

Two gentlewomen from Verona

By Karen McCallum

Twenty-seven years ago, during his wedding speech in New York City, my English husband, Alex, borrowed shamelessly from an old British saying, “Rugby is a ruffian’s game played by gentlemen, and bridge is a gentleman’s game played by ruffians.”

Rude and unpleasant behavior at the table is a perennial problem in tournament bridge – highlevel competition seems to bring out the worst in us. Sad to say, I am not blameless in this area myself. But that doesn’t stop me from lamenting a terrible situation. On the contrary, it spurs me to become a “part of the solution, as opposed to a part of the problem.” I’ve always tried to be a courteous and fair opponent, and a good partner as well, but I’m an emotional person, and I have failed on many occasions. Still, for the sake of all who play, and for the good of the game we love, I’m trying to do better. Recently, I played in the 12th World Bridge Championships in Verona, Italy, and Alex’s words came to mind once again. While ACBL tournaments continue to be far too confrontational and combative for me, I found that, in Verona, I was repeatedly struck by the unusually friendly and courteous behavior of both my opponents and the excellent WBF directors.

Director calls were almost non-existent, and respect for the difficulties regarding language and system was abundant. For the first time in many years, I found that it was a pleasure to be playing bridge again. Usually, in recent years, I have found myself longing to be home in my garden, with my family, away from all the rudeness and unkindness that seems to be part and parcel of bridge tournaments today. But, in Verona, I found my pleasure in the game renewed. I experienced only one unpleasant moment at the table, which I’d like to tell you about, for reasons you will understand a bit later.

Shattered peace

In the last semifinal session of the Womens’ Pairs, my partner, Lynn Baker, and I were in the happy position of being guaranteed qualification into the final, and there was no carryover. So this was just a practice session for us. We started against a pair who had no chance to qualify. One would think that the tension would be minimal - - particularly in this environment of conviviality we’d been enjoying up until this moment. Not so. On the last board of a three-board round, we were very late (as usual) and trying to catch up. Lynn and I had the following quick auction: 1K - 1P♠; 3T - 3P♣; 4P♠ - 4NT. . . Just as my RHO started to pass the tray under the screen with my 4NT call on the tray, the screen flew up and we saw that our partners on the other side had picked up their bidding cards, and an opening lead was on the table. They had simply assumed that the auction had ended in 4♠. No doubt they were trying to speed things up, since we were already into the next round on the clock. I quickly told them that the auction was not over. Confusion ensued – they were both apologetic and scurried to restore their cards to the bidding tray. The screen went back down and we passed the tray. A few seconds later the tray came back with Pass from LHO and 5♥ from my partner (two key cards without the queen). Holding ♠A Q x x x ♥ A Q x x ♦ – ♣A Q x, I was just about to bid 7♠ when my RHO quite suddenly raised the screen and told all of us, with considerable force, that we could not carry on with the auction because I had alerted my partner to the fact that the auction was not over! I was more than a little surprised to see that she was quite upset and attempted to calm her with a suggestion that we just get a director, but I had no impact. She continued to insist that we had done something illegal and her voice escalated to such a pitch that two directors arrived unbidden. They were unable to determine exactly what had happened for some time because of her continued anger. Each time they asked anyone else a question, she started up again, repeatedly removing my partner’s cards from the tray, and insisting that the auction was over, and that I could not be permitted to alert my partner illegally. By this time there was some heated conversation going on the other side of the screen as well, adding to the commotion, and other tables around us were asking us to be quiet.

Difficult ruling

The directors consulted and attempted to rule (correctly, I believe) that there had been no damage and that the auction should continue (with some cautions about unauthorized information and lead penalties, since there had been a card face up on the table during the auction). But my RHO would not allow such a ruling. She didn't even appear to listen to it. She continued her angry objections, not allowing anyone else to speak, despite the directors' repeated requests that she stop talking. I finally managed to catch a director's eye and informed her quietly that it was all irrelevant to both pairs and that perhaps they should just make a ruling that would keep the peace.

Eventually, nearly 12 minutes into the next round, my opponent was quiet enough that they were able to make a ruling that made her happy - the final contract was 4NT. I refused to play it (with the permission of the director), because of the time and because I was so disturbed by the woman's rude behavior that I didn't want to stay at her table. I asked the directors to adjudicate the result, willingly conceding all 13 tricks if necessary, and left the table. The director gave us 40% on the board. Ironically, trumps were 4-1 and I was going down in 7♠, for a much poorer score.

I was so distressed by the rude behavior that I was unable to play with a clear mind for the next several deals. My partner was merely annoyed (she's not easy to intimidate or upset) - annoyed enough to file a recorder form about the behavior on her side of the screen, which was apparently no better. Several players in the section told me later that they had been disturbed by the woman's behavior, which continued long after we left her table. The directors both sought me out the next day and apologized for handling the situation badly and making the wrong ruling. Of course, I thought they had handled it as well as possible under the circumstances - brilliantly in fact - and told them so. It was a very difficult situation for them and I admired their calm demeanor and their ability to quickly find an unusual solution to an unusual problem. But their apology did not fall on deaf ears. How nice it was to be in an environment where people take responsibility for their actions and care about the impact they have on others!

A different attitude

Fast forward to the third session of the Women's Pairs final, two days later. Could it be mere coincidence that exactly the same thing happened again? Lynn and I bid 1T - 2K; 2C - 2NT; 3NT - 4NT . . . As we passed the tray to the other side (with my 4NT as the last call), we saw that both of our partners had picked up their bidding cards! Once again, I said, "The auction isn't over!" And, once again, there was confusion, with apologies, a bit of laughter, and some scurrying to restore the bidding cards to the tray. And the auction continued without further incident. Obviously I should never bid 4NT. This timely LHO found the killing opening lead and we scored very poorly. Nevertheless, I left the table feeling that warm glow that comes from realizing that there is far more good in human nature than bad. It was all such a non-incident that the irony of the situation didn't really register with me until much later.

The pair we were playing against, my "Two Gentlewomen from Verona," were the young Chinese pair, Yan Huang and Yan Hong Wang, who were very much in contention to win the event. They were lying third at the time we played them, and eventually finished second overall. They were fighting hard for every matchpoint, and yet neither of them made any attempt to gain advantage from the irregularity. Given their courteous manner, I doubt that it even occurred to them. The last day of the tournament, when I cheered for them as they received their silver medals, it was as much for their sportsmanlike attitude as for their wonderful victory. Bravo, ladies! What a different, and marvelous, place our bridge world would be if we all followed your example!

*"Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to Heaven."*

From All's Well That Ends Well (Act 1, Scene 1)