

Unauthorised information

Question

Recently the following came up in a club game.

My Partner S opened the bidding with 1NT

W doubled

I, as N, bid 2H which my partner alerted.

E passed.

S bid 2S, having misinterpreted my bid as a transfer (against our agreement)

W passed and the bidding came to me.

I bid 3H (better than S with my three points and 5 Hs)

The Director was called and the ruling was that I was telling partner that she was mistaken, and that this was unauthorised information. Is this correct?

Answer

This is a situation that arises quite frequently. The relevant Laws are 16 (Unauthorised Information) and 73.1 (Proper communication between partners). The latter law says that “communication between partners during the auction and play shall be effected only by means of the calls and plays themselves.” Any other information that a player gets from his partner is unauthorised information. It does not mean that it is illegal – unauthorised information occurs regularly as part of the game, eg. When your partner alerts or fails to alert your call, when your partner gives an explanation of your bid (correctly or incorrectly), etc. What Law 16 says is that a player may not make a choice which is based upon the knowledge obtained from the unauthorised information.

So, in your case, your partner’s alert of 2H was unauthorised information. What the Law requires of you is that you act AS IF your partner had described your bid exactly as you intended – even though you may know that this is not the case. That is, if my partner had said that 2H was natural and still bid 2S, what would I do now? Effectively the laws require that you think along these lines: partner knows I have hearts, but doesn’t seem to like them and is suggesting 2S as a better contract. Would my hand be OK for a 2S contract? If the answer is yes, then you are required to Pass. Bidding 3H with just 5 hearts is not a possible alternative. It is assumed that partner has already heard you say this and has said no to hearts. So, unless you have another suit, passing 2S seems, on the face of it, to be the correct action at law. Had you held six or seven hearts and a singleton or void in spades, then there would have been reason to rebid 3H and this may have been permitted. Knowing the actual hand would be necessary for me to make a completely informed decision.

I know that the law is commonly breached by players, purely through ignorance of their responsibility under the laws. It can be very hard to take an action (such as passing 2S in your example) which you are pretty sure will lead to a bad result for your side. The Laws do not allow a player to “tell their partner again” what they’ve got when they know, because of unauthorised information, that there has been a mix-up.

As a Director, the way I try to instruct players and to explain rulings is by emphasising the “AS IF” sentence above. For many players, to deliberately take what is likely to be a bad score is very hard. I think it will take a lot of work on the director’s part to explain to many players their ethical responsibilities.

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