

“INFREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS”

By Joe Hertz

Presented at NVBA Unit Game Jul-25, Aug-1, 2019

As Bridge Players, we have a problem. Nobody really teaches us the Laws of the game outside of Club Director Courses. We typically learn them by violating them or being witness to other bridge players doing the same. This has made “Director, Please” two of the scariest words for a new bridge player to hear, and probably spreads “imposter syndrome” among otherwise perfectly capable bridge players. That is, players preferring to play in 199er or NLM games not because of a fear of facing off against better bridge players, but due to a fear of a director call over an issue they felt they should really have understood before they tried to play against more experienced players.

This is my attempt to help rectify that problem.

The Laws of bridge, when it comes to infractions, largely concern themselves with 3 types and abbreviates them as follows.

AI -- Authorized Information

MI -- Misinformation

UI -- Unauthorized Information

AI is what you are allowed to consider in making your decisions. There is no guarantee this will be useful, or even correct information. Just that you are permitted to use it in making your own choices.

Greg Herman writes a useful article on this topic which can be found at <http://www.northerncoloradobridge.com/archives/playerscorner/BridgeEthics.htm>. I'll quote liberally from it here:

[AI is] any general knowledge about a board known before you see your hand. This includes, but is not limited to: knowing your seat and vulnerability, the event format, the number of remaining boards and your estimation of your current standing, your knowledge and/or perception of your opponents style and ability, information about your partner's general style and ability, and the amount of time remaining on the clock. This does *not* include, for example, overhearing the result attained on the same board at another table.

Any information derived *purely* from legal calls and plays to the current board. By *purely*, I mean:

- For calls made by you or your partner, your recollection of the agreed meaning of the bid, and in the context of your system, any available negative inferences from having selected that call over other legal alternatives
- For calls made by your opponents, their agreement on the meaning of the call, any relevant observed partnership tendencies, and any available negative inference

- For plays, the rank and denomination of the card played, in the context of the information you know about the hand (the cards in your own hand and dummy, and the calls and plays previously made on the board)
- Withdrawn actions *by the opponents* [ex: an attempt to make an insufficient bid]
- Knowledge of legal procedures and their applicability to the current board. For example, if partner opens the bidding in fourth chair as the first call to the auction, and it is not accepted, the information that partner will be required by law to pass throughout the remainder of the auction is authorized to the offender.
- Inferences drawn from *opponents'* mannerisms, demeanor, tempo, gestures, reactions, etc. These inferences are, however, drawn at the player's own risk.

UI is...well, pretty much anything that isn't AI. You often get UI. It happens all the time! What you cannot do is let the UI damage the opponents. You must ignore any UI you get to the best of your ability. Likewise, the opponents must ignore any UI they get.

Again from ColoradoBridge's site:

Examples of *unauthorized information*:

- Tempo in which **partner** selects an action
- Manner in which **partner** selects an action
- An unexpected alert or failure to alert by partner
- Any inferences from questions asked or not asked by **partner** about the opponent's auction
- Utterances or remarks by partner during the auction or play period
- Partner's gestures or expressions
- Withdrawn actions or plays made by partner
- Comments, results, remarks, or analysis overheard or accidentally seen pertaining to to-be-played boards
- Explanations by partner about the meaning of a call

MI is exactly what you think it is. Typically a bad explanation of an agreement. Damage from MI is when someone has received MI and makes a bad decision as a result of the MI. Just because MI is present doesn't automatically mean there is going to be an adjustment. The damage has to be connected to the MI. If it isn't there won't be one. Often MI and UI go hand in hand (ex: South bids and North explains the agreement incorrectly to E/W. South now has UI about what North thinks South's bid means.)

Is it unethical to convey unauthorized information?

No. Sometimes, for example, you judge you need to sit and think about an important decision for an

extended period of time. This will convey unauthorized information to partner, and, depending on your final decision, this may restrict partner's future legal actions. But sometimes it's worthwhile and important to take the time to make the right decision; just consciously recognize the implications of the choice you are making.

Is it unethical to *needlessly* convey unauthorized information?

Not *unethical*, per se, but it is certainly very poor practice; one who needlessly conveys UI makes for a poor partner. All players (including ethical ones!) should strive not to convey UI when possible.

Is it unethical to use and/or be influenced by unauthorized information?

Yes- this is what is actually considered unethical.

My partner bids out-of-tempo. After this, I make my bid, and opponent calls for the director. Is my opponent accusing me of being unethical?

No, not necessarily. The opponents potentially have legal protection under Law 16B1, and are likely just calling the director to 1) establish the facts, and 2) retain their right to redress, should it be appropriate. It should be noted that it is good practice to volunteer that you recognize that partner's call was out-of-tempo before making your call, especially if you believe that, without the opponent's knowing your hand, your call may appear to be perceived as being suggested by the unauthorized information.

End citation of <http://www.northerncoloradobridge.com/archives/playerscorner/BridgeEthics.htm>

So what am I allowed to ask about? What are they allowed to ask about?

- Questions must be about your or their **AGREEMENTS ONLY**.
- You must have a "bridge reason" for asking the question.
- You can **never** ask a question just for partner's benefit (YOU need the bridge reason, not pard).
- You can **never** ask a question if you already know the answer to it (you have no bridge reason).
- It is to everyone's benefit for you to NOT ASK leading questions. Phrasing matters!
- THERE ARE NO JEDI MIND TRICKS IN BRIDGE

Try to stick to these types of good questions/requests if you can:

"Leads and Carding?", "Your Discards?", "Please Explain", "May I see your System/Convention Card?"

Examples of bad questions (all of which I have been or seen get asked!)

(Partner leads a Queen) "Top of a sequence?" (i.e. from QJT). There are lots of reasons to lead a Q playing standard leads. Which one applied at that given moment is not part of your agreements.

(After trick one has been played, but not “quitted”) “You play Standard/UpSide-Down, right?”. This phrasing once resulted in a ruling against a famous bridge player because the opponents inferred that it meant declarer had a reason to ask it (i.e. she could not tell the answer from the contents of her own hand) and so they played their partner to have those values.

(After finding out we play Upside-Down Attitude) “So what does that ♠4 of your partner’s mean?”. They might as well be asking who has the ♠2 and ♠3, because that is what determines if the 4 is encouraging or discouraging, and the location of those cards is not part of your agreement!

(After 1N-(2♦)-2♥), the next player to bid turns to the NT opener and asks if the 2♥ bid is a transfer. This is an attempt at a Jedi Mind Trick -- The person asking had a spade stack. He got the opener to say, “Oh, I guess it is!” when he already knew that it was not intended as such.

“What type of hand can your partner have for that bid?”. All but preying on your desire to be a nice person and to try and answer the question as well as you can. Actually answering this question violates the following safety tips.

SAFETY TIP #1: STICK TO “JUST THE FACTS”. All of your answers should essentially be re-statements of your agreements. That’s all of what they are entitled to know about, right? I always do exactly this because I have a very bad hearing loss. I know I might mishear any question so it follows that any simple “yes” or “no” response I make can get me into trouble. I might not be answering the question they asked me, but I will never misinform them. If they want to know more than that and you aren’t sure if the question is kosher to ask, PLEASE ask for a director.

SAFETY TIP #2: DO NOT GUESS!!! An answer of “UNDISCUSSED” is perfectly fine! No agreement is no agreement. If you think you know what it is, but haven’t discussed it, it’s STILL “UNDISCUSSED”. If you have an agreement but aren’t precisely sure what it is (or are concerned that P has forgotten it) , just hand them your convention card. It’s safer. If you try to guess and your guess is wrong, then you have given them MI and maybe your partner UI as well. The resulting director call will not be good. In some cases, you can even ask your partner to leave the table while you explain. That way, if you explain it wrong, P hasn’t heard what you said and so he has received no UI!

As long as you actively try to not transmit UI or MI, or take advantage of UI if you receive it (you cannot always avoid it) , even if you go about doing so incorrectly, nobody will think you behaved unethically.

What’s the difference between an alertable bid or an announceable bid? When do I do which?

The actual rule is that alertable bids are "highly unusual and unexpected". Let’s try to make that a bit simpler.

If you look on the convention card, some lines are in black, some in red, and a few in cyan (blue).

Bids in black are typically not alertable or announceable (unless yours happen to be “highly unusual/unexpected”)

If they are in red. These are alertable. MOST of the time, this means you say “Alert!” AND play your alert bid-card. (you’re supposed to do both!). You do NOT explain these unless an opponent asks at their turn.

If they are in blue you announce them (explaining them instead of saying “Alert!”). There are only a few of these. The only announceable bids are:

A 1♣ opening that is non forcing and “may be short”.

A 1N response to a 1♥ or 1♠ opening that is “forcing” or “semi-forcing” (because opener’s next bid might get made on as little as a doubleton in that suit -- the announcement tells the opps that might be about to happen).

Transfers (to the next suit up):

1N-2♦, 1N-2♥, 1N-4♦, 1N-4♥, as “Transfer”.

2N-3♦, 2N-3♥, 2N-4♦, 2N-4♥, as “Transfer”.

EXCEPTION:

AFTER the first round of bidding is over, you do NOT alert bids above 3NT during the auction (yes, really!). You are required to alert them AFTER the bidding is over (the opponents can always ask). Why not? Because the odds are that the opponents will not be bidding at that level, and so your alerts aren’t going to help the opponents and are probably more likely to help your partner (which they shouldn’t ever do anyway! So the laws strive to remove this potential source of UI from the game).

What should I do if my partner forgets to alert an alertable bid (or alerts a bid that isn’t alertable)???

- 1. DON’T PANIC!!** You can fix the MI later. Just don’t use the UI you now have and you’ll be fine!
- 2. So DON’T try to correct partner during the auction.** Partner is allowed to make mistakes. YOU’RE allowed to make mistakes. Your opponents get to know your agreements even if one of you forgot them (and you’ll tell them what they actually are at some point later. Keep reading)
- 3. You are ETHICALLY OBLIGATED to continue AS IF PARTNER DID NOT MAKE ANY SUCH MISTAKE.** So if/when pard explains your bid incorrectly you must be all “LALALALALALA I CANNOT HEEEARR YOU!!” (at least until the end of the auction). Funny but true: Every now and then, I’ve been known to actually turn off my hearing aids if I thought I was about to become the recipient of UI!

So you should ask yourself what you would be doing if partner had alerted your bid correctly (what the laws call “in the absence of any UI”) and proceed accordingly. That might mean you have to alert

partner's next bid even though you know he forgot your agreement and he doesn't mean it as such (so now YOU will give HIM UI that he cannot make use of as well! Ugh!). Just do it. Don't worry. We'll clean up the mess afterward. A bad board isn't the end of the world. If you keep to your responsibilities, you might get lucky and get a good board out of the deal because having UI isn't the problem. You will wind up receiving UI all the time. It's THE MAKING USE OF UI (even accidentally) that is the problem. See below for an example of how you might survive a situation like this.

4. So when do you tell the opponents about the mistake?

You do it only once disclosing the mistake would not help out your partner play the rest of the hand.

So if your side is declaring, you say so before the opening lead. They call the director if needed

So if your side is defending, YOU WAIT UNTIL AFTER THE HAND IS OVER (YES, REALLY!)

5. True story. I once opened 2♦ natural and weak, but partner alerted it as Flannery (11-15 HCP's with 5 hearts and 4 spades). Partner bid 2NT (inquiring further under both agreements), I made my normal 3♦ Ogust response (bad hand, good diamonds) just like I was ethically obligated to do, which he alerted thinking it meant I had 3 diamonds and one club. He then bid 4♥ which was passed out. Before the opening lead, I then explained that we didn't play Flannery, and we got a top board because both 4♥ and 5♦ were making and while some pairs were in 5♦ (+600) nobody else was in 4♥(+620). HONESTY PAYS!