



Slow down, you bid too fast

If you were to ask the players at your local club if it was OK to show your entire hand to your partner before the bidding started, you'd (hopefully) get a unanimous rejection of the proposal as being contrary to the spirit of the game. Likewise, if you were to suggest that players should be allowed to say things such as, "Partner, I have 4 points," at the commencement of the auction, you'd be sure to get dirty looks. That's now how we do things at the bridge table. Yet some of the very same people who rightfully condemn the aforementioned practices are perfectly fine with telegraphing the strength of their hand with the speed of their bidding over enemy preempts.

As you've probably heard, the ACBL has decided to do away with the Stop card – used to caution an opponent that a skip bid is about to take place – at all of its tournaments as of Jan. 1. Many clubs are expected to follow suit. Players who learned the game during the age of bidding boxes may wonder what the proper protocol is, now that the Stop card is on the way out the door. And those who remember the pre-bidding box days may wonder if the old skip-bid warning is coming back (it's not). This month's Ruling the Game column (pg. 33) discusses the change in detail.

Regardless of whether you liked the Stop card, players are obliged to pause after an opponent makes a skip bid.

We are all familiar with players who think that the required hesitation is just a legal annoyance, and they demonstrate that annoyance in various ways. Here's a common one. Partner deals and opens 1♣, and right-hand opponent overcalls 2♠, weak. The offender, who also has a weak hand, passes in a flash. "If I have a bad hand, why do I have to wait before passing?" is their mantra, not realizing that the quick pass tells their partner exactly that. And what happens when they have a good hand in this type of situation? You already know the answer: It's a quick bid or double. The partners of such players are indeed blessed: They know if their partner has a strong or weak hand.

After an opponent's skip bid, the object of the required pause, of course, is to conceal *from partner* how good or bad your hand is. And no, with a bad hand you may not pay mere lip service to the suggested 10-second pause by counting out the seconds with your hand folded. That's just as bad as an instant pass. You need to study your hand as if you're not sure what action you want to take, *even if it's completely obvious*. Bridge players have to become poker players in these situations. Don't give the show away by acting too quickly.

Just as learning to count your cards before each deal is a habit that needs to be developed, pausing after enemy skips needs to be practiced, too. The Stop card is dead. Long live the mandatory pause.

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