

## PLAYING WITH SCREENS - Unauthorized Information -

When playing behind screens, there are a number of mechanisms in place (clearly set on the WBF Code of Practice) that release the players from part of the constraints of playing without screens. At the same time, additional constraints are created and the players should be aware of them and educated accordingly.

“The intention of screens is to reduce to the minimum the circumstances in which the members of a partnership are mutually aware of any matter not part of the legal auction (...) The WBF considers it desirable that players should vary the tempo randomly when returning the tray under the screen. When North and South are the players with next turn to call after the tray is received, these are the players who are responsible for the movement of the tray. It is considered there can be no implications if a tray returns after 15 seconds or less. This period may be extended during the later stages of a complicated or competitive auction without necessarily creating implications. Attention is drawn to the distinction to be made in the tempo expected when the players encounter highly unusual situations generated by unfamiliar conventions or treatments.”

So, players do not need, for example, to be concerned about the need to avoid “slight hesitations” during the bidding, because delays of up to 15 seconds are considered “normal”. However, they need to be aware that there is a pressing need to avoid, at all times, the inadvertent supply of potentially unauthorized information to the other side. Sources of unauthorized information passing through screens are, for example:

1. Making noise when removing calls from the bidding box and/or placing them on the tray. Players must do that silently, namely without snapping the calls on the tray.
2. Tempo variations. Note that North bids first - then East - then North pushes the tray (likewise, South bids - then West bids - then South pushes the tray). Both players on each side can therefore control the tempo of the auction. North (South) should delay passing the tray when East (West) bids too quickly, and East (West) should delay their own bid when North (South) bids too quickly. It is also proper to adjust the tempo in a seemingly random manner.
3. Making noise when asking/answering. Unfortunately players not always write questions and answers. When they don't, at least they should avoid being heard on the other side.
4. Calling the TD. We will return to this subject later, but when there is a call to the TD on one side of the screen it is usually perceived on the other side and this may be an important source of UI, namely when the tray has taken some time in the same side of the screen.

If one side has all these troubles to avoid passing information to the other side, if 15 seconds between “tray trips” is considered normal, if players should randomize the passing of the tray, then it is also logical that on the other side players should also avoid using any information that might be conveyed by the tempo of the tray. This statement can be interpreted in more than one way, but our approach is that players should **COMPLETELY IGNORE** the tempo of the tray when bidding.

Consider the number of possible reasons why the tray takes some time on the other side:

Thinking (one of the two players), asking and replying to questions, writing, searching for a paper pad, asking for coffee, calling the TD for some side question not relevant to the other side, agreeing the number of tricks made on the previous board, randomizing the tempo, etc., etc. The factors causing the delay of the tray are so varied that most of the time it hardly conveys any information at all relevant to the hand (and in such a way that it might be usable by the players).

In the long run, players are better off if they just ignore these (often random) variations of tempo and bid normally their hand as much as possible.

An example of this approach:

NS Vul	NORTH					
Dealer East	♠ A 10 5		West	North	East	South
	♥ A K Q 9 4 3				Pass	1♣
	♦ 7 4					
	♣ 10 8		Pass	1♥	Pass	1♠
WEST		EAST	Pass	2♣(1)	Pass	4♣(2)
♠ 6		♠ Q 9 7 3 2	Pass	2♣(1)	Pass	4♣(2)
♥ J 10 8 7		♥ 6 5 2	Pass	4♥(3)	Pass(4)	4♠
♣ A Q 9 6 5		♦ 10 3 2	Pass	5♣(5)	Pass(6)	Pass
♣ J 7 5		♣ 9 6	Pass			
	SOUTH					
	♠ K J 8 4					
	♥ -					
	♦ K J 8					
	♣ A K Q 4 3 2					

- (1) very slow
- (2) very slow
- (3) very fast
- (4) deliberately adjusted tempo
- (5) disputably fast
- (6) deliberately adjusted tempo

East, having judged the bids of 4♥ and 5♣ to have been made in too fast a tempo, took out his Pass card immediately but held it over the tray before depositing it. South, when faced with the decision to bid 6♣, claims he decided not to push on because of the perceived hesitation by partner.

This case raised a number of questions at the time, and prompted some changes in regulations, in a way that, nowadays, we would not adjust the score to 6♣. South should ignore the variation of tempo and bid whatever he thinks the right bid to be. The fact that partner could be hesitating or not should not be taken into account for the player's decision.

Of course there will be occasions where an opponent will question some action from a player, arguing that it was suggested by an alleged delay in passing the tray. How do we deal with this situation?

This kind of problem is much more complicated than it looks like, and there are important points to discuss at a number of levels: 1) Approaching the table; 2) Getting the facts; 3) Reaching a decision. There are some questions for which we do not have a clear answer, and we hope that this lecture will raise the general awareness about these so that (hopefully) we will be able to fill the blanks that we still have with practical, consistent and lawful answers.

## **Approaching the table and getting the facts**

The way the TD approaches the table is very often the most important part of the job, and we should know exactly what to do, and how, in every specific situation. A correct procedure may solve (or minimize) a lot of cases. Less than that, and the cases will become nastier than what they should be.

Since we are talking about screens, the TD has to try to avoid making one side of the screen aware of what is happening in the other side. All efforts have to be done in order to not communicate to the other side unless, and until, it becomes a need.

This leads us to the first problem. When it is the player on the side of the break in tempo that calls the TD, he places himself in jeopardy because he becomes himself a carrier of unauthorized information. In European Championships captains are instructed to tell their players not to call the TD on the side of a huddle. This is the “wrong side” to call the TD.

The TD should always be called from the side where the delay was perceived and not from the side where the delay was caused. A hesitation which looks evident for the side where it was made is sometimes not perceived as a delay in the other side. When a player calls the TD to tell him that his screen mate hesitated, he is making the other side of the screen aware that something wrong has happened. In the last Rosenblum, a TD was called in such a case, from the wrong side of the screen, and once the other side was asked whether they had noticed something or not, the reply was: “Well, I understood that my partner is complaining about a hesitation”!

In Italy, calling the TD from the wrong side of the screen results in the rights of the non-offending side to be cancelled (however, there is still the option of adjusting the score for the offending side, splitting the score). We don't have such a regulation in Europe (nor in WBF events). The approach is that calling the TD from the wrong side of the screen results in “seriously jeopardizing” the rights of the non-offending side. This does not mean that we do not take the case into consideration. It means that we have to be careful when getting the facts, and especially try to establish if it was the player calling the TD that made his partner aware of the break in tempo. How do we do that?

The first thing to do is to ask the other side of the screen if any of the players noticed something unusual on the tempo of the tray moving to either of the sides (NEVER focus the question). You will be surprised as to the number of times players will say that they noticed nothing! It is not unknown for a player to say that his screen mate huddled for about one minute, while partner on the other side says “— Everything was normal”. However, if you make a wrong question, like “— Did you notice an hesitation for the tray to come from the other side of the screen?” the player will know who hesitated and will say instinctively “—Yes, there was a very long hesitation”, just because you focused his attention on something that probably was not there for him before.

When you are not able to dismiss the case with this line of acting, make sure that you gather the statements of all four players (was there a tempo variation, who caused it, for how long, what happened during the break in tempo, etc.) All of this should be done in a quiet voice, so that the flow of information between sides is minimized. In the end, you should decide if the call by the wrong side influenced the perception on the other side, and to what degree. If you are not convinced that the hesitation had already passed through the screen, the approach is to consider that it was the action of the “wrong player” that informed the other side of the screen about the hesitation, therefore ruling that “no UI has been conveyed”.

This means that it is very important that, in accordance with the CoP, we educate the players to not call the TD from the wrong side of the screen, explaining them carefully that this will frequently result in their side losing the right to receive an adjusted score.

Once the TD is convinced to really be in a UI case, there is no further procedural problem, the situation being now the same as without screens.

Now the second problem: the TD is called from the right side of the screen, the one that may have received unauthorized information. You will have to make similar questions (what was the perception of the players about the break in tempo, the reasons, the duration, etc.), but on different timings and with another 'style', because you no longer have to establish if that side noticed the hesitation and you do not have to worry about ringing the wrong bells.

This act of gathering information is important for you to know what happened at the table (get the facts). It might not matter for the final decision, but it is a fundamental step in the process of understanding.

After establishing the facts, the “procedural” problems are basically over. The TD orders the table to continue play and asks the players to recall him at the end of the hand if any of them feels damaged. It is a good practice to stay around the table, “just in case”, because the likelihood of a call at the end of the hand is high. An important point, which we stress again in this last paragraph before talking about the bigger problems, is that you should never wait for the end of a hand to get all the facts about an alleged break in tempo. You get the information as soon and as quietly as possible, and you order the play to continue. Not the other way around.

### Reaching a decision

As we saw above, we try our best to either establish that there was no hesitation, or to reduce it to a normal UI case, just like without screens. To do so, one of the important things is always to know who hesitated. If the TD finds out that it was the “presumed” player who broke the tempo, we have a normal UI situation, as without screens. If on the other hand the TD finds out that there was no break in tempo from the player who was bound to be responsible for the hesitation, we get to the third (and biggest) problem, which we will discuss soon.

Let us just see an example of a “normal” UI situation, from the Bermuda Bowl:

#### Board 1. None vul. Dealer North.

	♠ K Q T 4 2		
	♥ J	West	North
	♦ T 9 8 7 6	Duboin	Crombie
	♣ Q 4	-	Pass
♠ J 8 6	♠ 5	Pass	2♥ (2)
♥ Q 5	♥ T 6 2	Pass	5♣ (4)
♦ K Q 5 2	♦ J 4 3	Pass	6♠
♣ K T 9 8	♣ A 7 6 5 3 2	All Pass	All Pass
	♠ A 9 7 3	(1) Strong: 8-9 playing tricks or 22-23 HCP BAL. or a major two-suiter (18-23 HCP) or a GF in hearts.	
	♥ A K 9 8 7 4 3	(2) 5+ spades; 8+ HCP.	
	♦ A	(3) RKCB; (4) 0-3 keycards.	
	♣ J	(5) Break in tempo.	

Opening lead: ♣10.

Result: 6♠ made six, plus 980 for N/S.

East called the TD when North raised 5♠ to 6♠, stating that the tray had been on the S-W side of the screen for quite a long time before returning with the 5♠ bid. North agreed. South also agreed to the break in tempo over 5♣. North explained that at the time he bid 5♣ he was somehow under the mistaken impression that hearts were the implied trumps and responded to show his zero keycards. When South bid 5♠ he realized that his own spades were trumps and with one more keycard than he had shown (the ♠K) and good trumps (including the queen) he raised to 6♠. He insisted that it was the 5♠ bid and not the tempo that cleared up his confusion. He also told the TD that after the double he thought it was possible that the hesitation had been due to West thinking about a club sacrifice.

The TDs consulted a number of players about whether passing 5♠ was a logical alternative for North. All believed that pass was a logical alternative and that North could not be allowed to bid on after a break in tempo. While divided in their opinions, after considering all of the evidence and the opinions of the consulted players, the TDs decided to adjust the result for both sides to 5♠ by South making six, plus 480 for N/S.

The Committee members agreed that there had been a clear break in tempo which was far more likely to have been due to South than to West and which made bidding on with the North cards more attractive. All members agreed that the fact that all of the players consulted and some Committee members thought pass was a logical alternative made that the only defensible conclusion. The Committee sustained the TDs' ruling for both sides: 5♠ by South made six, plus 480 for N/S.

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As you can see, the approach with screens, once the problem is reduced to a "normal" UI case, is pretty much the same as without them.

However, we have still one "big problem" to attack. There are times when the break in tempo does not come from where the players think that it came. Something else happened. In competitive situations, it is pretty normal that a side of the screen perceive wrongly a delay of the tray. Very often a player who was not taking part in the auction suddenly finds a reason to get involved, starting to think while nobody on the other side would expect it to be possible. In slam or very artificial situations, on the other hand, the break in tempo is very often caused by asking and answering to questions. It may also be the case of other random events, like the tempo being adjusted "too much", or there was coffee spill, a gorgeous caddy with a short skirt, or two players simply talking about the weather).

We are lucky that these situations have not happened very often (curiously, when a player finds out that it was not his opponent that hesitated but his partner instead, he generally drops his case). But even if infrequent (until now at least), we have no clear way to treat these situations. Some examples:

1 - A player is in a situation where there are two possible 50% actions, one aggressive and the other not. There is a break in tempo from one side of the screen. The player should ignore the break in tempo and bid whatever he thinks is the right bid. Now we have two situations: A) Partner created the break in tempo. Maybe the player used it (he had a logical alternative), and we may adjust the score under the usual UI techniques. B) Partner bid perfectly on time. Does it feel right to adjust against the players, in this

situation when they probably did nothing wrong (the bid is a 50% shot, and if you ignore the tempo of the tray you will bid it 50% of the time)?

2 - A player takes a 5% action, clearly wild, after perceiving a break in tempo from the other side of the screen. It turns out that it was on the other side there was a long period of questions and answers (like for example when you have translation problems). Should we allow the action? His partner did nothing wrong. Did the player ignore the tempo of the tray? Probably not, if the action is so far fetched. What about 20%, or 30% actions?

All these problems arise from the fact that the Laws are not written specifically for playing with screens, and the current regulations are somewhat incomplete in this respect. We should not be able to penalize a pair that did nothing wrong in the bidding. However, when the players are choosing their bids they do not know if they are limited by the actions from partner or not (even when they are supposed to ignore the tempo of the tray, it is often impossible to abstract from it). Also, there are all these situations where the connection of the tempo of the tray to partner's actions makes it "feel right" to adjust against the player. Finally, there are opposite situations where the lack of connection should probably entice us to be more lenient (when partner is innocent and the player has a borderline decision, for example).

A glass that is half full is also half empty, and when we say that the player "could have used the information made available by the other side of the screen", we may also say that he "could have not used"... Should the glass be half full or half empty, according to what happened on the other side of the screen?

The increase in awareness of this problem is recent, and started with the following problem:

NS : top of first division

EW : new partnership but players with international experience

Systems : both 5-card majors with lots of gadgets, both playing multi

Deal 5 (NS/N)

	J		
	A98642		
	KT		
	8532		
AT98	\	Q76532	
3	- - -	KQT7	
Q9873	/	J4	
AT7	/	9	
	K4		
	J5		
	A652		
	KQJ64		

Bidding:

West	North	East	South
	pass	pass	1Cl
1Di	1He(5cards)	1Sp	2Cl
3Sp	4He	4Sp	..Dbl
pass	5Cl	pass	pass
pass			

The hesitation was attributable to South, and lasted the proverbial 3 minutes (one minute more likely).

Just before the lead, west called the TD to draw attention to the delay.

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The case in itself is not difficult. But things became very interesting when someone said “what if we don’t know who hesitated, or if there was a random factor causing the break in tempo”...

Should we adjust back to 590 (4♠ doubled making)? Is it different when South hesitates and when it is something else? Or do we allow 5♣ (and when)?

Another example:

1♠ 4♦  
4♥ 4♠  
4NT 5♥  
...5♠

The screen mate of the player bidding 5♠ starts asking written questions after the 5♠ bid and gets written answers which altogether takes more than 2 minutes. Then the screen is pushed to the other side. Now 6♠ is bid and made. Is it possible to adjust the score if without screens adjusting would have been the obvious decision?

Let us say that a substantial majority of players would have bid 6♠ but that pass is a logical alternative. Is it clear NOT to adjust?

Let us now say that less than 25% of the players would have bid 6♠. Is the TD allowed to draw the conclusion that such a call can only be based on the hesitation (therewith not accepting it)? Even when partner didn't hesitate at all?

A third example, perhaps more striking...

North ♠KT9xx ♥AKQxx ♦AKQ ♣-	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>
(Screen)	1♠	-	2♠	-
South ♠Axxxxx ♥xx ♦xx ♣Txx	5NT	-	6♣	-
	7♠			

5 NT Asking about trump honours; 6♣ A or K of trumps

Two cases: First, South hesitates for a long time. Second, West felt ill and stopped for some time after 6♣. Surely there is a case that North has taken advantage of what he has assumed to be South’s hesitation in both cases. Are East-West entitled to redress? Or is North allowed to keep his grand slam? In which cases?

There are a number of possible approaches towards a solution for the problem, none of them is at the same time fully supported by the laws and regulations, and completely fair to both sides at the table.

In the ACBL the approach is to always adjust against the player, when we judge that he might have used the tempo of the tray to make up his mind, independently of who was hesitating. This means that the players cannot try to ignore the tempo of the tray and

are bound by more restrictions than without screens (whoever hesitates, on the other side both members are subject to UI), and adjustments are frequent. This way, players that did nothing wrong in borderline case are “penalised” for random events. However, to be fair with the approach, there is an advantage for the TD, which may also be (arguably) perceived as an advantage to the competition: If there are ten tables with similar breaks in tempo, the decision is the same for all of them.

The opposite approach is to simply consider all the information arising from the tempo of the tray as random, because of all the factors that may affect it, so in effect calling it “non-information”. Exception: The variation of tempo could demonstrably be connected to one of the players (and we would reduce it to an open-screen situation). This would reduce the number of adjustments, probably paving at the same time a highway for a number of strange vehicles...

Two approaches in the middle, worth considering, are the following:

#### Approach A

- 1 - Players should ignore the variations in tempo from the tray.
- 2 - All the information eventually arising from it is non-authorized to a player if the variation can have been caused by partner (meaning... almost always).
- 3 - When (2) applies and a player’s action is questioned by the opponent, then if the break in tempo came indeed from partner the player cannot select from logical alternatives one that could have been suggested by it.
- 4 - When the break in tempo did not come from partner, the player cannot select an option that would be taken only by a minority of his peers.

This approach solves the two situations above in a peculiar way. A) Even if you are supposed to ignore the variation of tempo, if you are forced to take a view in a 50% auction you just assume the hesitation came from the opponent and act accordingly - you will not be adjusted under (4) above. B) If you take a wild or gambling action after a break in tempo from the other side of the screen and it turns out to be a lucky moment, you get adjusted against, also under (4). You have to define wild or gambling action - the borderlines - but you no longer penalize a partnership that did nothing wrong in the bidding.

#### Approach B

When partner breaks the tempo, use the usual UI techniques. When the opponent does it, or when it was a random factor, do nothing. The rationale for this approach would be that if the information is not coming from partner then it is authorized.

Whatever the approach (A or B), if we have ten table with the same hesitation and a 50% action, from which 5 have the “right” player hesitating, 4 have the “wrong” player hesitating, and one has a random factor, the adjustments will not be the same through the field (should they be?) Under both approaches, you would adjust when the “right” player is hesitating and not otherwise. In the 5% case, on the other hand, the final solution would be different. Approach (A) condemns the player to an adjusted score (he is not entitled to wild actions after a break in tempo). Approach (B) allows the action (even if the hesitation helped the player, who assumed it was partner’s hesitation, it would be authorized information because it did not come from partner).

What is the current approach? Curiously enough, there is not enough jurisprudence to establish one. The first example that we presented shows that the principle of ignoring

the tempo of the tray is a sound one, but regarding the way to treat a break in tempo from other than partner there is no clear view and we do have a problem. As we stated earlier, we have been lucky that very often the players drop their cases when they find out, at the end of the hand, that it was partner that hesitated, or that the other side of the screen was just questioning and answering.

Finally, there are a few other possibilities of UI, when playing with screens, but they are much easier to deal with, and we mention them only for the sake of completeness. One source is the noise made. Behind the screen, UI may pass from, for example, involuntarily snapping the bids on the tray (the players on the other side will know the timing of the bids made), or from the sound of writing (they will know that some bid is conventional and is being asked, for example), or oral explanations (sometimes they hear everything). The source of the noise is normally readable, and the type of information conveyed clear enough, so that it should not be a too difficult problem for the TD. The situation will be treated simply as if no screens were in use. Another possible source is the light (a player may sense a movement from shadows) or the table itself (vibrations, for example). If a case happens we deal with it in pretty much the same way as without screens, but we should also try to adjust the playing conditions to minimize the source of the UI (adjust the light, the position of the table, even change tables if possible).

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