



Practical Tips to Speed Up Your Play

by Bob Gruber

Frequent duplicate bridge participants quickly become aware that duplicate bridge is a timed event. Whether you're playing a pairs game, a team game or an individual, the timing is related to the number of boards per unit, where a unit is either a round or a match. ACBL makes the following recommendations:

- 2 boards/unit: 7½ minutes/board
- > 2 boards/unit: 7 minutes/board

Official policy is that you complete all boards within the allotted time. If you've already started a board when time is called, you're usually allowed to finish it—quickly. If you're in this position, don't take advantage by dragging out the bidding and play. You're preventing two tables from advancing to the next round/match in a timely manner. Sometimes this delay can ripple to several tables within just a couple more rounds, so you really should finish that board as quickly as possible.

If you don't finish the board quickly, the director will be disinclined to be sympathetic about future tardiness. In general, you may be allowed one late play—if the opponents are willing—but not two, and maybe none if you're habitually late. Plus, the director may impose a procedural match point penalty for repeated slow play.

Being stuck behind a slow pair can be frustrating. There are a few practical things many pairs can do to speed up their game without detracting from the time dedicated to the bidding and play.

First, save the postmortems until you've finished the round/match. This suggestion applies whether you're in a pairs game, team game or individual event. Only after finishing the entire round/match, should you discuss the hands just played—if there's time. If not, mark your card for discussion when there is time¹. And if you do discuss the hands during the game, be sure to keep your voices down. This is one time when sharing is not appropriate.

Second, while the bidding is proceeding, keep your head in the game by assessing the bids and the implications for your next bid or bids. This assessment applies to the opponents' bids as well as partner's. Also, if you have time, speculate on what you might lead if your right hand opponent (RHO) eventually becomes declarer in a given strain (suit or NT). Thinking ahead about future bids and a potential opening lead improves both the speed and quality of your game.

Third, if you do end up on opening lead, make your lead before recording the contract in your private score. Verbally confirming the contract is fine, advisable even, but your next task is making the opening lead. Normally, you will have plenty of time after leading to record the contract and still see the entire first trick. That's because a) declarer will normally take a few seconds to study the dummy before playing, and b) partner may take additional time to study the dummy. Even if both play like lightening, you can leave your card face up on the table while you finish your recording task. That gives you the right to study all cards played to the trick, including other players returning their card to a face-up position. If pressed to "get on with it," mention that it's everyone's responsibility to agree upon the contract and at least one player from

¹ The paper titled *Enabling the Post-Game Postmortems* has some suggestions to make it easier to conduct the postmortems after the game



each side should keep a written record of both the contract and the eventual result, which should also be agreed upon.

Fourth, when you finish the round, unless you have a legitimate reason to leave the table, such as a restroom visit, a snack or coffee run, or a game break, please remain at the table and visit (softly) with your opponents. Also, try to take care of these other tasks after finishing a round early when you have extra time. That way, you'll almost always be ready at the start of the next round. Plus, you might find visiting with the opponents enjoyable, informative, and a way to make friends or meet future Swiss teammates.

So far, we've discussed the overall timing of a round or match. But there are also timing considerations when it comes to individual bids. In duplicate bridge terminology, it's referred to as tempo. In general, you should try to maintain the same tempo when making each and every call. That way partner can't take any inferences from the time you take to make a call.

But frankly, we all know some bids take more time than others. If you are playing in an open game, a hesitation, or break in tempo may get the director called to the table. Even experienced players often have the wrong idea about what is allowed after there has been a break in tempo. *You are allowed to take the time you need to make a decision in the bidding.* Don't let anyone (including a director) tell you that it is wrong to take the time needed to think through a knotty problem.

There is no time limit on an individual bid, but the limit per round/match is not extended because you have a difficult decision on a bid. Also, other difficult decisions may lurk in the cards, so to be fair to everyone you should bid as quickly as reasonably possible. In short, keep your tempo if possible.

Having thought, you may pass, double, redouble or bid as you like. The limitation is on your partner, who may not take an action that is not clear-cut or that could have been suggested by your hesitation. You'll be asked, either by an opponent or by the director, to acknowledge that there was a break in tempo. If there was, you should agree. When play is finished, if the opponents think there was a problem, that is, they were damaged, they will call the director. That doesn't happen very often.

By thinking throughout the bidding (including "what might I lead at trick 1 if it's up to me"), maintaining our tempo and saving discussions until there is clearly time for them, we can speed up the pace of the game and make duplicate bridge a more enjoyable experience for everyone.