

Ethical Dilemmas

(Part 2) – The “Cone of Silence”

Suppose you hold this good hand:

- ♠ KQ7
- ♥ A104
- ♦ KJ6
- ♣ AKJ5



21 points. It fits perfectly into your 2NT opening range of 20-22, so you open 2NT. Partner responds 3C, which you have agreed to play as simple Stayman. You bid 3D. Partner bids 3NT, and that's the final contract. No problems.

In the 1960's show "Get Smart", there was a contraption called the "Cone of Silence", which was lowered over the table to enable Max and The Chief to have a conversation in private. In an ideal world, every bridge table would have its own Cone of Silence to prevent a player hearing any conversation between their partner and the opponents during the hand. Of course, just like the "real" Cone of Silence, it doesn't work and you hear everything that partner says. The Laws act to place restrictions on what you can do when you hear your partner say something or give an explanation that doesn't match your hand. You must pretend that you didn't hear it, and that's often very difficult.

Let's return to the hand at the start. This time, however, there is a material difference. You open 2NT. Partner alerts this and when asked says, "less than an opening hand with at least five-five in the minors". Why would partner do this? Maybe they have forgotten the system, maybe they thought that the two of you had discussed it and decide to change the way you played it, maybe they have been playing weak minors with all their other partners and just had a brain explosion, or maybe – unlikely as it may be – they are right and it is you who has forgotten the system.

Whatever the reason, in last month's article I tried to impress that there is nothing you can say at the moment. The very earliest that you can point out the problem to the opponents is at the end of the auction if you become declarer or dummy, and not until the end of play if you are a defender.

So, just like before, partner has bid 3C. What should you do now? The temptation of course is to just bid 3NT so that you can wake partner up to the error of their ways. However, this would not be legal. Remember the Cone of Silence. You must pretend that you didn't hear partner's explanation. You must do what you would have if partner had said, "20-22". That is, bid 3D. Given that partner is under a misapprehension as to what you have for 2NT, they may think that you just have longer diamonds than clubs and pass 3D. This could be a disaster for your side if you have a game on. But the Laws prevent you from doing anything about it, because you are not entitled to take advantage of the information you got from partner's alert and explanation.

If you do take an action, which is based on hearing partner's explanation, then the Director may make a ruling to adjust the score. When this happens, the score is taken back to what would have happened if you had bid as you would have normally had that Cone of Silence been in place.