considered to have an implied partnership agreement which needs to be alerted. For example, “officially” the pair plays that a 1NT opening is 16-18. However, this player has opened with 14 points on this occasion and has done it before. Therefore the explanation which his partner must give AT ALL TIMES in the future is, “16-18 but it may be a couple of points less”. If the bid which has been made falls into a category of calls which would not normally be permitted under the systems regulations in place (eg opening at the one level with 6 HCP), then the director should advise the pair that if it happens again, then they will be awarded a maximum score of average minus on the board. Note that all this is contingent on the director establishing that there has been a pattern which would constitute an implied partnership understanding. Just because it has happened once is not grounds to make such proclamations.
2. Investigate the actions of the partner of the player who has psyched/shaded his call. Remember the principle that the partner must be just as much in the dark as the opponents. If the player has made any allowance for his partner not having his bid, then he is considered to have “fielded the psyche”. This is a very serious infraction and should be met with the full punishment of the law. If the director determines that a player has taken some unusual action allowing for his partner not to have his bid, then he should consider awarding an adjusted score. To do this, he makes a judgement as to what would likely have happened in the auction if the psycher’s partner had taken the normal action on his hand. If this would have resulted in a worse result for the pair than what was obtained at the table, the score is adjusted accordingly. (One caution – the player is allowed to take into account the actions of the opponents when judging whether or not his partner may have the expected holding for his call. For example – with North the dealer, the auction starts off Pass-Pass-1♥. EW then bid all the way to 3NT. North holds 9 points, so it would seem that this is unlikely to make if partner has an opening hand and a double would not be unreasonable. However, the fact that EW have shown so much strength and also that South has opened in third seat – where it is not uncommon for a player to open light – is sufficient for South to judge that perhaps partner is not at full strength. This determination would not be considered “fielding”.)

Advice to the players to protect yourselves from potential psychic/light calls...

1. Believe your partner! The auction goes (1♦) – X – (2NT*) – ?. You ask what 2NT means and are told that it shows 11+ points with diamond support. You are looking at 13 HCP in your hand. It doesn’t compute: the opening bidder showed 11/12+, partner’s double showed 11/12+, 2NT showed 11+, you have 13...that adds up to at least 45 if everyone is absolutely minimum. There are only 40 points in the deck – someone is telling a “porky”. You need to bid game or at least extract the maximum penalty from them. If you fail to do so, you are unlikely to get any joy from the director even if it is one of them who has psyched. If it’s your partner who has been lying, well that’s something for you and him to have out after the session.....

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2. Consider making adjustments to your system to deal with the opponents. Answer this question – what would a double of 1♠ mean in this sequence: (1♥) – X – (1♠) – ? Perhaps you have an agreement that all doubles below 3♠ are for takeout. To play double here as takeout is dangerous. The sequence which starts off (1♥) – X – (1♠) is probably the most common psychic manoeuvre. There is a chance that the 1♠ bidder doesn't have spades at all. Instead they have a weak hand with hearts support and are trying to confuse you out of bidding game or to your best spot. When partner has already shown the suit which the opponents bid, or if he has inferred that he has that suit (eg. by the takeout double of 1♥), then your double should be for penalties. That is, you say to your partner, *"I would have bid spades if he hadn't"*. Similarly any spade bids that you make should also be natural. If you feel the need for a cue-bid, use the opponents first suit (here, hearts), the one that partner has said he doesn't have. As well as dealing with any out and out psyches, you will also be able to cope with an honest spade bid by the opponent. For example, in the same auction, you have something like:

♠ AJT64
♥ 642
♦ Q5
♣ KQ8

When partner doubles, you probably think that 4♠ is the likely best contract for your side. Give partner a fairly normal takeout double like

♠ K952
♥ J7
♦ A84
♣ A654

and 4♠ will be your best spot even if the spades are breaking 4-0.

There are a number of similar sequences where playing the double as penalty and bids of the opponent's suit as natural will greatly simplify your auctions. It would be advisable to have the discussion with your partner.

In the next article, I will look at the case where a player has accidentally departed from the system. ♥