

He Who Hesitates is _____?

We have all heard the above phrase and know the usual ending. However, as it relates to bridge, I offer up some additional choices:

He (She) who hesitates is:

- (A) totally out of it (perhaps that is the same as lost)
- (B) cheating (purposely trying to give partner unauthorized information).
- (C) not concentrating (perhaps thinking about where the woman at the next table got that gorgeous sweater she has on.)
- (D) compromising partner (making it difficult for partner to do what he or she would normally do).
- (E) not abnormal (trying to figure out some problem as it relates to the particular hand).
- (F) violating the Laws of Bridge

Take your pick. Decide for yourself which of the above statements are true, false, or irrelevant as it relates to playing ethical bridge.

I'm sure that we have all been the partner of the poor lost person in (A) or (C). In fact we have probably been that person a time or two. It reminds me of that old bridge question and joke: "At any given moment, how many people in the world are in a comatose state.....excluding your bridge partner that is?"

While you are considering the above answers let's look at an actual appeals case from a recent NABC:

	North	
	♣J7654	
	♦----	
	♥AJ96	
	♠Q987	
West		East
♣10		♣AK82
♦AQ1097		♦K864
♥8543		♥K10
♠KJ6		♠1032

South
 ♣Q93
 ♦J532
 ♥Q72
 ♠A54

The bidding:	West	North	East	South
		1NT(1)	Pass	
	2♦(2) Pass	2♥	Pass	
	Pass(3) 2♠	3♥	Pass	
	4♥ Pass	Pass	Pass	

- (1) 12-14
- (2) Transfer to hearts
- (3) Longggg break in tempo

Results: 4♥ made 4 for +620 E/W. There was an agreed break in tempo at West's second opportunity to bid. The Director was called and after hearing the facts rolled the contract back to 3♥'s disallowing East's 3♥ call but guessing that West would balance back in with 3♥. Thus the Director's adjusted score was +170 for E/W.

The East/West pair appealed this result on the grounds that East was applying the Law of Total Tricks (hmmmmm, that rationale once again!!). The appeals committee upheld the Director's ruling and had various and mostly unkind things to say about East's action. Most agreed that the hesitation by West made East's bid far less risky, and that without intending to, West had conveyed the information to East that he/she had some values but nothing to bid.

In fact, this exact situation gives rise to the vast majority of hesitation problems. A player (in this case West) has some potential extra values, and no convenient method to describe them.

Now having been in West's position many times, I know that I must bend over backwards to ignore my partner's hesitation. But is it always possible? I suggest that it is not. Sometimes you may not be consciously aware of the fact that partner bid or passed out of tempo. However if you are, you are now faced with the dilemma of trying to ignore it and do as you would have done without the hesitation, or noticing it and acting upon it. This is really the root of the hesitation problem.

To recap the Laws of Duplicate Bridge: “Players are authorized to base their calls and plays on information from legal calls and plays and from mannerisms of opponents (not partner). To base a call or play on other extraneous information may be an infraction of law. After a player makes available to his partner extraneous information that may suggest a call, as by means of.....an unmistakable hesitation,.... the partner may not choose from among logical alternative actions one that could demonstrably have been suggested over another by the extraneous information.” Thus bidding again after partner’s hesitation must be based on clear-cut values in one’s own hand.

But are hesitations themselves a violation of the bridge laws or contrary to ethical behavior at the table? Of course not. Unfortunately they happen...it’s a part of the game. However, it is in violation of the bridge laws to give your partner unauthorized information and for your partner to then act on that information...that is often what happens when an undue hesitation occurs.

Ok, now for the answers to the opening question? I suggest that any and all of them could be true with the possible exception of (B) and (F). While (B) could be true, it is rare to find someone who hesitates intentionally as a way of providing partner with something additional to think about. I recommend that you rarely concern yourself with the idea that someone may be guilty of the C word. It seldom happens as an intentional act. Much more likely a hesitation is a subconscious thing.....the person, if inexperienced at least, rarely knows that they have hesitated at an inopportune time.

(F) which says that he (she) who hesitates is violating the Laws of Duplicate Bridge is essentially an untrue statement. It’s only when one’s partner takes advantage of a hesitation that the Laws have been violated.

As we all know proverbs often contradict one another. The wisdom that advises us that if ‘we hesitate we are lost’ also prompts us to ‘look before we leap.’ The latter seems to suggest that we think before we bid. I suggest that we all try to keep our tempo the same at all times in order not to appear to be lost.

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