

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [114]

The Cardiff Winter League resumed last Thursday. Once a month through the winter eight teams play off against each another, two matches of fourteen boards, those matches repeated later in the season in order to give a complete schedule of 14 x 14 board matches. It contributes a welcome additional competitiveness to the winter season. This year we invited a composite team from Penarth to make up an eighth team, and very welcome they are too. This board gave them a far from ideal introduction to the event.

Dealer East; N/S vul

	♠Q983	
	♥A4	
	♦AK9543	
	♣2	
♠A42		♠J5
♥985		♥K1072
♦QJ6		♦7
♣Q1074		♣AKJ983
	♠K1076	
	♥QJ63	
	♦1082	
	♣65	

At my table in the match against the Houston team the bidding was as follows:

W	N	E	S
		1C	P
1N	2D	3C	all pass

The final contract was the same at both tables. We gained an IMP when North against me attempted to cash a second diamond, thereby promoting my Queen of diamonds for a spade discard and a tenth trick. But nine tricks was really the limit. This seemed a normal enough result, although it might be noted that North/South have a good chance of making Three Diamonds – that contract depends on how declarer plays the spades, and whether he can limit himself to one loser in the suit.

When Filip and Diane Kurbalija sat North/South against Simon Brindle and Rod Hudson (not a regular partnership, as I understand) who were representing Penarth, there was a bit more life in the bidding.

W	N	E	S
		1C	P
2C	2D	3C	3D
P*	P	4C	P
P	4D	all pass	

Four Diamonds seems quite a stretch, and was duly defeated (I didn't discover whether this was by one or two tricks). However, in the view of North/South, West had hesitated prior to passing over South's 3D call. They sought a ruling on the question of whether East's bid of 4C should be allowed. The situation was complicated in that West did not think he had hesitated, and East for his part had not noticed a hesitation.

Since Chris Rochelle was still playing, Eric Cummings took on directing duties. Eric was asked, at the conclusion of the set, to rule on the question of whether East's 4C bid should be allowed. This was after the hand had been played and scored. I don't know at what point North/South raised their concerns about a slow Pass with the opponents. I should have thought it needed to be before North bid on to Four Diamonds.

Eric asked various players, including me, whether, if there had been a hesitation from West, we would allow the bid of Four Clubs. Following this consultation exercise Eric ruled the final contract back to Three Diamonds by North, making. This might not have mattered very much given the rather eccentric Victory Point conversion scale in operation, but unfortunately it altered the result of the match. The Penarth team appealed, and the board has been referred to David Stephenson for a final decision.

This was an unlucky introduction to the competition for Penarth, but the issues raised are as old as bridge itself, and they will continue to be raised until the game is played with all the players in separate rooms, keying their bids and plays into some electronic device (and if that day ever comes, I will find something else to do with my time).

There are a few issues worth addressing. First, should North/South have sought a ruling? This is slightly more complicated than it may sound because there are inevitably some gradations between a strict, rule-based approach to the game and one in which players take a more relaxed stance. My own approach varies according to circumstances. For example, if someone (not my partner or myself) leads out of turn on a club night, I will tell them to pick it up. I am also (unless facing repeat offenders) pretty relaxed about club players making bids following hesitations - people aren't doing it deliberately; and they won't understand why the director is being called. But the League is a step up, so it is right that the rules of the game be applied. If in the view of North/South there was a clear hesitation by West following South's 3D call they have every right to seek a ruling.

What if the hesitation was very brief? The less obvious the break in tempo, the trickier it becomes – not least because the opponents may not be aware of anything untoward. But it also has to be recognised that even brief hesitations convey unauthorised information (at least in an established partnership, and especially where the players are experienced). It is precisely for this reason that most of us prefer to play with screens whenever possible.

Still, this is an area where player discretion is bound to enter in. I might be influenced by what I knew of my opponents - for example, how experienced are they at tournament level? Another question worth asking is whether the opponents, faced with exactly the same situation, would themselves seek a ruling. If you don't allow that this has any bearing on the matter you are, like it or not, countenancing two different games being played in the one event, and that has to be a concern. Equally, no-one wishes to play 'all-in' bridge, with unauthorised information regarded as simply grist to the mill. So it's not straightforward, in my view. This incidentally is one area in which we all miss Patrick Jourdain – he was always very measured in these situations.

Was the ruling correct? Provided North/South raised their concerns with the opponents *before* North played the hand in Four Diamonds, then yes, I believe it was. One has to accept that there was a break in tempo over South's 3D call – Filip and Diane would not have said so if there wasn't. If further corroboration were needed one might look at West's hand – it's quite difficult to pass smoothly with that hand on that auction. Accepting there was a break in tempo, East was in receipt of unauthorised information and - since Pass is a logical alternative - he cannot be allowed to bid 4C (the fact that he might well have done

so in any event is not the issue, unfortunately).

What should the adjustment be? I'm no expert on such matters, but I assume it should be the most favourable plausible score for North/South, which is Three Diamonds making nine tricks: +110.

The result of the appeal is awaited with interest.

GD