

Unauthorized Information at the Bridge Table

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Have you ever wished you could say to your partner, “Lead a spade?” Bridge would be an easier game if that were legal, but the game would also be pretty boring. The fun of bridge is deducing the correct action from limited information, and the only information we can use from partner is what comes from his calls and plays.

There is a problem, though, because sometimes partner can tell you something about his hand by acting fast or slowly or by a “look” or a remark. Information conveyed in any of these ways or by partner's tone of voice or manner of asking questions is *unauthorized information* (UI) for you. This means you are not allowed to use it to select your own calls or plays. Partner's unexpected alerts or failures to alert and his answers to opponents' questions are also UI. Bridge is a thinking game, and players are allowed to think whenever they have a difficult decision to make. However, the fact that the decision was difficult is UI to partner.

What do you do when you have UI from partner? You must “carefully avoid taking any advantage” (Law 73C, with further requirements in Law 16B). The requirement is stronger than just choosing the call or play you were going to make anyway. If partner's action suggests a particular call or play, you must not choose that action if there is a logical alternative (LA). This means any alternative that is sensible, even if inferior. You don't have to pass a forcing bid or bid spades when you really have hearts, but if there are multiple choices available, you must select the one least suggested by the UI.

Let's try an example. Suppose partner thinks for a while and then makes a penalty double. You are a bit short in the trump suit and maybe have an extra card in your own suit, so you'd like to pull the double. Perhaps you are sure you would always pull the double in normal circumstances. However, that's not enough. You must consider whether passing the double is completely silly; if not, you must pass. Partner's thought suggests the double is doubtful. That is UI to you, and you must go out of your way to “carefully avoid” taking advantage. Of course if you have a hand where passing the double is obviously stupid, feel free to bid on, but make sure pulling the double really is so obvious that everybody with your cards – and without the UI – would do so.

What can you do when you might have created UI yourself? Sometimes not much, but sometimes you can choose an action that avoids giving your partner a problem. You might, for example, be able to choose the final contract for your side rather than involve partner in the decision. Or perhaps you could bid Blackwood rather than make a delicate slam invitation. These won't always be rational choices, though, and you just have to remember that creating UI is not illegal (except in rare aggravated cases). The UI may put constraints on your partner's choices, but that's all.

In fact, sometimes UI has no effect. Suppose you have opened a strong 2♣ bid, and opponents compete. Most pairs agree that 2♣ creates a “forcing pass” situation: opponents will not be allowed to play undoubted. If your partner thinks for a long time and makes a forcing pass, the long thought is still UI, but it doesn't suggest any preference between doubling and bidding on. You can do either one with no concern.

What should you do when you think the opponents have created UI? First, recognize that this will happen quite often, and most of the time it's harmless. However, if there could be any doubt about the facts, you

can seek agreement as soon as the UI is created. Using the example above, if an opponent makes a slow penalty double, you might immediately ask the opponents, "Do we agree that the double came after some thought?" If they agree, just go on. If not, call the Director to decide on the facts and protect everyone. It is important to avoid upsetting anyone or becoming upset yourself. No one has done anything wrong so far.

What if you think an opponent has taken advantage of UI? Continuing the example, let's assume an opponent has pulled the slow penalty double. You should *not* call the Director at this moment. For all you know, pulling the double was entirely automatic with the hand that player held. Wait until you see the hand – either when it comes down as dummy or at the end of play. If *then* you think pulling the double was dubious, that's the time for a Director call. Again there's no need for either side to get upset. There may have been an infraction, but it's the Director's job to put things right.

UI situations are tricky, and if you play bridge long enough, you will be ruled against no matter how hard you try to avoid it. You will also revoke, lead out of turn, and do lots of other illegal things. Try to avoid them all, but realize you will never be 100% perfect if you are a normal human being.

Finally, what should you do if you get UI from someone other than partner? If it's from your opponents at the table, it's not UI! (There are some rare exceptions, but they involve infractions, and the Director should advise you if one of these happens.) If an opponent's slow penalty double tells you he doesn't really have a super trump stack, feel free to play accordingly. Your opponents will take advantage of information you give them, so that's a good reason to try not to give them – or your partner – any that you don't have to.

If you get UI from somewhere else, say a loudmouth at the next table, tell the Director. In doing so, avoid giving the information to anyone else who might not have heard it. The Director's job in these cases is to avoid giving a disadvantage to either side. In an extreme case, the Director can declare the board unplayable and give average-plus to both you and your opponents – and a penalty to the loudmouth! But the Director has some options, depending on the exact information, and may be able to have the board played fairly.

Here are two great UI examples offered by David Grabiner:

S W N E
1S P 2S 3D
X P ?

You have ♠Kxxx ♥Kxxx ♦xx ♣xxx, and are considering pulling the double. Perhaps you would always pull the double in normal circumstances, since you have an extra spade. But neither passing the double nor bidding 3♠ is a clear error. If partner took 20 seconds before doubling, you have UI that he wasn't sure of his double. Since you must carefully avoid taking advantage of the UI, you must pass his double.

Now, suppose you have ♠Qxxx ♥Qxxxx ♦– ♣xxxx. Passing would now be a clear error; your spade holding and diamond void are both bad for defense against diamonds and good for play in spades. Since nobody would seriously consider passing, you can bid 3♠ even if partner's double was slow.

An example with unauthorized information from an explanation:

You open 1NT with ♠AQxx ♥KJxx ♦Ax ♣QTx. You intend to show 15-17 but partner announces "12-14". Your opponent then passes, and partner bids 2NT, invitational. If you had not heard the explanation, neither passing or bidding 3NT would be a clear error, as you are in the middle of the range. But the UI tells you that partner has 11-12 HCP, not 8-9, as he wanted to invite game opposite a 12-14 point NT. To avoid taking advantage, you must pass.

Now change the clubs to KTx, making the hand a 17 count. Passing 2NT would now be a clear error even without the UI. You may bid 3NT because that is the only logical bid when you have a maximum and partner invites game.