

Stopping Legal Abuse at the Table

Most players are now familiar with the concept of Zero Tolerance. It is intended to eliminate harrassment, criticism, gloating, gratuitous lessons, and most other forms of abuse that we see at the bridge table. It does not however, prohibit the use of the bidding box to intimidate and to bully.

As with most forms of abuse, there are Abusers and Victims. Abusers are those who make pre-emptive bids with less strength or shape than most; Abusers are those who make aggressive overcalls and takeout doubles; abusers are those who raise partner with much less values than are normally expected. They do this because they believe that disrupting the opponents' communication, especially early in the auction, is a consistently winning technique.

Victims are those who lack either the awareness, methods, discipline, or will to deal with the Abusers. Victims frequently identify themselves to Abusers by the conventions that they play (or don't play).

Everyone is an Abuser on occasion. All pre-emptive bids are designed to interfere with the opponents. When we pre-empt, we are Abusers. Weak two-bids, three-level openers, weak notrump openers, Michaels cuebids, Unusual NT overcalls, and even the occasional speculative spade overcall can be pre-emptive in nature.

So how can I stop being a Victim?

Note #1 to Self: Do not permit opponents to play in undoubled sacrifices. When we know the hand belongs to us, we should double all obvious sacrifices. If you're getting a bad board anyway, you have more to gain and less to lose with a close double. Decide with your partner on a reasonable level beyond which all doubles are penalty doubles.

Note #2 to Self: Reduce the use of general strength bids that don't declare shape. Two club openers announce to the entire table that you have the balance of the strength. They practically beg the opponents to interfere if possible, especially at favorable vulnerability. Eliminate two-club openers unless you have either a huge balanced hand that can play in your partner's suit (or defend any suit contract), or have both a strong hand and a self-sufficient suit (so you know where the contract belongs already). Reduce the frequency of making off-shape takeout doubles; they, too, invite pre-emptive action.

Note #3 to Self: Reduce the use of conventions that remove the risk to interfering opponents. Any convention that removes the threat of a penalty double is an open invitation. When opponents make a takeout double and you hold points, it's usually better to start with a redouble. Fit-showing bids are fine (Jordan 2NT, Bergen raises), but they remove the threat of the penalty double; hence, they should only be used when there is little defensive strength. Using DOP1 over interference of ace-asking bids has some of the same weaknesses. But possibly the worst convention of all time is the "stolen bid" double (also known as the "shadow" double). The use of this mechanism against

interference over your notrump opener tells the opponents that you have no way to double for penalties; it removes any threat to the opponents and is a virtual license to steal. This convention should be avoided at all costs.

Note #4 to Self: Learn how and when to double for penalties. Exercise patience and restraint when the opponents wander into your auction; if your action is not clear, be prepared to double or be content to pass, knowing that your partner can re-open the bidding. When balancing, if reasonable, try to use a double to balance (instead of NT) to protect a partner that might like to punish the opponents. And learn how to and when to convert takeout and balancing doubles into penalty doubles.

And remember: If your opponents aren't making an occasional doubled contract, you're not doubling enough.