

Information, and What to do with it

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While playing bridge, there is only one legal way of communicating with your partner: during the auction, by the calls you make; and during the play, by the cards you play. Any other information which passes between you and partner is called unauthorised information (often abbreviated to UI). The laws explicitly state that you may not use such information when deciding what action to take.

UI can take many forms. It ranges from the highly undesirable – the shake of the head, the look of disgust, the unmistakeable groan – to the absolutely innocent which is part of the game (eg. partner alerting your bid). Two of the most common types of UI are also a perfectly normal aspect of the game. One is the length of time partner takes when deciding what to do; when they take a long time, they clearly have a problem. The other is the explanation of the meaning of your bid which partner gives to the opponents; if he gets it wrong, you know that partner has misunderstood you and there is the temptation to “have another go” at getting it right.

In this article, I am going to talk about what your responsibilities are when you have UI from partner. It is a question which I am regularly asked. Many players think they should just ignore it and do what they would have done anyway. However, this is not correct. The Laws of Bridge place a greater ethical obligation on you when you find yourself in this position. Hopefully, the following examples may demonstrate it.

With both sides vulnerable, you are sitting East, holding the following uninspiring hand. You hear the opponents, playing Standard, bid uninterrupted to 3NT.

You, sitting East, hold:

- ♠ J7653
- ♥ T
- ♦ 8652
- ♣ 754

The auction goes:

W	N	You	S
	1C	P	1H
P	1NT	P	3NT

They haven't shown any inclination to bid towards slam even though you only have one point, so partner must have a reasonable hand – maybe even an opening hand. What do you lead?

Look at the options:

- a ♠ – it is usually pointless leading from a long suit with a weak hand, as it will take a lot for it to be right. (For example, partner holds KQx and declarer can only duck once.) However you might get lucky and this is what many players would choose.
- a ♥ – South has not made any move to search for a heart fit, so the chances are that he has only four and NS have at most seven hearts between them. If they have seven and you have one, partner has five hearts and a good hand, but couldn't bid. The opposition bid his suit. Just think about all the times when partner is on lead to 3NT and you hold a singleton – it's always the suit partner leads! So why not return the favour when you are on lead? There is an excellent chance that it is the best one for your side.

- a ♦ – could be right and it is probably be fairly safe. Even if you are picking up the suit for declarer, it is something which he probably could have done himself. It is probably won't be a devastating lead (partner may have bid diamonds if that was the case), but it is one that is least likely to give anything away, and maybe that's how you need to defend this hand
- a ♣ – to lead declarer's suit would be a real shot in the dark. I suspect it has the least expectation of being successful.

So having heard the evidence, what do you choose? For me, the argument for a heart lead is strongest, although I can understand if you want to choose a spade or a diamond.

Now let me give you some more information. After South bid 3NT, partner paused for about 15 seconds before passing. What were they thinking about?

There are two possibilities: bidding or doubling. What was partner thinking of bidding? I don't think there is an answer to that question, There is no way that partner would have considered stepping in over 3NT. So it was double. If partner had doubled, what would you have led? The correct answer is a ♥. When partner, having passed throughout, doubles a freely bid 3NT, it asks you to lead dummy's first bid suit. They have got very good hearts; they couldn't bid them since the opponents bid them first, and they couldn't double 1H as that would be for takeout showing the other suits.

Now on the actual hand, partner did not double, but they were clearly thinking about it. Do you still lead a heart? This is where knowledge of your ethical responsibilities comes into play.

Law 73C

Where a player has available to him unauthorised information from his partner, such as from a remark,...explanation,...hesitation..., he must carefully avoid taking any advantage from that unauthorised information.

So it is not good enough to merely pretend that you didn't notice that partner had passed some UI (as they did here through the hesitation before passing over 3NT) and lead what you were going to do anyway. The Laws require that you actively steer clear of the action which partner has, in this instance, unconsciously suggested will be the winning one. The only time that a heart lead would be allowed is if it was absolutely clear cut on your hand. (♥AKQJ10 would be the most extreme example of when it would be stand out, but it has to be very, very obvious.)

My second example relates to the bidding:

Partner opens 1H and you hold: ♠ AK4
♥ J862
♦ 984
♣ K98

The auction goes:

W	N	E	You
	1H	P	3D!
P?		

You have close to an opening hand (albeit a very weak one), four card support for partner, but poor shape. You decide to show this as a limit raise. You and your partner have agreed to play Bergen raises and the bid to show this hand is 3D.

Partner alerts 3D as required and then starts thinking. After what seems like an eternity, partner eventually bids 3H, signing off. Are you tempted to try 4H? Look at all your points! You would open the bidding with most 11 counts, so you can use the excuse that you have an opening hand. What UI do you have from partner's hesitation? What were his alternatives? 3H or 4H. If you are going to "carefully avoid taking any advantage", you must pass.

Same situation. Partner alerts 3D. This time the opponents ask and he says, "6 to 9 points with four hearts" and bids 3H immediately. This time you have heard the wrong explanation. Partner may have an automatic 4H bid opposite a limit raise. But again in avoiding taking advantage of the UI, you must pass.

Are there any times when you could bid again when you show a limit raise and partner bids 3H? Yes, if you have no UI, you are free to do what you like, no matter how silly it might be. So if partner explained 3D correctly

and bid 3H straight away, do whatever you want. Similarly, if there were no questions asked and partner bid 3H without hesitation, again you are at liberty to make any call at all.

The only other time you may get a chance is if your hand “changes” and you haven’t got your bid. So say you suddenly discover that the ♣9 is actually the ♣A. Now you could justify a 4H bid.

When players bid 4H in the face of UI, their excuse is often, “*But I was going to bid it anyway*”. Apart from being a self-serving statement, it misses the point. When they have UI, they need to bend over backwards not to take an action which takes advantage of it. Unless you have a miscount of a similar magnitude to the one I described in the previous paragraph, if you choose to show a limit raise, for example, that’s it. Once partner conveys UI, you have absolutely no option but to pass their sign off.

Is there a way around it?

1. Get your partner not to pass UI! That’s hard. In one instance, they have to get the system right. On the other hand, if they do hesitate, encourage them to err on the side of bidding on rather than signing off. Get them to understand that you will be bound by their decision.
2. If you have a hand on which you want to be in game, make a bid which is not invitational. So, for example, if you decide that the above hand is worth bidding game, then do not make a limit raise – find another bid.
3. Change your system so that you have a bid which forces you to game without overstating your strength. For example, the auction 1H-3NT is one which doesn’t come up very often. My suggestion is to use 3NT in this sequence to show a hand which is about the strength of a limit raise, but is just too good to stop out of game. That way you don’t have to include such hands in your normal game force raise sequence and can avoid the risk of partner shooting off to slam when you just don’t have enough ammunition. One thing you should definitely avoid is having a bid which shows “*limit raise or better*”. That is asking for trouble. If you get UI from partner before a sign off and you then bid on, you will get little sympathy from the director if your hand is at all borderline. ❤️