

## Slow Play? Well Hurry Up!

The biggest irritant in duplicate bridge, claimed a survey not too long ago, is not table rudeness, or complicated systems, or even anything to do with smoking. It is slow play. Many experienced local players who used to play frequently are seldom seen at clubs these days. Is it because they play rubber at home? because they've lost interest? because they feel no need to beat inferiors? because they've lost touch with the latest conventions? No. It is because they haven't the patience to play club bridge anymore, because it's too damn slow.

As a result, many club games are getting smaller. Once you lose the top end of your player base, the remaining members of your game don't attend with anywhere near the frequency of the bridge-crazy addicts, and attendance goes slowly down. You can point to a lot of reasons attendance is off, but the number one turn-off of this game is following a pair who is slow every round, or waiting for the North-South pair one table lower to complete the round and hand you the boards.

And what do you read about slow play, and how to prevent it? They tell us to play quickly, don't conduct post-mortems, don't waste time smoking or getting coffee or talking to friends between rounds, claim when you can, and all sorts of obvious things like that. Sort of like advising a pitcher to throw strikes and don't give up a hit, or a goalie to keep the puck from entering the net. The real keys to playing fast are in forming habits that serve to keep the game moving, and staying alert at the table.

To play fast you don't need to play fast; you just need to play slow less often.

Suppose the auction goes 1NT (15-17) on your right, you pass an eleven count, LHO makes a transfer. You should see that there is a great chance for you to be on opening lead eventually, and you should start figuring out what your best lead might be against notrump, or against the suit about to be bid by RHO. Once the auction is over, you can immediately place a card on the table. After your lead is turned face up, you can write the contract on your convention card as declarer studies dummy.

You scoff. *"That might save five seconds,"* you say. *"Over the course of the night that might save a minute or two at most."* Point taken. But how often have you seen one or more of these:

- a fourth pass by the player whose bid was passed out
- *"whose hearts; is it my lead?"*
- *"what did we do on board seven, partner?"*

These events don't cost five seconds; they cost minutes. But if you get into the habit of keeping the game moving, it will speed up the game a little bit, by getting opening leads onto the table quicker and saving time figuring the best defense because you need to go over the bidding again in your mind before leading to trick three; and, it will speed up the game a lot, because players who are really at the table almost never ask *"is it my lead"*, or make a fourth pass, or forget what happened on the previous board.

So let's go over the ground and look at a single deal and how time wasted can be extra time saved:

**Arriving at the table:** this is where most of the time goes. The smoking ban in effect now at most clubs forces smokers to go outside or to a special room to smoke, where you can't hear the round being called. Many clubs have washrooms, or coffee and other refreshments that are far away from the tables. Some clubs even have less washroom space than they need and lineups result. None of these is any excuse for arriving at the table late. The only excuse for arriving at the table late is that you were still playing boards when the round was called. Even this is not an excuse if you finished the boards late and then went to get a leisurely refreshment while your next opponents were waiting (although we will make an exception for biological urgency, provided you follow it up with bridge

urgency to make up for the lost time).

**Greeting the opponents:** too many of us don't greet our opponents. But some of us do so with such profusion that by the time the first bid is finally made, other tables have played three tricks already. The happy medium is to greet and pull cards from the slot simultaneously. This keeps everybody happy. If someone wants to tell a story, fine, but don't let it hold up the bidding. Correct form is something like "...so Freddie went up to the officer and said 'Sir, I respectfully--redouble--I respectfully submit that...'" If you are not confident in simultaneously bidding and being the jovial raconteur, simply mention that you have a funny story to tell after the round, and almost certainly you'll have time--trust me.

**Sorting cards:** even with my bizarre method of sorting cards, I take about the same amount of time as everyone else. What isn't cricket is when somebody is forced to say "*still sorting*" because the dealer has passed his 2-count without sorting. This slows things down for everyone, since there is the awkward knowledge that the dealer passed quickly. The time gained by the quick pass is swiftly lost by the other players as they try to ignore this unauthorized information. Sort your bad hands and your good ones. We also need to recognize that some players have genuine trouble in sorting their cards and need a few extra seconds. Rushing them inevitably causes more time wasting later.

**Bidding:** Take a few seconds before sorting to check the dealer and vulnerability on each board. Reduce the essential information to two words: "*We/They/Both/None*" for vulnerability and "*1st/2nd/3rd/4th*" for the seat you are in. If you're East on Board 15, you simply remember "*They; 4th.*" If those new boards with the green hands and the funny vulnerability stickers confuse you, you won't be confused when you make it a habit to look for this information every deal. The number one timing problem in bidding consists of players not realizing it is their turn. Either the dealer hasn't seen that he is the dealer, or the player due to make the next bid is waiting for LHO to say something. If you are next to call and are thinking for more than a few seconds, it's a good idea to give some indication that you know it is your bid, to put minds at rest.

**Before the opening lead:** Once the bidding is over, somebody should say aloud the contract and declarer ("*...so, Six Hearts Redoubled, by East...*") and the players should write the contract down now on the backs of their convention cards--except the player on opening lead, who should open the proceedings before writing the contract down.

**The play:** The opening leader should have the contract written down by the time the thirteen cards in dummy appear. At this point, no matter how obvious the play to the first trick, declarer should think for a half-minute or so before playing. Opening leader's partner may also wish to take some time, either before or after he plays his card. Time taken at the first trick is not time wasting; this is virtually always a time of planning and deep thought. Later in the hand, however, there are all sorts of needless irritating time wasting tactics that happen frequently:

- declarer thinks for a minute, then leads towards an ace-queen in dummy, LHO follows low smoothly, and declarer now goes into the tank again. Surely during the first tank he should have considered that the most likely outcome was a low card from LHO. His decision whether to finesse or not should have already been made.
- a player pulls a card from his hand, holds it unseen in mid-air, then replaces it again. Ten seconds later, the same act with a different card (or is it the same one again?). Some declarers even go so far within their blue funk of deep thought as to play a card at a speed of about three millimetres a minute, until everyone in the club can see what it is, only to quickly pull it back at the last moment! This often causes the opponents to throw their cards on the table in disgust, which undoubtedly contributes to the time wasting, but under such torture who can blame them?
- many inexperienced players (especially when trying to learn from a better partner) go out of their way to make the absolutely 100% perfect and proper signal on defense on every card. This results in ten seconds to decide whether to play the five or the three first as declarer

runs his solid nine-card suit. Partner is usually so zonked by the repeated tanks he doesn't even notice the signals.

- it's my impression that people who look at the ceiling usually have nothing to think about at that time.

The solution to all of these is to stay ahead of what's happening. Don't detach a card until you're sure you want to play it. Don't lead up to dummy without some idea of what card you'll be playing in the likely circumstances. Don't take on too many defensive conventions at once: the proper way to learn how to signal is to start slow and add things little by little. The ceiling won't help you.

**Claiming:** Many players have run into the Laws while trying to claim and have decided apparently to never try it again. This costs them time. If you fear claiming because there's a trump out and you might muff the claiming statement, just play a few more tricks until all you need to do is show your cards. If you're on defense and you can see that dummy is good (and you **know** that partner cannot win another trick), concede. It saves time.

**Irregularities:** There's nothing sillier than players debating over whether the director should be called after an irregularity occurs. Call him. You may have heard that you can't call the director if you're dummy. Call him anyway. Don't waste time dillying over whether the irregularity means anything. Keep calling until your call is acknowledged. (There are players who think that you can summon a director by waving, as though they're bidding another hundred in a silent auction. You can't. Yell at him. Even if he's on the phone.)

**After trick thirteen:** Whoever is closest to North's convention card is responsible for seeing that North grabs the traveller first, before he enters the score on his own scoresheet. If North tries to enter the score on his convention card first, I suggest slapping your hand down on it. If North wishes to blab on, I suggest one of East or West take the scoresheet themselves and open it up for him. There is so much opportunity for time to be lost here that all four players should be especially vigilant. Get the job done before discussing the hand at length. Don't let anyone have an extended look at the scoresheet while there are still boards to play. A glimpse or two, or a quick (and quiet) recap of the most popular scores by North, fine. A comprehensive analysis of who bid the slam against whom, by counting tables to figure out who is pair 13, is not at all proper.

**At all times:** Be aware of how much time you have before the round is to be called. Directors could do a lot more to help players in this respect. Few directors anymore say "*you should be on your last board*", or something like that. It's better for a director to announce when a round is half-over, so that players can speed up if necessary.

**The Golden Rule:** There is one misapprehension that almost all players share with regards to slow play, and that is the fault principle. Too many players adamantly refuse to speed up their game (which as we've seen, does not necessarily mean to play fast, but just to avoid playing slowly) after a pair arrives late, since they feel that they were not responsible for the original delay. This sort of thing happens:

Round One: Played 3NT and needed to engineer a difficult endplay to make it, then a difficult defense for the needed 800 against our vulnerable game. Left the table three minutes into the next round.

Round Two: Got to table to find no opponents, they were fetched from the smoking area outside five minutes into the round, and sat down saying "what took you so long?" Three times during the round we tried to speed this pair up, but they insisted on post-morteming the first board, and South took two minutes before being reminded it was his lead on the second. Left five minutes late, with opponents behind us waiting to take our seats.

Round Three: Asked North, explaining system to South, to fill in the scoreslip after the first board and he exploded. "*Not my fault you guys arrived late; you'll have to play quicker. Bloody slow players.*" Continued post-mortem. Director announced an early hospitality break, "*because of a*

*certain East-West pair".*

Do you think the East-West pair is going to be back next week? Probably not, but the two North-South pairs will. Notice that the East-West pair had a few tough hands and got behind, tried to catch up, and were denied the opportunity. Don't blame the director: no director can monitor every table to find out who's at fault when a pair gets behind. By this time, it probably looks to the director like the East-West pair is slow.

The Golden Rule is that **there is only one person responsible for slow play: you**. I don't care what the circumstances are, I don't care if you've never been late getting to a table in your life: if you make no effort to get caught up, you are **guilty**. If your attitude is *"I won't help because it isn't my fault"*, you are hurting the game more than any slow pair ever could.

Fast players don't play *"fast"*. They just slow the game down less often. As a result, they have more time to think. What we need to do is look for the ways we all slow down the game and get rid of them, filling them with awareness and pauses for thought.

Slow players don't play *"slow"*. They lose the thread and take time doing a whole slew of unnecessary things that slow the game down. It takes only one player to cause delays. *"Don't let that person be you."* Keep your game moving: hurry up--and think!