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No More Dirty Tricks

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While the rest of Bermuda takes the January sun, a rumpled crew of red-eyed men will soon be celebrating the start of 1975 in smoke-filled rooms inside the island's Southampton Princess Hotel. Seated in silence, four at a table, they will decide the fate of several nations, but delegates from the same country will not be able to communicate directly with one another, even by gestures, because screens on each table will prevent Americans from seeing Americans or Italians from catching other Italians' attention with a wink or a shrug.

This, at any rate, is the plan arrived at after much consultation and debate, for insuring fairness and goodwill at the upcoming world team championship of contract bridge, which will run from Jan. 25 to Feb. 2. The red eyes and the smoke have always been part of the previous 24 Bermuda Bowl contests. But the silence and the screens are new. Their purpose: to make it impossible for any of the pairs of competing experts to cheat or be accused of cheating. In the Watergate era, even bridge players have resolved to foil those creeps who try to win by playing dirty tricks.

The time is ripe. Contract-bridge cheaters have been plying their illicit trade since the game was invented in the nineteen-twenties. Decades before Donald Segretti perpetrated his first smear, ordinarily honest people discovered that they could tell their partners if they had a strong trump suit by bidding one spade with special emphasis. Tournament players, with careers at stake, invented slier ploys: meaningful hesitations, hand signals and other codes to convey secret information about their cards. Or so other tournament players have charged, year after year, in steamy protests that have poisoned the alr of international bridge. actual proof of cheating has been scant, accusations have been frequent. Especially since the British pair, Terence Reese and Boris Schapiro, were suspended from world championship play in Buenos Aires in 1965, bridge officialdom has

searched for a way to eliminate the perennial scandals that were besmirching their supposedly genteel game.

Finally, Julius L. Rosenblum, president of the World Bridge Federation, took action. “At almost every tournament,” he wrote earlier this year World Bridge News, the federation's official publication, “innuendoes about unethical conduct have come to my attention. Sometimes there have been direct accusations from the losers, and in a few instances even from the winners... I shall propose that a screen be placed diagonally across each table so that the partners will not be visible to one another; and that bidding boxes be employed so that partners will not hear one another. (The two bids from one side of the screen will be called out simultaneously to the players on the other side by a tournament official.) After the auction ends and the opening lead is made, the screen is lifted from the table and play proceeds.”

This proposal was initially rejected by the W.B.F. executive council. Many members, notably Europeans, bridled at the notion that such elaborate measures were necessary. Bridge would not be bridge any more. The screens would give bridge a bad name. They would slow down play intolerably. And their mere presence would be a reproach to the honor of the Italian team, which has dominated world bridge for more than a decade.

These objections were overcome and bridge screens have now been approved for Bermuda. They have also been tested in the final rounds three North American tournaments this year. Some screens have been made from foam display board, others from cardboard reinforced with strips of wood. Painted blue, 3 feet high and 5 feet wide, they are clamped in a vertical position across the table from the northwest to the southeast corners. At the bottom of the screen is a small notch that fits over the duplicate board that holds the cards.

Yes, they are still using cards with the screens, but almost everything else has changed. Players are not permitted to speak until after the bidding is completed and the first card is played. At tournaments in Vancouver, Washington, D. C., and New York, players pointed to their bids on a printed sheet and an official monitor on their side of the screen wrote them down. After the two opponents on the same side of the screen had bid, the monitor called out the bids to the players on the other side. Thus the

players on the non-bidding side could receive no information from their partners except the bids themselves. Since the two bids were called out together, it was impossible to tell which bidder, if either, had made a pregnant pause. The monitors, who themselves were experienced bridge players, were in a position to create intentional “huddles” or pauses in the bidding so that any real hesitations in bidding would be disguised. This is an important feature of the screen, because in old−fashioned, face-to-face bridge, it was obvious to anyone that a man who waited three minutes to say “Six hearts” had a very different hand from someone who blurted out the bid with a big smile.

The American Contract Bridge League's “Procedures for Screens” also alter the normal rules for signaling what are known as alertable bids. In an unscreened tournament, if a player makes a bid whose meaning is not likely to be clear to the opposing partnership, then his partner must say “alert” as soon as it is his turn to bid. Then, if the opponents want to know what is up, the alerter will say, for instance: “My partner's bid of five spades means he has all four aces.” Normally, a bid of five spades shows a strong spade suit.

The alert procedure, even without screens, is a confusing business. New and still controversial, it has led to misunderstandings and disputes, because it is often very difficult to decide which are the bids that “everyone” will understand and which are the ones they won't. In any case, with screens on the table, the alert procedure occurs twice per bid. The bidder points to the word “alert” on the printed bidding chart, but the monitor does not mention this when he calls out the bids. Then the bidder's partner must also point to “alert” on his chart. If the opponent on his side of the screen wants to ask a question about the bid, he points to the word “question.” The alerter can then give an explanation of the bid by writing it down o
 a pad provided for this purpose.

If this sounds confusing to you, it also flummoxed some of the experts who played with the screens. “Our team missed a chance to play in Bermuda because of the screens,” said Alan Sontag, a leading player who lives in Flushing. “We lost IMP's (international match points) because Larry Cohen misunderstood something the monitor said.” Sontag's team finished second at the International Team Trials in Washington last Labor Day by a very narrow margin.

Sontag and another top New York player, Kathie Wei, both complained that the screens slowed down play enormously. Mrs. Wei, whose husband, C. C. Wei, invented the “Precision” bidding system, said, “The screens caused at least two hours of delay in each session at Vancouver.” A spokesman at the A.C.B.L. headquarters in Memphis, Tenn., Robert F. Bonomi, asserted, on the other hand, that the screens have not appreciably delayed bidding. (Vancouver was the first big tournament at which the screens were used, and time records kept by monitors show that most of the delay took place only in the semifinal round and, surprisingly, occurred during the play, after the screens had been removed.)

Up to this point, player reaction to the screens has been good, or at least tolerant. “The screen,” says Bonomi, “was originally intended to stop cheating, but one of the side effects is that it has given players greater freedom of action. Now they can wink all they want, and if they grimace or scratch their heads, they don't have to worry that their partner is wondering, ‘What does it mean?’”

In any case, only full−blown champions will probably ever have to deal with a screen. And they seem to be adjusting to the change—just in time to get used to another device: bidding boxes.

At Bermuda, players will not point to a bidding sheet but, instead, will silently reach into a small box and choose a card with their bid printed on it. Swedish tournaments pioneered the use of these cards, which come in pack, with one card for each possibly bid. Bidding boxes do away with any possible language problems and create convenient, visual record of the auction that is error−free.

Is this charade necessary? Are bridge players really a pack of cheats? “Absolutely not,” Bonomi says. “The screens prevent the unintentional transmission of information, and they will eliminate accusations of cheating.”

An editorial in a recent number of The Bridge World, the leading American bridge periodical, concurred: “The integrity of the contest—that is what is involved in the use of screens, not the morality of the players.... The job of the World Bridge Federation is to make obvious and unquestionable what they already believe - that world's championships are won on merit alone.”

To some less official observers, the matter is neither obvious nor unquestionable. “At every tournament, there is an undercurrent of suspicion,” said a New York player whom I will call Olive Overtrick. “At the World Bridge Olympiad in the Canary Islands last May,” she said, “many top American players felt that they couldn't win because of cheating.”

Naturally, in the ferociously competitive world of high level bridge,such “feelings” and “suspicions” have erupted into scandal. At the world championships at Lake Como in 1958, the Italian team was accused by the Americans of using hand signals. In 1959, at the European championship at Palermo, there was a protest against a British pair because one of them stroked his chin and made other gestures. This spring, at the Bermuda Bowl in Venice, an Indonesian team arrived under the pall of an Australian accusation made at the Far Eastern championship. And there has been almost ceaseless grumbling about the Italians, whose successful defense of the world championship, year after year, has raised eyebrows and temperatures, especially the eyebrows and temperatures of players whom those fine Italian hands have trounced time and again.

The biggest of all bridge scandals blew up in the face of the two British players. The Reese−Schapiro case eventually led to several lawsuits a full−length trial under the aegis of the British Bridge League and two polemic books.

Bridge players everywhere still argue about the incident, for it was never completely resolved. But the rough outlines are clear. During a world championship match against Reese and Schapiro, players of vast reputation, the American expert, B. Jay Becker of Flushing, noticed what he thought were peculiar finger movements being made by his opponents. He mentioned this to his partner, Mrs. Dorothy Hayden (now the wife of this newspaper's bridge columnist, Alan Truscott). She too began noticing “signals,” as did several other players alerted by Becker. Eventually, Becker, Mrs. Hayden and Truscott, who was covering the tournament, sat down and determined to their satisfaction that Reese and Schapiro were communicating the number of hearts in their hand with a finger code. It all depended on the number of fingers they showed behind the cards when they held up their hand. one finger meant one heart, two fingers two hearts and so on. Suits of five or more were allegedly indicated by spreading the

fingers. Two spread fingers meant five hearts; three spread fingers meant six, etc.

Many witnesses claimed that they saw the finger signals. Notes were taken. The British captain was convinced that the recorded finger positions coincided only too well with the number of hearts Reese and Schapiro actually held in each hand. He suspended them. They denied everything. Subsequent investigations led to opposite decisions by the British Bridge League (acquittal) and the World Bridge Federation (guilty).

The affair is immensely complicated; only bridge experts have the competence to decide whether Reese and Schapiro played individual hands as if they had illegal information about their heart suits. And the experts are divided. But one piece of evidence, which came to light after the B.B.L. trial, is certainly provocative. In 1967 Alan Truscott compared notations made by Don Oakie, a California expert, of suspicious but hitherto unexplained finger movements Oakie thought he had seen Reese and Schapiro making at the 1960 Olympiad in Turin—with records of the hands they played. Oakie had noticed the same signals at Turin that Becker had noticed at Buenos Aires. And, by Truscott's analysis, the Turin signals were also meant to show heart length, for the number of fingers matched the number of hearts in almost every case.

If true, this would imply that Britain's finest bridge partnership had been flouting bridge ethics for several years with a crude but possibly useful cheating system. Knowing the number of hearts in your partner's hand would not only enable you to bid more effectively (heart games are often missed because a partnership goes up the bidding ladder to spades too quickly). You could also deduce important information about the distribution of cards in the rest of partner's hand and know just that much more about which card to lead to open the play.

Whether Reese and Schapiro actually did cheat is, however, not nearly so interesting as why they would risk their careers for a bit of an edge. Why, to put it more generally, are tournament bridge players — who almost never compete for cash prizes—tempted to cheat or to believe that their opponents are cheating? In short, why so much cheating in bridge?

This is a hard question to ask experienced players because, given the paranoia about cheating in expert circles, it sounds like an accusation.

So I put it to Edgar Kaplan, editor of The Bridge World, who is universally regarded as the conscience of bridge and a saint of the game. “The fact is,” Kaplan said, in his manuscript−and pipe−filled upper West Side study, “bridge is a very easy game to cheat at. There are so many motions people can make, so much information they would like to pass on.”

In other words, the very nature of contract bridge makes cheating an attractive possibility. The essence of the game is communication between partners. Their bids during the auction period must convey enough information about their cards to decide how many tricks they can win and which suit will make the ideal trump. But the rules of bridge allow this crucial information to be expressed only in a severely limited language that can never convey all that a partnership would like to know. Fifteen words - the numbers from one to seven, the names of the four suits and the terms, “no trump, pass, double and redouble” — are inadequate to describe the 635,013,599,600 hands.

To increase their word power, experts have invented bidding systems and conventional bids which give specially agreed upon meanings to “natural” bids. For example, the lowest possible bid, one club, has a natural meaning: “I think we can win at least seven of the 13 tricks if clubs are trump.” But in the currently popular Precision system, “one club” indicates (with one exception) all hands with 16 or more honor points (aces count four points, kings three, queens two and jacks one) and says nothing whatever about clubs.

Bidding systems are really encoded artificial languages that use the permissible 15 bidding words to convey as much information as possible about a player's hand to his partner during the auction period. They are entirely legal so long as the partnership using them makes their meaning clear to its opponents. Bidding conventions, which are artificial bids agreed upon beforehand to cover specific bidding problems, are also legal under the same requirement. That is, a partnership that means something artificial by a particular bid must so inform its opponents. If, for instance, my partner and I are playing the Landy convention, we have to say so at tournaments (we would write this on a printed convention card and show it to opponents before bidding started) and, if asked, we have to explain that this is an artificial bid of two clubs that one of us would make after opponents have opened the bidding at one no trump. Furthermore, this club bid shows good hearts and spades but, probably, weak clubs, and

t calls upon my partner to choose his best major suit, spades or hearts, and bid it when his turn comes.

The trouble is that not all partnerships mean precisely the same thing when they say they are playing Landy or Fishbein or the other conventions. Whence the alert procedure. But this too has raised problems. So the A.C.B.L. is now considering a list of official definitions of artificial bids to eliminate confusion as well as the possibility that some players might purposely conceal private meanings within supposedly well−known conventions.

This official convention lexicon, argues Olive Overtrick, will stifle legitimate innovations in bidding language. But with or without such a convention code, some players inevitably will not be content with the restraints the rules of bidding impose on communication. These players will insist on expanding the official vocabulary of bridge with a number of other means of communication. To put it plainly, they will cheat.

No one can say how many of the more than 10 million Americans estimated to play bridge actively shade the rules in their favor, in tournaments or in friendly rubber games at home. Edgar Kaplan claims it rarely happens. Olive Overtrick says: “There is probably more cheating at club tournaments than at international contests. In rubber bridge, it's practically taken for granted. The screens won't help, because most players won't use them.”

Miss Overtrick does favor another recently developed anti-cheating device called the recorder's memo. Now in general use in New York tournaments and in some other areas, the memo is a written complaint filed anonymously with the official tournament recorder. In other words, if I think my opponents are up to something non-kosher, I register my suspicion, quietly. The recorder will not ordinarily pay attention to just one memo, but if he gets a pile of them from different sources, all pointing to the same hustle, he will act.

Even with the threat of a recorder's memos hanging over their heads, some players, even very good ones, will probably continue to depend on a widespread form of technical cheating politely referred to as “table feel.” This covers a multitude of petty sins. As Sue, a bridge duffer from Miami, puts

it: “I've played with the same partner for so long that I know what he means when he hesitates or bids in a certain tone of voice. I know the kinds of mistakes he is likely to make and what decisions cause him trouble.” Table feel, then, means the unintentional transfer of information. It is a mild transgression, and it is commonly considered “part of the game.”

Intentional cheating is something else again. Here bridge is rife with possibilities. Players can, of course, try all the maneuvers used in other card games. They can peek at other people's hands, use marked decks, deal improperly, look at the bottom card as they deal or even set up mirrors on the table (concealed on rings or lighters or in pipe bowls) that will reflect the cards as they are dealt. The list could be extended. In addition bridge has several special fiddles all its own. Here are just a few, garnered from experts and duffers alike:

- Bid the same call in slightly different ways to convey suit length. “Diamond” means a four-card suit. “A diamond” means five. “I'll bid one diamond” means six.

- Prearrange signals with your partner. If you touch your ear that indicates confidence. If you tap the table “nervously,” the number of taps shows how many aces you have. People with good memories can work out hundreds of these signals. Most opponents won't catch on because nearly everyone fidgets at bridge. Experts, however, would begin to notice that your partnership was making plays it could not normally have made. (Edgar Kaplan suggests that a foolproof way to protect a system of signals would be to couple it with a master on-off signal. Then, if you coughed, the system's signals would all be meaningful. If you coughed twice, the system would become meaningless. “No one could break that,” Kaplan says, “but your opponents would still know something was going on.”)

- Take advantage of the confusion and noise of a tournament and the fact that half the pre-dealt hands of duplicate bridge—the same hands that you will be playing later in the session—are all turned up and visible at the same time. If you are on your own, you can learn a lot during a trip to the bathroom that takes you by several tables. Or you can eavesdrop on the bidding at other tables. If you have a friend, he can kibitz at other tables. It is particularly helpful if you and your friend have a foreign

language in common. Then you can discuss his discoveries out loud with impunity.

- After the deal, sort your hand by suits in a prearranged order. Partner can then tell how many you have of each suit, because he can see that you have just pulled out three cards for your first sort, which always mean, say, hearts. Diamonds might come next, then spades, then clubs.

- Follow in the footsteps of unnumbered players of rubber bridge who wait until halfway through the play of a contract and then say, “I've got the rest.” At this point, immediately sweep up the remaining tricks before any but the most alert can check out the claim. Most of the time, opponents will be too polite to challenge your sleight of hand. If you really didn't have all the rest of the tricks, now you do.

- You will not be detected in most friendly rubber games if you use the famous pause system with your partner. The two of you agree that. say, an eight−second pause before bidding means the bid is particularly strong. Four second pauses signal weak bids and six−second pauses connote the average value for the bid.

- Mom and Pop players particularly favor special intonations, self−induced coughs, titters, body language and significant itches. Often these signals are unconscious, but they are still cheating if the partner understands them and uses the information they convey. This kind of hustle prompted the late George S. Kaufman to call for a “review of the bidding including all the original inflections.”

As you can see, the theory of cheating at bridge Is highly developed. But is it really practiced? I tried to find out by keeping my eyes and ears open during the consolation round of the recent New York Regionals. I kibitzed on game after game, waiting for skulduggery. The experiment was a dead loss. I saw no peeking, no suspicious gestures, no wandering. It was too noisy to eavesdrop. The protests witnessed were all routine. Mostly, people just played bridge and stared at the ceiling.

Then it happened. A friend of mine in the non-playing dummy position tapped on the table where his hand had been laid out for the play. That much was legal. Dummies are permitted to alert their partners that the

next lead comes from the dummy hand. And my friend's partner had started to lead out of order from his hand. But those taps had not been randomly rapped out. My friend's finger had come down directly behind his spade suit. And spades was undoubtedly the lead of preference.

Later, I asked my friend about his tapping. He said he was completely unaware he had been pointing to the spades. And I believe him. But there you are. If he had meant to cheat, no one could prove it. Even screens and bidding boxes could not have prevented him, because they are only used before the play. What is an honest man to do?

My mother always said, “Don't play cards with strangers.” But in tournament bridge, where games with strangers are inevitable, the only workable strategy seems to be: Assume the other guy is honest—and hold your cards low. ■