Civility at the Bridge Table

I have played bridge for most of my life, but I had stayed away from playing duplicate bridge. It had the reputation of not being a pleasant place to enjoy the game of bridge. Being a game and naturally you wanted to win, a fair number of players used other tactics besides skill and luck to obtain victory. I would call their actions and behaviors uncivil. First when a new pair came to the table, they would be totally ignored and not acknowledged. Next players would make negative comments about their partner’s or the opponents bidding or play. Some of the nasty tactics that were used were badgering, rudeness, insinuations, profanity, intimidation, threats or even violence. Others might provide constant lessons or analyses. Still others would use annoying behavior, make embarrassing remarks, or any behavior that would interfere with the opponent’s play.

Barbara Seagram, a Canadian who owned a bridge club and was also a teacher of bridge noticed that her students were not playing duplicate. In 1996 when she became president of Unit 166(Ontario), she joined with Paul Cronin who was also on the board. He came up with the idea of “Zero Tolerance”. From there it went to the duplicate bridge organization, ACBL( American Contract Bridge League). A Zero Tolerance Policy was adopted in November, 1997 which went into effect at the 1998 Spring NABC in Reno. The purpose of this policy is to create a much more pleasant atmosphere in NABC’s to try to eradicate unacceptable behavior in order to make the make more enjoyable for all. Or in other words, a civil environment.

Unfortunately this policy is limited to ACBL events and not individual duplicate clubs. Nevertheless ACBL has remained committed to improving acceptable player behavior at all times. Through its monthly magazine, articles are written about Zero Tolerance. Individual clubs are encouraged to adopt their own Zero Tolerance policy. Posters and promotional information is available for display and information at local clubs. Currently they have a Play Nice effort which is really transposing the two words that one likes hear when playing, “nice play”. The following are some examples of how to Play Nice- Say Hello to Everyone, Acknowledge Good Play by the Opponents, Be Understanding, Be Kind, Help Those with Less Experience, Value your Partner, Grace is Good, Respect the Directors, Enjoy. Many clubs have done just that.

Here is how the policy works. Somewhere in the room there is a poster that states that this is a Zero Tolerance game. At the beginning of each event the Director will remind the players of zero tolerance and that if there is any negative behavior that the Director needs to be called. Directors are called and make a determination of action to be taken. Usually if it is a first occurrence, a warning is issued. If the behavior persists, an adjustment of score can be made or further they cannot be allowed to play for a certain length of time. In some extreme situations, the person could be permanently banned from play at that club. It can still be difficult for some to call the Director or even say anything. Some clubs have a Zero Tolerance card in each bidding box. When there is bad behavior, the first step can be is to pull the card and set it in front of the offender. Then if the behavior persists, it can be easier to call the Director.

Civility now exists in many duplicate bridge games. I happy to report that all the duplicate games in Door County adhere to the Zero Tolerance Policy. Players are on the increase and in the Zero Tolerance games, everyone is having fun, even if the cards are not going one’s way.

Just one example that when you advance civil behavior and are committed, it will work.

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