

The Trouble with Psychs, by Mike Flader

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One of my administrative tasks is to respond to letters and e mails written by ACBL members inquiring about rulings they have received at clubs or tournaments. A large number of these letters involve incidents of psychs made at the club level, and a disproportionately high percentage of these cases seem to involve Flight A players psyching against less experienced opponents. The purpose of this article is to help directors, club managers and players deal with psychs. A psych by definition is a call which grossly distorts either the distribution or strength of the player's hand made with the intent to mislead the opponents. Psychs are legitimized by Law 40 which allows players to make any legal call, including an intentionally misleading one such as a psych, as long as the agreed upon meaning of such calls are disclosed to the opponents in accordance with the regulations of the sponsoring organization.

As you can see from the above, some psychs are regulated by the sponsoring organization (in this case the ACBL).

1. An agreement to psych, either explicit or implicit, is illegal. A pattern of frequent psychs suggests an agreement, as do calls made by the psycher's partner in an auction when partner has made a call that is a psych. When a director deems that a pair has such an agreement, he may award an adjusted score if he believes that the opponents have been damaged as a direct result of the illegal agreement. He may, in addition, assess a procedural penalty against a guilty pair even if there is no damage to the non offending side.
2. Frequent or excessive psychs are illegal. If it is reported to the director that a pair has psyched three times in a session, the director should proceed under the assumption that this is the case.
3. Frivolous or unsportsmanlike psychs are also illegal. A pair deemed to be psyching in the hopes of creating a favorable swing on the last round of an event against the leaders when the offending pair is out of contention is deemed to be doing this. The same applies to a pair who attempts to help friends by "taking a flyer". Players must attempt to win even if their position is hopeless. The penalty for doing this could be as severe as an appearance before a conduct and ethics committee with possible probation or suspension for the offenders. The big issue with the folks who write me regarding psychs is the issue of how to deal with them fairly and legally in their clubs and at tournaments. Remember that one of the few things that a club must agree to do in obtaining an ACBL sanction to run games is agree to follow the Laws of Duplicate Contract Bridge. Thus, since Law 40 permits psychs, clubs cannot simply prohibit them.

Here are some suggestions, however, for dealing with this vexing topic.

A. Education

- Educate the victims. The best way to combat psychs at the table is to trust partner. When there seem to be 50 high-card points in the deck, always assume that partner has his or her calls.
- Educate the perpetrators. It is perfectly OK for pairs to do everything legal in an attempt to win when playing in a sectional. In a club game, however, a more relaxed atmosphere should be encouraged. A top pair should not have to psych against pairs they are much superior to. Encourage them to "play it straight", a tactic which will result in a friendlier atmosphere and help the less experienced pairs improve and can even lead to the mentoring of the newer pairs. The top pairs will still win most of the time. Suggest to them that psyching against weaker pairs in a club game should be viewed as unsportsmanlike.
- Define for everyone what a psych actually is - a gross misstatement of either the strength or the shape of one's hand made with the intention of misleading the opponents.

B. Policy Implementation

- Require that all psychs be reported - twice. Once by the victims and once by the offenders. A notice to this effect should be posted in the club's playing area. All directors in the club should be aware of the policy and its purpose to increase everyone's enjoyment of the game.
- Set up a log book to be used by the directors to record psychs.
- Have your directors keep your log book up to date.

C. Policy Enforcement

- Be consistent! If pairs fail to comply with your regulations in reporting of psychs committed by their side, assess a penalty against the pairs in the games in which the psychs occur. You will only have to do this once or twice for perpetrators to know that you mean business.
- If a pair seems to have an implied agreement to psych, they need to get an adjusted score and/or a procedural penalty. This can be done completely within the Laws. (The Law that applies when adjusting a score is 40C.)
- Follow up on reports of excessive, frivolous, or unsportsmanlike psychic activity. Penalize the offenders where appropriate.
- Speak to frequent offenders. If you can't persuade them to clean up their act, place them on probation or suspend them from your club. If you are suspending a player from your club, you must do this by letter, and a copy of the letter must be sent to the ACBL Club Department. Unlike other bodies of the ABCL such as units and districts, a conduct committee is not required.