

## Hurry up – and think!

(Mike Phillips)

As a bridge director I find that there are two subjects that consistently create the most problems.

The first is air-conditioning. It is impossible to please everyone, and for each person who is too cold there is another who is too warm. At Trumps Bridge Centre when someone complains I often employ what I call a “placebo strategy” – I pretend to alter the settings and that’s usually good for half an hour’s peace. It’s my experience that air-conditioning is an imperfect science, and people should realise that it’s not the director’s fault, and make allowances.

The other thing that concerns directors is slow play, and that’s a shame not only because it’s so unnecessary, but because it’s one of the things that put people off bridge clubs at a time when it’s a struggle to maintain numbers.

Bruce McIntyre of Vancouver wrote some pertinent comments some ten years ago, that are just as valid today, and I’ve borrowed from some of them here.

The real keys to playing fast are in forming habits that serve to keep the game moving and staying alert at the table. To play fast you don't need to play fast; you just need to play slowly less often.

Suppose the auction goes 1NT (15-17) on your right, you pass on an eleven count, LHO makes a transfer. You should see that you are likely to be on opening lead eventually, and you should start figuring out what your best lead might be against notrump, or against the suit about to be bid by RHO. Once the auction is over, you can immediately place a card on the table. After your lead is turned face up, you can write the contract on your personal score sheet as declarer studies dummy.

Likewise, you are defending a trump contract, you are short in trumps, and you know that a discard will be needed when declarer draws trump. Don't wait for this moment to think about your discard – you know what your signals are so make up your mind as soon as dummy goes down, so that you can play smoothly and quickly when the time comes.

There are many more ways in which precious seconds and even minutes can be saved, which will not only speed up the game but also allow more time to concentrate on the cards.

Let's go over the ground and look at a single deal and how time wasted can be extra time saved:

**Arriving at the table:** This is where most of the time goes. Smokers must go outside or to a smoking room, where they can't hear the round being called. Some clubs have toilets, or coffee areas, that are far away from the tables. Some clubs even have less washroom space than they need and queues result. None of these is any excuse for arriving at the table late. The only excuse for arriving at the table late is that you were still playing boards when the round was called. Even this is not an excuse if you finished the boards late and then went to get a leisurely refreshment while your next opponents were waiting (although biological urgency is an exception, provided you follow it up with bridge urgency to make up for the lost time).

**Greeting the opponents:** Too many of us don't greet our opponents. But some of us do so with such warmth that by the time the first bid is made, other tables have played three tricks already. The happy medium is to greet and pull cards from the slot simultaneously. This keeps everybody happy. If someone wants to tell a story, simply save it for the end the round, and almost certainly you'll have time - trust me.

**Bidding:** Check the dealer and vulnerability on the board before sorting your cards. The number one timing problem in bidding consists of players not realising it is their turn. Either the dealer hasn't seen that he is the dealer, or the player due to make the next bid is waiting for LHO to say something. If you are next to call and are thinking for more than a few seconds, it's a good idea to give some indication that you know it is your bid, to put minds at rest.

**Before the opening lead:** Once the bidding is over, the players should write the contract down now on their personal score sheets - except the player on opening lead, who should open the proceedings first. Likewise, dummy should not delay tabling the cards to record the contract.

**The play:** The opening leader should have the contract written down by the time the thirteen cards in dummy appear. At this point, no matter how obvious the play to the first trick, declarer should think for at least 10 seconds before playing. Opening leader's partner may also wish to take some time, either before or after he plays his card. Time taken at the first trick is not time wasted; this is virtually always a time of planning and deep thought. Later in the hand, however, there are all sorts of needless irritating time-wasting tactics that happen frequently:

- declarer thinks for a minute, then leads towards an ace-queen in dummy, LHO follows low smoothly, and declarer now goes into the tank again. Surely during the first tank he should have considered that the most likely outcome was a low card from LHO. His decision whether to finesse or not should have already been made.
- a player pulls a card from his hand, holds it unseen in mid-air, then replaces it again. Ten seconds later, the same act with a different card (or is it the same one again?). Some declarers even go so far within their blue funk of deep thought as to play a card at a speed of about three millimetres a minute, until everyone in the club can see what it is, only to quickly pull it back at the last moment! This often causes the opponents to throw their cards on the table in disgust, which undoubtedly contributes to the time wasting, but under such torture who can blame them?
- many inexperienced players (especially when trying to learn from a better partner) go out of their way to make the absolutely 100% perfect and proper signal on defence on every card. This results in ten seconds to decide whether to play the five or the three first as declarer runs his solid nine-card suit. Partner is usually so zonked by the repeated tanks he doesn't even notice the signals.

The solution is to stay ahead of what's happening. Don't detach a card until you're sure you want to play it. Don't lead up to dummy without some idea of what card you'll be playing in the likely circumstances. If you cross to dummy, or to your hand, know what card you intend to lead next. Keep your signals simple. If you're in trouble, long thinks won't make the impossible possible, so if you're going down, go down gracefully - and quickly. Gazing at the ceiling won't help you.

**Claiming:** Many players are nervous about claiming. Don't be: the Laws encourage declarer to claim as soon as the outcome of the hand is clear. It's no disgrace to get it wrong sometimes. If you're on defence and you can see that dummy is good (and you **know** that partner cannot win another trick), concede. It saves time.

**Irregularities:** There's nothing sillier than players debating over whether the director should be called after an irregularity occurs. Just call him, and keep calling until your call is acknowledged. (There are players who think that you can summon a director by waving, as though they're bidding another hundred in a silent auction. You can't. Yell at him. Even if he's on the phone.)

**After trick thirteen:** The scorer must put the result on the traveller first, before he enters the score on his own scoresheet. If North/South want to blab on, I suggest East or West take the traveller themselves and open it up for them. There is so much opportunity for time to be lost here that all four players should be especially vigilant. Get the job done before discussing the hand at length. Don't let anyone have an extended look at the traveller while there are still boards to play. A glimpse or two, or a quick (and quiet) recap of the most popular scores, fine. A comprehensive analysis of who bid the slam against whom, by counting tables to figure out who is pair 13, is not at all proper. Above all, save the post mortems for the end of the round.

**At all times:** Be aware of how much time you have before the round is to be called. Directors could do a lot more to help players in this respect. Few directors anymore say *"you should be on your last board"*, or something like that. It's better for a director to announce when a round is half-over, so that players can speed up if necessary.

**The Golden Rule:** There is one misapprehension that almost all players share with regards to slow play, and that is the fault principle. Too many players refuse to speed up their game (which as we've seen, does not necessarily mean to play fast, but just to avoid playing slowly) after a pair arrives late, since they feel that they were not responsible for the original delay. If your opponents arrive late at your table, for whatever reason, all four of you are responsible for trying to catch up.

The Golden Rule is that **there is only one person responsible for slow play: you**. No matter what the circumstances, even if you've never been late getting to a table in your life: if you make no effort to catch up, you are **guilty**. If your attitude is *"I won't help because it isn't my fault"*, you are hurting the game more than any slow pair ever could.

Fast players don't play *"fast"*. They just slow the game down less often. As a result, they have more time to think. What we need to do is look for the ways we all slow down the game and get rid of them, filling them with awareness and pauses for thought.

Slow players don't play *"slow"*. They lose the thread and take time doing a whole slew of unnecessary things that slow the game down. It takes only one player to cause delays. **Don't let that person be you**. Keep your game moving: hurry up - and think!