

On Cheating Strategy

TO THE EDITOR:

In the wake of a wave of accusations of “self-kibitzing” in online events, several well-known players (including some Master Solvers’ Club panelists) made public comments to the effect that a personal examination of the deals indicated no evidence of cheating. I contend that such scrutiny will seldom be conclusive.

In the past, players and administrators have been on the lookout for naive cheaters, those who will take obvious advantage of what might be gleaned from a peek: great leads, super declarer play, and so on. Especially if such results were obtained by a player previously thought to possess only modest skills, such occurrences constitute a red flag. But what if a potential crook were more sophisticated?

A sensible self-kibitzer in a team match would not cheat in the card play. It might sometimes be difficult to play “normally” after seeing all the cards, but it would not be challenging to make mundane opening leads, to lose finesses that ought to be lost, to play according to percentages. Similarly, a careful cheater would take routine actions in the auction, even when they were slated to work out badly. As dealer, one cannot pass holding, say:

♠ K Q J x x x ♥ K x x ♦ x x ♣ x x,

just because there is a spade stack in left-hand opponent’s hand; instead, one must hope for a duplicated result. It is essential to present plausibility. These considerations imply that a peeking expert will not cheat on every deal, or even on most deals. When an accused person claims that innocence has been demonstrated by some poor results, that claim assumes that the accusation incorporates naivete.

The best place to take advantage of illicit knowledge is in the bidding. Some situations require guessing, where a player must take a position. Such situations arise

frequently. Here are two examples that come to mind from recent experiences.

(1) At imps, with only the opponents vulnerable, South holds:

♠ x x ♥ x ♦ A Q x x ♣ A K Q x x x.

	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—		1 ♠	Pass	2 ♥
Double		3 ♥	Pass	4 ♣
5 ♣		5 ♦	6 ♦	6 ♥
?				

It is possible to construct deals consistent with the auction where double or seven diamonds (or perhaps pass, where partner has a clear-cut action that works well) is the best move, and any choice would appear to be normal bridge. There would be no way to tell that a winning “guess” had been aided by a peek.

(2) At imps, with both side vulnerable, the player in second seat holds:

♠ x ♥ A 10 x ♦ A x x ♣ Q J 8 x x x.

RHO, the dealer, opens two spades. Here, most players would see a marginal decision between pass and three clubs, either of which might work out very well or very badly, depending on the layout. An intervernor who picked the winning option would not appear to be cheating.

A well-chosen overall cheating strategy would add an additional layer of protection against accusation. In a team match, a smart self-kibitzer won’t try to win by 100 imps. Merely going right on the 10 to 20 percent of the deals that offer close bidding decisions is likely to be sufficient. Playing “brilliantly” may wow the fans, but that is dangerous and should be reserved for dire circumstances, such as when your table opponents have done better than you think your teammates will do. If a crook thinks the match is won by half-time, it would be routine to turn off misbehavior in the second half. Considering an even larger picture, it is not necessary to win every match.

A sophisticated cheater can be caught only by looking at deals en masse, not by

considering them individually; any one good result can be attributed to honestly-applied skill, but no honest player will take the winning action on more than 70 percent of borderline bidding decisions.

How rampant is cheating? I have seen no evidence regarding this question at any echelon of bridge. However, there is an empirical estimate of how often college students cheated in an attempt to win a cash prize when they thought their dishonesty would be undetectable: 69 percent succumbed to the temptation. This is a link to the paper that produced this result:

<https://anthonyongphd.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/ong-weiss-2000.pdf>

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