



For the love
of the game

Play nice



American Contract Bridge League



Revisiting Zero Tolerance

BY SUE MUNDAY

While Percy Pro might have a gazillion masterpoints and a national title or two, he's an obnoxious blowhard. Percy simply doesn't treat people very nicely. He postures and pontificates and expects everyone — including the club manager — to be grateful he calls your club "home." He is an abysmal ambassador for bridge, and he should have been bounced years ago. But here he is, sitting North at table three, preparing to launch into yet another diatribe.

From the golden age of bridge, we have sepia-toned photos of tuxedoed gentlemen and beautifully gowned ladies seemingly enjoying a pleasant game of cards. From behind many of the photos, however, emerge tales of outrageous behavior at the card table. Not only was the bad behavior tolerated, it was often celebrated. Beneath its genteel veneer, duplicate bridge was a battlefield.

Expletives flying freely while drinks sailed through the air and ashtrays were dumped in partner's lap made for colorful copy, but eventually, the schtick got old.

Canadian bridge club owner and teacher Barbara Seagram recalls: "I had been aware for years that very few of my students ever became duplicate players. They did not have the thick skin required to endure the rudeness and boorish behavior at the table. They would arrive in class and recount the humiliation and discomfort that they experienced. They were embarrassed and intimidated and decided that duplicate was just not for them."

Seagram became president of Unit 166 (Ontario) in 1996 and found in fellow unit board member Paul Cronin a like-minded activist.

"Paul came up with the title of Zero Tolerance," says Seagram, "and drew up the rules of behavior that should be expected in order to create a welcoming environment."

According to Seagram, Hans Jacobs from Unit 246 created a sign that could be posted in clubs to alert players that unpleasant behavior would not be tolerated. A second poster spelled out Zero Tolerance dos and don'ts, and the public education campaign was on.

Seagram & Co. put a notice in the Bridge Bulletin, making the materials available to clubs. "I mailed out at least 270 sets of posters around North America," Seagram says. "Unit 166 absorbed the cost of mailing, printing and laminating these posters. Paul worked with me diligently throughout, and it is his words on all the signage to this day."

The policy itself was immediately implemented at clubs in southern Ontario. Seagram says, "I wrote articles in my monthly newsletter that scores would be adjusted in the event of any unpleasantness. We believe that warnings should not be given, and that those who have their score adjusted are less likely to offend in the future. It's an age-old adage: 'Not only must justice be done, but it must also be seen to be done.' Rest assured that surrounding tables are listening in, and the process serves as a deterrent to others."

What Seagram and Cronin and everyone in those clubs discovered was that Zero Tolerance worked. "We saw a remarkable shift in behavior patterns," Seagram says, "and a much friendlier environment evolved."

Another thing Seagram noticed: "The players now never

hesitate to report unpleasantness whereas before, they considered unpleasantness part of the game that they had to tolerate."

How about Teaching Tina, whose nonstop analysis and lessons are worth every cent her tablemates pay for them? "If you had bid this," or, "if you had led that" — she means well. She wants everyone to know what she knows, which is everything. Tina is one of the most dependable local volunteers. But at the table, she's insufferable. There have been plenty of complaints — from surrounding tables (because she's awfully loud) and from opponents, too, who feel belittled.



ACBL's Zero Tolerance Policy

The ultimate purpose of the ZT policy is to create a much more pleasant atmosphere in our NABCs. We are attempting to eradicate unacceptable behavior in order to make the game of bridge more enjoyable for all. Below are some examples of commendable behavior, which, while not required, will significantly contribute to the improved atmosphere:

- Being a good “host” or “guest” at the table.
- Greeting others in a friendly manner.
- Praising the bidding and/or play of the opponents.
- Having two clearly completed convention cards readily available to the opponents. (This one is a regulation, not just a nicety.)

The following are examples of behavior that will not be tolerated:

- Badgering, rudeness, insinuations, intimidation, profanity, threats or violence.
- Negative comments concerning opponents’ or partner’s play or bidding.
- Constant and gratuitous lessons and analyses at the table.
- Loud and disruptive arguing with a director’s ruling.

If a player at the table behaves in an unacceptable manner, the director should be called immediately.

The ACBL adopted its Zero Tolerance Policy in November 1997, and it became effective with the 1998 Spring NABC in Reno.

While the League’s authority to enforce Zero Tolerance extends only to tournaments it sponsors — NABCs and Regionals at Sea, at this time — clubs, unit-sponsored sectionals and district-sponsored regionals are urged to follow suit.

ACBL Manager of Bridge Administration Sam Whitten explains, “Our clubs are not franchises, but independent, legal entities. While the ACBL has a responsibility to see that the club games we sanction are conducted in accordance with the Laws of Duplicate Bridge, behavioral issues fall within club management’s purview.”

Dozens of clubs running ACBL-sanctioned games openly identify themselves as Zero Tolerance clubs.

For example, the Leelanau Duplicate Bridge Club in Suttons Bay MI makes its stance known right off the bat in paragraph one of its website welcome: “The Leelanau Duplicate Bridge Club is run on the basis that everyone can be nice and have fun and still play a competitive and high level of duplicate bridge. Zero Tolerance will be enforced.”

The Bridge Ace in Wilton Manors FL: “Zero Tolerance is enforced. The club is, and will continue to be, a pleasant place to play. Rude, obnoxious and/or boorish behavior is not tolerated. Those who cannot behave like ladies and gentlemen are not welcome.”

The Park City Bridge Club in Park City UT doesn’t even run ACBL-sanctioned games. Club organizers, however, feel so strongly about ensuring a positive bridge experience that they require each and every member to sign the Zero Tolerance policy.

Finally, this from a Philadelphia club’s website: “The Bridge Club of Center City prides itself on the most enjoyable bridge environment anywhere. To ensure that end, we expect all of our players to conduct themselves



Paul Cronin

as exemplary sportspersons and to treat one another with respect and civility. Our members play for the love of the game, for sport and excellent bridge competition. Pettiness, nastiness or making anyone feel small in any way has no place here at our club — and that is what we have Zero Tolerance for.”

Whether or not a club or tournament formally adopts a Zero Tolerance policy, there are provisions within the Laws of Duplicate Bridge that accomplish the same purposes. “Annoying behavior, embarrassing remarks or any other conduct that might interfere with the enjoyment of the game” is specifically prohibited under Law 74A. Law 91A gives the director the authority to assess disciplinary penalties, including scoring adjustments, suspension and — subject to approval by the tournament organizer — disqualification.

Reggie Regular, who regularly berates his partners for poor bidding, poorer play and awful leads, makes his opponents squirm. Sure, Reggie pays full cost five days a week. Consider, however, that for every card fee Reggie pays, one or two Timid Tammies, unwilling to put up with such god-awful behavior, slip out into the night, never to return. Reggie may be a regular, but he is not doing his club owner any favors.



Barbara Seagram

The ACBL is renewing the public education campaign initiated by Seagram, Cronin and Jacobs more than 15 years ago. The theme, “Play nice,” transposes two words we all like to hear at the table (“nice play!”). New posters have been developed and are being disseminated to all clubs.

One of the posters picks up a catchphrase used in the Bridge Club of City Center Club’s ZT statement: “For the love of the game.” The second poster builds on an email received from Dean Congbalay of Longboat Key FL originally titled, “All I really need to know I learned at the bridge table.” It is a positive restatement of ZT tenets.

It takes much more than posters, however, to make Zero Tolerance work. One of the hallmarks of a committed Zero Tolerance program, whether it be at the club or tournament level, is the director’s announcement at the start of each game, “This is a Zero Tolerance game,” or words to that effect.

It is then up to the director to make sure the policy is enforced. A first offense is usually an immediate 1/4 board disciplinary penalty (or 3 IMPs in team games). If both members of a partnership are involved, the penalties may be additive (1/4 board each = 1/2 board).

If a second offense occurs in the same event, the recommended action is ejection. In the case of chronic offend-

ers, club managers may suspend players, with bans lasting anywhere from a couple of weeks to six months. A letter from the director/club owner is sent to the player documenting the reason(s) and the length of the suspension. Some club managers have an interview process that a suspended player must negotiate before being allowed to return.

Seagram observes, “Many club owners do not want to alienate regular customers, as this is their livelihood. Barring a frequent player will deprive them of revenue. They need to grasp that *not* barring these players costs them attrition of many more customers.”

In the end, it is the players themselves who bear the brunt of making Zero Tolerance work. First and most obviously, those who recognize themselves in the “do not” set of behaviors must take responsibility and clean up their act.

Players must also step up and report ZT violations.

How a club deals with behavioral problems can be quite different from how a tournament director addresses the same issues. In a club, the members know that they’ll be playing against Reggie and Percy and Tina day after day after day, or at least until they can no longer tolerate it. Calling the director to the table at the moment of the infraction can be difficult. Club directors hear the comments after the fact — during the break, after the game or even days later — when it’s too late to take action. At a high-level tournament, who wants to risk calling the director when the somebody who is misbehaving is really a *somebody*?

If the victimized players recognize they share in the responsibility for a positive environment, they are more likely to speak up when an infraction occurs.

Says Seagram, “I think that all players are responsible for policing this situation. When I call a director about a problem (perhaps at an adjacent table), I make a point of checking with the

director later to see what penalty was awarded. If none was, the director gets to listen to me expound on the subject, and if that doesn’t work, I then a) report the situation to ACBL and b) speak to the offender myself.”

ZT cofounder Cronin is another who will never rest. On Feb. 14, 2011, he issued this impassioned plea, “What’s the Problem?” on BridgeWinners:

“One of our local clubs is trying to bring in a Zero Tolerance behavior policy and is having a very hard time doing so. One person is afraid his ‘enemies’ will report him just to get him in trouble; another is afraid that players will report others for minuscule or imagined infractions; another is concerned that we must have ‘due process’ with every complaint and take it to the Supreme Court for adjudication ...

“Why do some people have such an incredibly difficult time with the concept that bridge should be an enjoyable game, and that there should be some recourse when something interferes with your enjoyment of the game? How can they look at their ever-shrinking club memberships, and the ever-growing number of people playing in non-sanctioned games, and the very large number of players in the 0-49 or 0-299 games who absolutely refuse to come out to the open games, and still maintain that it’s important for business to continue to cater to the ill-tempered and the large-egoed?

“Folks, the game is dying! We need new players, and we’re not getting them because the perception out there is that they will be embarrassed and intimidated. If we can put a man on the moon, why can’t we offer folks an enjoyable game?”

Seagram sees a far different landscape than pre-ZT days. “I believe that the world of duplicate bridge is a happier place now. Zero Tolerance is an attempt to get players at all levels of competition to behave. It works.” ■