

The New ACBL Alert Procedures and You

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A couple of years ago when the new convention charts came in, I wrote a prep for people. It basically said “If you’re a player, and you’re not doing anything too unusual, you don’t have to care; if you’re a club owner or director, you have some work to do.” The Alert Procedure has been updated (for the first time since 1991), and, well, I can’t say that.

It doesn’t matter who you are, there are changes you need to make, and changes you need to know to understand others the way you used to.

First, as always, it’s important to read the actual document. [Here it is](#). You can get it on the ACBL web site by going to “Tournaments”, then “Charts, Rules and Regulations”.

Second, several things that were Alerted or Pre-Alerted no longer are; that information will only be available from asking or from the convention card. You should get into the habit of paying attention to convention cards¹.

Third, get used to Pre-Alerts; you will be hearing two or three a session going forward. Get used to Delayed Alerts; pretty much any slam auction now will have some. But note that online, all Alerts (even ones that would be delayed face-to-face) are made immediately, by the bidder.

Reading the new Procedures

All the Definitions from the new Convention Charts are also used in the Alert Procedures. So if you don’t know by heart what Natural means (note, it’s not what you think!) or what is a Very Strong hand or what Average strength is, you should have the Convention Charts open to the Definition pages. There are also a few new Definitions to pay attention to. You can access the Conventions Charts [here](#). You can get it on the ACBL web site by going to “Tournaments”, then “Charts, Rules and Regulations”.

- The inversion trick from the Convention Charts (where the Basic charts tell you what you can play, and the Open charts tell you what you **can’t** play) worked so well, they’ve done it again:
 - The Natural Bids section lists what to Alert. Note that it doesn’t say “Do not Alert anything not in this list”; this is deliberate. If you strongly believe that something is Natural, but odd enough that the opponents will be surprised, you can Alert it.
 - Passes is an “Alert these” section. But read it carefully, it is very easy to miss critical context.
 - The Artificial Bids section lists what **not** to Alert. It’s a very small list, but much bigger (and more specific) than before²
 - The Doubles section is incredibly confusing, but boils down to:

¹ you know, the weird diagram with coloured boxes and text on the back of your scorecard holder?

² It also has a small bit that says to Alert any Quasi-Natural bids that are not Announceable. For the two of you that play 4-card weak 2s, this will be important.

- The list is of doubles that aren't Alertable. Note that this includes "all doubles by both sides" starting with opener's rebid;
 - No doubles are Alertable of 3NT or higher;
 - Except for doubles that say "don't lead this suit" or "lead a specific suit, that isn't this one" - those are Always Alerted, no matter what anything else says.
- Redoubles is a "Don't Alert these" section.
- Read the examples carefully. There are a **lot** of them, and they clarify very well.

1. Announcements are changing (slightly) (for the better)

First, for those of you who keep hoping not to Announce "15-17" or "transfer", sorry. They aren't going away, and for a good reason; it's for **your** protection. Just do it, okay?

All the old announcements are back, but with more information:

1. Minimum length of short Non-Forcing minor openings are now stated explicitly: "Could be 2". "Could be 1". Most people who played <2 card openings did this anyway.
2. The range of **any** Natural 1NT opening. No change here.
3. Announcements for transfers are clarified and expanded:
 - a. Now, instead of saying "Transfer", you Announce the suit: 1NT ("15-17", remember)-2♦ "Hearts".
 - b. This now applies to **almost all** transfers; if you play 4-way transfers, 1NT-2♠ is now "Clubs" (if you play "clubs, or diamonds if partner corrects", you still Alert that); if you play transfers after 1♣, a 1♦ response is "Hearts"; playing Namyats, opening 4♦ is "Spades". The only exception is the rare double or redouble that shows length in some other suit than the immediate next one (this is Alerted).
4. Forcing or Semi-Forcing 1NT responses, as before. "Semi-Forcing" is now defined, so everyone knows what to say and what it means when the opponents say it. They also require "could have four spades" if 1♥-1NT routinely bypasses 4-card spades (because you play Flannery, for instance).

It is now clear that an Announcement is a special kind of Alert, not a thing different from an Alert. That shouldn't matter to anybody who isn't a Director.

2. Pre-Alerts are different, and more common

It used to be there were pre-Alerts, but nobody ever had one. "Leading low from two small" was the most common; ultra-aggressive preempts and openings, or Mid-Chart conventions, were others. News: the Mid-Chart is gone, and the other two are now so common as to not require warning.

WARNING: this means that if the opponents open random 9-counts at the 1 level in first seat, or open 3♣ with Qxxxxx and a card, they no longer have to let you know - it is your obligation to find out, either by asking or checking the card³.

There are still pre-Alerts, but they're totally different, and you should get used to hearing two or three a session. Quoting the document:

³ On the other hand, they almost never did before, either. At least you know to ask, now.

1. Any system which includes at least one 1-level Opening Bid that is not Natural or that is Forcing.
2. Any canapé system⁴. (If you don't know what that is, you don't play it)
3. Playing different systems depending on seat or vulnerability. It is not considered a different system if the only change is NT Range (and responses) or Opening Bid strength.
4. Artificial Opening Preempts below 3NT. (For those not playing Open+ in long matches, "2NT opening for the minors" is about all you'll see, but Multi, transfer preempts, and others belong here).

So, If you play Precision (or any other Forcing Club or Diamond system), or Forcing 1-bids, or a 2+card 1♣ opener (other than 4=4=3=2), or Romex Dynamic NT, you have to tell the opponents before the round. Every time. If you play "2/1, 5-card Majors in 1st + 2nd, Roth-Stone, 4-card Majors 3rd + 4th", same thing.

It is Actively Ethical to explain in your pre-Alert all the weirdness of your system, not just the thing that makes it pre-Alertable. So if your weak 2s are 1-7, because all your opening suit bids are 8-14 and a 15+ Strong Club, that's what you should tell people, not just "we play a Forcing Club".

3. Delayed Alerts are clarified, and more common

Basically, nobody knew how Delayed Alerts worked before, or even that they existed. That's going to change.

So, what are Delayed Alerts? Simple:

- Any Alertable bid,
- Higher than 3NT,
- Starting with opener's rebid;

must not be Alerted at the time when playing live, but must wait until after the auction.

Why are Alerts delayed? Most commonly, by the time the auction has got into the game zone, it is more likely that the Alert will help the alerting side (keeping them on track with "yes, partner, I remember that's artificial") than the alerted side; the opponents are not likely to do anything (except make a lead-directing double, but you might penalty double a "natural" call) until the play anyway.

What Alerts are not delayed?

- If you're self-Alerting (online, or behind screens), no Alerts are Delayed. You're not passing information to partner with the Alert or explanation.
- Alertable non-bid calls - passes, doubles, and redoubles - are never Delayed.

What has changed with the delay procedure? It is now required for the declaring side to **explain**, not just Alert, any Alertable calls that were delayed until the end of the auction, before the opening lead⁵.

⁴ Sorry, canapé players, the Laws Commission has it in for you. You, and your opponents, are going to get tired of all the Alerting.

⁵ Which the Actively Ethical pairs were already doing. What do you expect to happen if at the end of the auction, you say "oh, 4♦ is a Delayed Alert"? The opponents not to ask?

Defenders now Alert, but do not explain unless asked, their delayed Alerts before the opening lead rather than after⁶.

Why will this be more common? Because two changes to the Alert Procedure will ensure almost every slam auction will have delayed Alerts, so everyone needs to know how it works:

1. Responses to Ace-asking bids are now Alertable⁷. All of them, even 5♥ over Blackwood and 4♥ over Gerber. At the end of the auction, you say “5♥ showed 2 keycards for spades, no ♠Q” or whatever. This is good, because players no longer have to ask “what’s 4NT”; they’ll be told at the end of the auction.
2. Control Bids must “be Alerted at the end of the auction, even if they are below 3NT.”

Those of you that were in the habit of explaining your convoluted slam auctions (when you were declarer) before the opening lead anyway; the rest of the ACBL will be following you!

4. Common things where Alertability has changed or been clarified

A caveat: this is not exhaustive, and is probably biased by my idea of what is “common”. You must read the Alert Procedures yourself and find out what has changed in your system.

- As just discussed, most slam auctions now have (Delayed) Alerts where there weren’t before, with responses to Ace-asks and control cuebidding now required explanations.
- There are a lot fewer Alertable doubles. Because almost all doubles starting with Opener’s rebid, or doubles of 3NT or higher are no longer Alertable, things such as:
 - Support doubles
 - Opener’s “I have a strong NT” double, playing weak NT
 - Doubles over interference in relay or transfer auctions
 - “I want to sacrifice” doubles
 - “I have one trick, do you?” slam doublesare now “you have to ask” situations.
- Direct cuebids are locked down: Michaels and Unusual 2NT, played the usual way only, are not Alerted, but “top and bottom” cuebid, or 2NT “for the minors” even over 2♦, are.
- A clarification, not really a change: Natural bids that also show length or values in another suit (such as 2♠ opening “Spades and a minor”, or a fit jump shift by responder), are definitely Alertable.
- Another clarification, and a welcome one: if your 2♣ opening is not guaranteed to be Very Strong, even if it is Forcing and Artificial, you must Alert. “Within one trick of game, no defence required” is not Very Strong (to make it so, you must guarantee 5 Control Points (A=2, K=1) or 14 HCP)⁸.
- Canapé players have to Alert the potential canapé opening, **and** the rebid that is usually longer than the opening suit (as well as pre-Alerting the tendency).

⁶ This was a “never happens” on top of a “never happens”; nobody got it right anyway, so the minor advantage of not tipping off the opening leader was not deemed relevant enough to keep it.

⁷ Formally, given the structure of the new Procedures, they are “not in the list of ‘Do Not Alert’ bids”. Resolving double negatives so you don’t have to, that’s me.

⁸ Note that if you are playing Basic or Basic+ chart, you are not allowed to have the agreement that your Forcing Artificial 2♣ is not Very Strong.

- If the opening is Natural, it doesn't matter how weak it is in most cases:
 - There's no minimum at any level that triggers an Alert. 8-14 1M bids? 1-7 (or 2-11) 2-bids? 3♥ on Jxxxx and out not vulnerable? Totally expected, you have to find out.
 - There are maximums that trigger Alerts, though:
 - If your "Preempt" could contain 12 or more HCP (including in 3rd seat, but not in 4th), it's Alertable.
 - If there are two ways to preempt the same suit at the same level, they're both Alertable (eg. 4♥ playing Namyats, where 4♣ would show a better 4 heart bid).
- Natural Jump Overcalls that guarantee at least Average strength (like Intermediate Jump Overcalls) are Alertable.
- Non-Forcing non-jump new suit responses to openings are clarified. If you play those, check it out.
- If you play Quasi-Natural openings (short, but non-Forcing, minor openings), note that many things that are Alertable over a 3+ opening are not over a 2+. This includes any meaning for the direct cuebid (including natural), the Intermediate Jump overcall, and any two suits for 2NT.
- If you play Artificial openings, like a Precision Club, even more so. In particular, 1♣-(2♣) is not alertable no matter what it means. You Have To Ask⁹.
- If you play "if forced to X, bidding X is the weakest action", note that your pass in competition showing a non-minimum is Alertable. I'm told it always has been, but I've never heard that until now.

5. Uncommon things where Alertability has been changed

- The 1950s are over. If you play 1♠-3♠ as anything but invitational - in particular, as Game Forcing - it is now Alertable.
- As stated before, 1♦-2NT showing minors is Alertable (if 1♦ shows 3+♦).
- 2♣ is Alertable if not Very Strong and Artificial. This includes:
 - Strong, Natural 2♣ (again, the 1950s are over).
 - 2♣ strong and artificial, but by agreement could be bid on what I call an "overstrength preempt" (say AKQJ-ninth and out), or on 18-19 not obviously game-going hands.
- Raises of preempts below game that are invitational or forcing.
- A Natural NT opening that "is always based on a long suit", such as the old Acol 3NT (18-ish, semi-solid 6-card minor).

6. Confusing things

The intent of the framers is clear:

1. By and large, Natural is not Alertable, Artificial is.
2. But, things "everybody plays" are not Alertable, things "nobody plays" are.
3. After the first round of the auction, try to minimize Alertable things.
4. There should be a rule to point to (or "no rule to point to") that specifically determines if something is Alertable or not.

⁹ Some would say you had to ask before, as well, as almost nobody knew the difference between a cuebid of a real suit and a "cuebid" of a totally artificial suit, and how that related to Alerting.

But in order to do all of this, they've written themselves into a few binds. Here are a few places where "the right thing to do" isn't obvious:

- If after 1m-(1♥), your double shows 0-3 spades, that's Alertable. If it shows 4 spades, it's a Negative Double and not Alertable. If it shows **4 or more** spades, it's a Transfer, and you announce "Spades".
- There are many auctions where the exact same overcall with the exact same meaning is Alertable if over a Natural opener, but not over a Quasi-Natural or Artificial opener. The artificial players need to know that basically they have to ask if a bid is not Alerted, but they may have to ask if the bid is Alerted as well, as it might be a "not Alertable over a 2+ 1♦, but since it's Alertable over a 3+, the opponents don't know that" Alert.
- As explained above, the "Alert doubles; unless they're in the list, or 3NT or higher; unless they are non-lead-directing" header is about as confusing as why 2000 was a leap year, but 2100 won't be.
- Speaking of doubles, they wanted Negative Doubles to be not Alertable, but trying to define a negative double correctly is very difficult. So there's lots of examples, and it's still confusing.
- There are things that are not Alertable because they should be obvious from the Pre-Alert:
 - "We play Precision". So 1♠-4♠ that could be 5 spades and a singleton, but could also be 13, 14 flat with 3 spades, is explicitly not Alertable - the opponents know opener is limited to 15.
 - You can play crazy defences to 1♣ Montréal Relay or "clubs or balanced", but not against "Majors 5, Diamonds 4, 1♣ could be 4=4=3=2 (only)." When they Announce "could be 2", you used to have to ask if you played different defences. Now, if there was a Pre-Alert of the 1♣ bid, then it's Artificial or Quasi-Natural; if there wasn't, you can rely on it being 4=4=3=2 only.

So there you are. I believe it's a good change, on balance; "highly unusual and unexpected" judgement calls are basically eliminated, and most of the corner cases that existed on the old procedures are clarified¹⁰. The big changes are big, but since they're so common, people should get used to them quickly. It is difficult to read, in general, but "your system" should be easy to work out. But it is a big change, and one everyone will have to adjust to, when we get back to the tables. Obviously there will be a "grace period" as players get used to the New Normal, but it's imperative that all players get The Big Obvious things right (pre-Alerts, explain your slam auctions, correct Announcements). Remember though: online you self-Alert, and partner doesn't see it, so it's worth explaining anything that might be unexpected, whether technically "Alertable" or not.

¹⁰ Of course, that means there are a whole raft of new corner cases just waiting to be found. I hope they will be clarified quickly when found.