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A Brief User Guide to Huddles

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What is a huddle? How do I prevent them? What do I do when the opponents huddle? These are some of the questions faced by every tournament player. Huddles can lead to anxiety, misunderstandings or even hostility between opponents. This is our guide to help you muddle your way through them.

First, what is a huddle? Thinking is in itself legal and an inevitable part of bridge. The problem occurs when you take longer than normal to make a call. In such cases the extra time may suggest to partner that your hand is flawed for your action. For example, you might have a better hand than he would expect, or you are uncomfortable with the denomination (notrump or suit).

When this happens, this is considered unauthorized information (UI) to your partner. He is not allowed to make a call that was demonstrably suggested by your break in tempo, even if he was going to make that call anyway, unless the call (or bidding in general) is so clear that everyone - not just you - would make it. At times this may seem unfair, but it's the law.

You can often prevent UI by planning your bidding - a good idea anyway - when taking some extra time is not going to give any relevant information to your partner. For example, you open one spade, raised to two spades by your partner. You make a three club game try and partner bids three hearts. You decide after some deliberation that you don't have enough to bid game on your own. You've just prevented partner from bidding four spades unless he has a really, really clear call, because you have given him UI.

However, if you had planned what you were going to do over three hearts before bidding three clubs and had bid in proper tempo, your partner would not be in this unfortunate position. Similarly, whenever you bid Blackwood, you should know whether you are going to sign off over each of partner's possible responses.

When a preempt occurs, even if it's not your turn to bid, use the enforced time for the pause to plan your own next call rather than twiddling your thumbs. You can't always anticipate problem bids, but make it a practice to anticipate as many as you can without causing the tournament to come to a standstill from slow play.

You should also eliminate UI and give yourself a little more leeway by always bidding in a deliberate, consistent tempo, while carefully studying your hand. Taking a couple

of seconds to make a call with your Yarborough also means that partner has no information when you take the same couple of seconds with a mild problem.

Other situations: After a skip bid or in a competitive auction, you should always take some time, whether or not you have anything to think about. The key is to be consistent in all similar situations. Partner should not be able to tell whether you were thinking or, if you were thinking, whether it was about bidding slam or where you're going for dinner.

The corollary is that you should never, ever act faster than the situation dictates. You can always bid slower without a problem but it is impossible to bid faster with a problem. A fast double, bid or pass may create as much UI as a very slow action. "Unwonted speed" is listed in the Laws of Duplicate Contract Bridge right along with "unmistakable hesitation" as a common source of unauthorized information.

Sometimes an unexpected situation occurs in which it is impossible to make a call quickly. Often the skip-bid warning gives adequate time to think about your call. However, at other times it is very difficult to decide on your bid quickly, no matter what your hand. In these situations there should be some leeway given before a slow call becomes unauthorized information.

Here's an example from the 1999 European Team Championships. Your hand is:

♠ AJx ♥ KQx ♦ QJ ♣ AJ9xx.

You open a strong club, LHO bids two spades, pard three diamonds showing 8+ HCP and 5+ diamonds, and RHO, the scoundrel, jumps to six spades. Even with a skip-bid warning, it is really tough to decide what to do here in about ten seconds. In fact, it is hard to come up with any likely hand where it isn't difficult to decide what to do quickly. In this case, the context of the bidding automatically creates an extended normal tempo (a much longer than usual window of time within which your action will not provide useful information to your partner). Conversely a double here in what would otherwise be considered normal tempo would be a strong source of UI. A double, here or any other time, should be made in the same tempo, whether it is an unclear action or made holding 150 honors in trumps.

Our last question is, what do I do when the opponents huddle? The laws suggest that you call the Director after a huddle which could result in damage to your side. If an opponent thinks for a long time and then signs off after a Blackwood response, and the other hand then bids on to slam, call the Director.

But we suggest that if the thought lasted for only a couple of seconds, don't. In general, you should decide what would be reasonable, normal, but appropriately deliberate tempo for a call given the context of the current bridge situation and whether the tempo of the call that was made was unmistakably outside this range. Also, decide whether that call made in that tempo carries a clear suggestion that the player's partner take a

particular action. If both of these criteria are met, then the Director should be called if the partner takes the suggested action.

But if there was no unmistakable huddle, or if the meaning of the huddle wasn't completely clear, then it probably isn't right to call the Director. If you do call and it later turns out that the partner made a pretty obvious or normal bid, don't call the Director back. If it's close, err on the side of letting it go. It makes for a much more amiable and sportsmanlike contest.

If the opponents are inexperienced, where even the simplest auction can be difficult and huddles are usually meaningless, avoid calling the Director. You'll find that you and your opponents will enjoy the game more, and it will encourage more players to continue playing duplicate bridge