



EUROPEAN BRIDGE LEAGUE

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SCREENS

History

It all started with the 'Franco boards', invented by the Italian international Mario Franco. In fact, the Franco boards were already screens, as we know them today, but only covering the upper side of the table. Each player could not see his partner and could see only one opponent. This was a major breakthrough in improving the game, and the WBF quickly adopted the system, introducing the Franco boards into World Championships in the Bermuda Bowl in 1975.

Jaime Ortiz-Patiño, then Vice-President of the WBF, was the major driving force behind the introduction of screens, with full and explicit support of Julius Rosenblum (President of the WBF from 1970 to 1976).

At the time, Ortiz-Patiño stated that "we are reaching an important stage in the development of our game. Drastic and energetic steps must be taken to protect the players from unjustified accusations of ethical play. These steps should also be such as to be effective in case cheating were to exist, in order to make such cheating as nearly impossible as one can".

There were those who opposed the use of screens at the beginning, arguing that they were distracting and dehumanizing, and they would give the impression that there was a lot of cheating going on at the top. However, as soon as they were introduced the players adopted them enthusiastically, feeling that competing was much easier at the ethical level. Players did not have to worry about facial expressions, and bending backwards because of partners' huddles was less frequent because they would not know that there was a huddle on the other side of the screen.

The fact that players were so positive about screens enabled the bridge bodies to engrave on stone that from that moment on all major events would be carried out with screens. Today, almost every country uses them on its top events, and in some even at the regional and club level.

However, during the early qualifying stages of the 1975 Bermuda Bowl something that became known as the "Bermuda incident" happened, because of feet movements under the table. It became clear that, to really stop the suspicion and innuendoes, it was necessary to extend the surface of the screen to cover also the area under the table. That was the last significant improvement made on screens.

Introduction

The entry on "screens" in "The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge" describes a screen as "an opaque barrier placed diagonally across the bridge table so that no player can see his partner (...) The screen has an opening in the center where the board in play is placed. Directly above the board is some sort of curtain arrangement that can be lifted or pulled aside once the bidding is complete. This permits all players to see the cards being played, but the opening is shallow enough that the players still cannot see their partner's face. The screen extends to the floor, blocking partner's feet from each other (...) The bidding is done by bidding boxes. Bids from one side of the table are revealed to the players on the opposite side by (...) using some sort of rolling box. Both bids are revealed to the other side of the table simultaneously so that it is more difficult to discern who huddled."

Note that a "screen", by definition, extends to the floor. However, everybody refers to "screens" as meaning indistinctively the "long" or "short" variation (covering only the upper side of the table or extending to the floor). The "rolling box" is referred to as the "tray".

All alertable bids must be alerted by both members of the partnership, questions are made and answers given in writing.

Playing with screens

Players need no longer be concerned about the need to avoid 'slight hesitations' during the bidding. Neither need they be concerned about showing any signs of discomfort about the way an auction is progressing. Furthermore, they no longer hear partner's explanations (or misexplanations) - all they have is partner's auction and their own knowledge (or lack of it) of their own system.

For the screen to operate with all these advantages it is very important that the players become aware that they must, at all times, avoid the inadvertent supply of potentially unauthorized information to the other side. Sources of unauthorized information passing through screens are, for example:

1. Making noise when removing calls from the bidding box and/or placing them on the tray. Players must do that silently, namely without snapping the calls on the tray.
2. Tempo variations. Note that North bids first - then East - then North pushes the tray (likewise, South bids - then West bids - then South pushes the tray). The advantage of this arrangement is that the players can control the tempo of the auction. Players are strongly advised to vary the time the tray is passed so that pauses up to 15 seconds (or perhaps longer in unexpected situations) are considered not to convey information. This translates into the following: North (South) should delay passing the tray when East(West) bids too quickly, and East(West) should delay their own bid when North(South) bids too quickly. It is also proper and advisable to adjust the tempo in a seemingly random manner.
3. Making noise when asking/answering. Unfortunately players not always write questions and answers. When they don't, at least they should avoid being heard on the other side.
4. Calling the director. The TD is sometimes needed at the table. The fact that one calls the director is almost always perceived on the other side, and that is unauthorized information. For example, if a player calls the TD because of an alleged hesitation by his screenmate, and if there will be a noticeable variation in tempo for the tray to pass to the other side, his partner (and the opponent) will inevitably know there was a hesitation and who hesitated. One should never call the TD on a hesitation at one's own side. If no TD is called the other side will often not notice the variation in tempo.

The opening lead also has a special mechanism when playing with screens. It should be made face down, and the opening leader's screenmate announces that the lead has been made. A defender raises the screen. This way, the number of faced opening leads out of turn with the screen open is greatly reduced.

Directing with screens

All major EBL events are held with full-size screens.

The screen is probably the Tournament Director's best friend, because it tends to remove most of the possibilities of inadvertent ethical problems resulting from hesitations. The fact that the players do not have information of the tempo of each bid from the other side, receiving both bids simultaneously, eliminates many 'hesitation' situations (though not all, as we will see ahead). Many 'unauthorized information' problems also vanish, because partner's explanations are no longer accessible.

So, TD's tend to get fewer rulings when screens are in use than without them.

It is however important for the TDs to be careful, when directing with screens, so that the integrity of the screen remains intact. The TD must above all avoid carelessly passing information from one side to the other through his own actions. Questions by the TD and answers by the players must be made in a very low voice. During play time, it is entirely proper for the TD to close the screen's aperture before going into any details with the players. If needed, the TD may sometimes remove from the table one or both players from one side of the screen and ask questions away from the table, if he feels that his questions and/or the answers will be heard on the other side.

The fact that each player is isolated from his partner until the end of the bidding is an advantage for the TD. He should strive to get at his first call to the table most of the information that may be eventually needed afterwards. Questions made after the play of the hand have less reliable answers than those made immediately after the call to the TD. When asking questions about system, carding, partnership habits or

else, both members of the partnership must be interrogated. It is up to the TD, according to each case, to decide on the spot when and how to ask the questions so that: a) no important information passes to the other side; b) the answers are as "pure" as possible.

Another important aspect of directing with screens is that partners do not talk much with each other while playing, so a lot of times it happens that the irregularities are discovered AFTER the end of the play. As long as they are within the time period provided by the Law, you, as a TD, have to deal with it, finding the opponents, getting both versions of the facts, etc. For this reason, TDs need to stay on duty for some time after the session has finished in order to handle these types of protests.

Note, however, that the call for a ruling after the end of the session should be made only if new information has been received by at least one of the players (if they both already knew about different explanations and didn't call the TD at the first possible moment, you still have to consider the case but the late call is a factor that must also come into consideration.

It is also very important that the papers with the written questions and explanations from all tables are gathered at the end of each session and kept at least until the end of the correction period.

Laws, Regulations and Screens

The Laws do not cover the specificities of playing with screens. Therefore, these are subject to regulations that are created by each governing body (NCBO or Zonal Organization). In some respects, the differences in regulations can be quite significant from country to country, even within the same zone.

The TDs attending this course have been supplied with a copy of the screen regulations used by the EBL together with the WBF Code of Practice. The regulations are, once again, not universal and not static. What is of most importance is for each TD to be fully aware of the specific regulations in each competition that he directs, and to apply them correctly.

All the regulations provide, besides some mechanical procedures of bidding and play, modifications to some of the Laws. The EBL regulations are no exception. The most important modifications are:

Law 25

At the meeting of the WBF Laws Committee, held on January 11th, 2000, in Bermuda, an important note was issued concerning this Law:

"The committee agrees that under Law 25B changes of call are allowed in the case of a misjudgment when the first call was made. The player himself decides that he has misbid. A player is not entitled to change because of his inference as to the probable next call by LHO, nor change his first call as a reaction to an irregularity occurring after his first call".

It was also a view of the Committee at the same meeting that "the Code [of Practice] provides that where an inadvertent or a deliberate bid is changed before the tray is passed to the other side of the screen, the effect of the Code is to provide that the players who then receive the tray will not be told anything about the change and there will be no penalty by way of limitation of score".

This matter is not unanimous and is subject to regulation. NBOs are free to adopt their own views on this subject. For example the NBB (The Netherlands) has implemented another point of view.

But for EBL and WBF tournaments, that is the current point of view. In practical terms, we do not apply the 'average minus' penalty from law 25B2(b)(2) and the player can change his purposeful call, as long as his LHO has not called and if the reason for the change is not connected with opponent's next call.

Examples: (1) North opens 1♥. East passes, South bids 4♥. West comments "I am not passing this one for sure". South is not allowed to substitute 2♥. (2) After two passes West opens a tactical 1♠. Now, South says "I bet you'll be playing 1♠ doubled". West cannot change from 1♠ to Pass.

Laws 24 through 32, and 36 through 39.

The general principles in the WBF Code of Practice apply. When it is possible to pass through the screen only the calls in the legal action (after any rectification), there are no penalties and players on the other side of the screen are not informed of any occurrence. When a player notices an irregularity on his side of the screen, he must call the TD, who will see that the infraction is rectified without penalty.

If an irregularity bid is transmitted through the screen the screen regulations supplementing the Laws apply. When an infringing call is passed across the screen with both sides at fault (as when either player commits a bidding infraction and the proper player moves the tray before rectification) both players on

the other side are responsible for calling the attention of the TD. The TD shall return the tray to the offending players for rectification without penalty. The infringing call(s) may not be accepted.

When there is only one side at fault (e.g. West bids and improperly moves the tray himself), the tray is returned for rectification AND the appropriate penalty is applied. Again, the infringing call may not be accepted.

In the unlikeliest case that the tray "goes round the table", returning to the side where the irregularity was committed before anyone notices it, the auction stands, again without penalty or rectification but Law 35 applies, in the case of an inadmissible call.

With these mechanisms, generally speaking, almost all 'bidding irregularities' penalties are redundant. An exposed card during the auction is simply picked up. An insufficient bid is replaced by a sufficient one. A call out of rotation is withdrawn and an inadmissible call is replaced by an admissible one. An opponent no longer has the right to accept an insufficient or out-of-rotation bid, and the 'skip bid' warning is not necessary. Only when the irregularity has passed to the other side with one side at fault are penalties applied. Namely, the lead penalties from law 26.

Law 20

The most important point on the regulations is that questions during the play period should be in writing with the screen's aperture closed. At no time prior to the completion of the hand is there any communication between sides concerning questions or answers (a player cannot, for example, ask if a certain bid was alerted on the other side or not).

Law 33

A simultaneous call deemed subsequent is cancelled without penalty.

Laws 41, 54

The opening lead is made face down. If it is out of turn the offender's screenmate should try to prevent it.

If the opening lead is faced, it is removed without penalty if the screen is not raised (the screenmate should try to delay the raising of the screen).

If the opening lead is faced and the declaring side has incorrectly opened the screen then the lead is accepted (Law 54B). Declarer spreads dummy's hand. The TD is entitled to award an adjusted score if he considers that the player who opened the screen could have known that it would be to his advantage to accept the lead.

If the opening lead is faced and the screen opened, through no fault on the declaring side, the laws apply just as if there was no screen at all.

Law 76

To keep the integrity of the screen procedure, spectators are not permitted to sit in such a way that they can see both sides of the screen.

Screens in practice

Opening leads

Here, the following four principles will see you through.

1. If the screen is opened by declarer or dummy, the lead is accepted and dummy spread (beware of 'could-have-known' situations).
2. Once the screen is raised correctly (by a defender), the normal Laws of bridge apply.
3. If two leads are made face up when the screen is raised, and both defenders appear to have led 'face up', these plays are, to all intents and purposes, 'simultaneous'. Investigate if the declarer side opened the screen through the action of the player sitting on the same side of the out-of-turn opening leader, but otherwise use Law 58.
4. A 'face down lead' is not a played card. Thus, a correct face down lead coupled with an incorrect face up lead is a lead out of turn (the face down card is picked up without penalty).
5. Declarer is not subject to penalty for exposing his own cards.

A common case whilst the screen is closed: West is declarer, North leads face down (not 'played'), South leads face up (out of turn) and the screen is raised... TD! North picks up his lead. Case A - EW opened the screen. West is still declarer. East spreads his hand. Case B - NS opened the screen. Apply Law 54.

A not-so-common case - 28 cards face up! West is declarer, North and South both lead face up, West and East both spread their hands. Now the screen is raised... TD! Apply the principles. North has really led (South's card is a penalty card). There is no 'lead out of turn'. West is declarer - he picks up his hand and play continues normally (though the defense is likely to be rather good), save that South has a major penalty card.

There are many variations on this theme, but none which cannot be solved by application of the above principles.

Different explanations

Due to the simple fact that with screens you have twice the explanations that you have without screens, this is a more frequent problem when directing with screens, and one that needs some mental focusing from the TDs.

N	E		S	W
1♥	3♣*		3♥	Pass
Pass	Pass			

3♣ - West to South: 'Ghestem (♦ and ♠); East to North: natural (♣)!

By definition, either East or West misexplained the system! (Theoretically they might even be both wrong...) It can be very relevant to establish which player got the right explanation and which got the wrong one. The 'right' explanation is the one which is in accord with the actual agreed upon system. South has bid 3♥ on ♠KJx ♥xxxx ♦AQx ♣xxx and missed game.

His argument might be that he would have bid 4♥ had he known that 3♣ showed (♠+♦) (he would have upgraded his hand). Whilst this is doubtless true, you need to establish whether or not he did get 'the' good explanation, according to the system. It is not unknown for it to be East who is wrong in these situations (i.e. East had forgotten his own system) in which case he has kindly told North what his hand is instead of what his system is. Thus, it would be North who has received misinformation - not South - and even if South has been 'damaged', the damage does not come from a misinformation of the opponents. West correctly explained their agreements, and that is what South is entitled to know.

If you cannot establish which explanation was right and which was wrong, you obviously assume the 'worst' case for the offenders. Sometimes different explanations come about because one player simply tries to achieve full disclosure by saying rather too much - in an effort to be helpful, he describes his own hand rather than his own system.

N	E		S	W
1♥	1♠		2♠	

South explains his own 2♠ as 'game forcing, promising the ♠A'. North explains it as merely a 'general game force'. Of course, South has the ♠A and East later protests that he would have done something different had he been given this information.

he been given this information.

Frequently South was merely saying too much. In other words, his cue bid did not systematically promise the ♠A - it was merely nice for South that he happened to hold it.

Of course, a TD would need some convincing on this sort of point (but common sense can sometimes be enough), but most of the time it is North who has 'got it right' in these sort of situations.

Appeals Committees may penalize 'different explanations' even if they decide not to adjust the score. This is their prerogative. TDs should not do it routinely unless they have a specific instruction to this effect from either the Committee Chairman or from the Conditions of Contest.

The special 'focusing' that we talked about comes into play in competitive situations, where both partnerships keep bidding for one or more rounds after the misexplanation. After establishing the correct meaning of the bid(s) in question, as a TD you have to consider the hand, taking into account that both opponents are entitled to know the correct meaning and that the players from the offending side will continue to assume their own explanations as correct, unless clear evidence from the bidding. You have to consider if there was damage or not, and what would be the likely/possible outcomes, giving the correct explanations to the non-offending side. Then, you 'simply' apply 12C1, 12C2 (or 12C3 if possible).

Written questions and explanations

All questions and answers should be in writing when playing behind screens. Obviously, it is essential that the other side of the screen do not hear what is going on. However, written questions and answers also help solve any language problems which may exist. Regardless of country, any bridge player would understand the symbol "?", or the reply "5+♠/4+♥, 11-14".

You will inevitably come across cases where the players have whispered to each other behind the screen instead of writing things down. Not surprisingly, this can lead to misunderstandings (even between players with the same mother language). If a dispute arises, the TD should try to obtain an agreed statement as to

what was actually said. If he is able to obtain such a statement, he can continue on that basis. If he is unable to obtain any agreement about what was said (player A maintains he said one thing and player B maintains that he heard something else), the Director tends to use Law 21A ('own misunderstanding') and thus refuses to entertain a score adjustment request. My 'formula' for this case is: "—I believe player A said what he said, and player B heard what he heard. Score stands." In other words, if the players appear to have made their own arrangements regarding questions and answers, against what is written in the Conditions of Contest or in the Screen Regulations, who is the TD to interfere in such a process? A procedural penalty on both sides would not be out of the question.

Hesitation sequences

Even if they are few and far between when screens are in use, they continue to happen. See this example:

N	E		S	W
1♥	Pass		2♠	Pass
3♦	Pass		3♥	Pass
4♣	Pass		4♠	Pass
4NT	Pass		5♦	Pass
...5♥	Pass		6♥	

There was a long delay on the NE side of the table before the tray was returned with the 5♥ and the Pass. Is anyone foolish enough to suggest that East might have been considering his next call? Of course not. It is virtually certain that North was considering some call other than 5♥ (or East was asking questions, which is less likely). Anyway, from South's point of view, the situation is as if North has a problem. South should bend backwards and avoid a logical alternative that could have been suggested by the variation in tempo. Thus, you (as a TD) are back in a normal (i.e. no screens) hesitation situation.

There are, however, some subtleties that may arise. When it is East that calls the TD, he places himself in jeopardy because he becomes himself a carrier of unauthorized information. During the last European Teams Championship, in Tenerife, the captains were specifically instructed to tell their players not to call the TD on the side of the huddle. Whenever a situation like that happens the first thing to do is to ask on the other side if any of the players noticed something unusual on the tempo of the tray moving to either of the sides (don't focus the question). You will be surprised as to the number of times players will say that they noticed nothing!

If you as a TD are called to the table because of a potential huddle, by the 'correct' side - the side of the partner of whoever hesitated - always get the statement from all four players as soon as possible about their impression on the timing. Was there a tempo variation, for how long, what happened during the break in tempo, etc.

It is not unknown for a player to say that his screenmate huddled for about one minute, while partner on the other side says "—Everything was normal" if you ask "—Did any of you notice anything unusual in the tempo of the tray going to either side of the table?"

But if you make the wrong question there, like "Did you notice an hesitation for the tray to come from the other side of the screen?", the player will know who hesitated and will say instinctively "—Yes, there was a very long hesitation", just because you focused his attention on something that probably was not there for him before.

If you are called by the 'correct' side, the one that may have received unauthorized information, you will have to make similar questions, but on different timings and with another 'style', because you no longer have to establish if that side noticed the hesitation and you do not have to worry about ringing the wrong bells.

Unauthorized Information

When dealing with unauthorized information from the other side of the screen, if you as a TD establish that there WAS unauthorized information, then it doesn't matter how the U.I. was made available or who made it. According to the Code of Practice, "it is the use of that information that is a breach of the Laws". You can, theoretically, adjust a result against a player if you decide that his bid was based on a long delay for the tray to come back, after a huddle, if the huddle was from the opponent. However, the opponents will have less of a case than if the "proper" player hesitates.

Final Words

You will be provided with more examples of screen rulings during the exercises. Always remember that screens are there to help players and TDs. While performing as a TD, the most intangible quality is to be able to direct correctly while keeping the screening process intact and making the minimum possible disturbance. Sometimes an ill-chosen word is enough to create an additional problem. In a judgment problem, you have to gather facts and players have to finish the hand in the most secure way. Learn to distinguish between what you can ask there, and what can wait until the end of the hand. A lot of information can be gathered without even disturbing players (hand records are an excellent source for the bidding and play, for example).

Another final point of view is that with screens there is a lot more items lost, forgotten, or simply ready to go to the trash at the end of each match. A lot of times there are caddies and other personnel to prepare the rooms between matches, but sometimes you will be left with an empty room that looks more or less like a war zone, with bottles of water, plastic cups, pads of paper, forgotten convention cards, napkins, boards on the floor, table and chairs, etc., etc.

As a TD, it is your job not only to apply the Code and decide on judgment cases. According to Law 81 you are the representative of the sponsoring organization, and you have to ensure the orderly progress of the game. When for some reason the organizers are short in staff, it does no harm if you pick from the tables the empty bottles and other unneeded material, collect paper pads with written explanations, gather forgotten convention cards and prepare the room (if there is time available) so that when players arrive for the next match they find a room that is more pleasant than otherwise.

When players are happy and relaxed, they make fewer mistakes. We can take the words "to ensure the orderly progress of the game" as meaning also "to keep players as comfortable as possible", within reasonable limits.

But then again, this is true for directing with or without screens...

Rui Marques, Tabiano 2001