

Minimizing Mistakes

by Lynn Berg

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Recently an “A” player in a small club game opened 1♠ with the following hand

♠ K754 ♥ 863 ♦ 97 ♣ J632

This was a “psychic” bid, intentionally distorting their values and distribution to mislead the others at the table.

This player does not make such bids at all frequently, but in this case I think they were wrong to do so for other reasons than the Laws of Bridge. Their opponents were fairly new “C” players who had just ventured to dip a toe in the deeper waters of an Open game. They did not have the experience or the tools to deal with this action—and the A player knew it. To me, this was an insidious form of bullying. They didn’t need to do this to get a good board against these folks; their superior skills would do that for them most of the time anyway. Instead, when the newbies saw the hand record after the game, they were aghast and puzzled. There was nothing I could do for them. Under the Law, psyching is legal and part of the game.

But I did go to the “A” player and tell them that in club games I thought they should reserve such tactics for their peers or better. Did they want to win in a nine-table game or a five-table game? Such behavior will drive off lesser players rather than welcoming them, I assured them. In the interest of developing new players and being fair in a club setting, they should reserve psychs for better opponents.

Here is what Duplicate Decisions has to say about psyching:

Psychic call (commonly “psych[e]” or “psychic”): A deliberate and gross misstatement of honor strength and/or of suit length.

Note: A deviation of, for example, one point or one card is not considered a psychic call (it is not a gross misstatement). Also, an opening of 1♥ holding ♦ - ♥AKJ ♦AJ76432 ♣732 because the player had two Diamonds sorted with the Hearts is not a psychic call (it was not a deliberate misstatement).

“Deliberate” is the key word. Psychic bids require the intention to distort and mislead. When a beginner forgets that 2♣ does not show 6-10 points and six Clubs, they are not psyching – they have just made a mistake.

Frequent psyching is not allowed, nor are what used to be “controlled psychs.” Anyone who psychs so often that their partner is aware that psychs are likely is violating the Laws. This is made clear in Law 40 C: “Repeated deviations lead to implicit understandings which then form part of the partnership’s methods and must be disclosed...” However, just noting on your convention card that you psych frequently does not give you license to do so willy-nilly. A good rule of thumb for club games might be once a quarter with the same partner. Any more bites on that apple could lead to unfair knowledge and expectation.

Bridge is a competitive game, populated by a lot of bright Type A players. But for many club players, their emphasis is on “club.” If we want to keep ‘em coming, psychs should be used with discretion.