

**Psychs and the Acol Club at BBO by 1eyedjack 27 September 2011**

This document is a polemic against the policy adopted by the management of the BBO Acol Club to ban the use of psychic bids in all pairs tournaments that they run; a policy which, at the date of writing this, has been in force for almost as long as I can remember.

What right have I to complain? None whatsoever, beyond a general right to freedom of speech and freedom to hold and express an opinion.

No-one is obliged to join or participate in the Club or its activities. Indeed, with very rare exceptions I have not played in any Acol Club pairs tournaments since the ban was imposed. I have on rare occasions accepted an invitation to substitute for a disconnected player, and in extreme cases I have succumbed to the plaintive pleas of a player who particularly wanted a partner for the tournament from the outset. In general, however, I have boycotted these events as a point of principle, and I thought that I would take a moment to express why I have taken such a strongly principled approach. Nor do I suffer from a lack of opportunity to play decent bridge on BBO outside of the Acol Club, so I have no particular personal axe to grind, and I trust that what follows is accepted as a dispassionate view. My views are no secret to the management of the Acol Club, but those views have sadly not been sufficiently influential to bring about a change of policy.

For the record, I have no particular desire to make frequent psychic bids. In reality I psych extremely rarely. Few players have the skill to judge accurately when and how to psych and consequently most attempts in practice cost more than they gain. I count myself in the majority. If I have any interest in the issue from the perspective of personal results, I would prefer to see the ban overturned mostly in order to give my opponents the opportunity to psych against me, in which exchange I hope to come out the winner more often than not.

The next question to consider is whether the Club has any right to impose this restriction. I conclude that it does, although strictly it is misleading then to describe itself as a "Bridge Club", or at least to describe these tournaments as "Bridge" tournaments. Because there is nothing in the International Laws of Bridge which delegates to a "sponsoring organisation" the authority to impose a blanket ban on psychic bids. As such the conditions imposed are illegal when viewed from the perspective of the Laws of the game. Nor is the term "Bridge" a protected term, so even if the game you are playing is strictly not "Bridge", then there is no recourse for any perceived damage if they choose to call it "Bridge", however inaccurately.

The Club "meets" on BBO for playing, using software supplied by BBO, and in so doing presumably does regard itself as bound by certain terms and conditions imposed by BBO. However, BBO is at pains to distance itself as far as possible from the regulation of clubs that use its facilities. BBO is primarily nothing more than a provider of software, for individuals and clubs to use broadly as they see fit. It does publish default codes of conduct, a brief summary of what might be expected as standard methods and what might, for example, be alertable. However these only apply in the absence of override by the host of a club, tournament or table. Certainly BBO has never taken an interest in whether events within it ban or allow psychic bids. BBO also provides an unpaid service of sorts in weeding out suspected cheaters and individuals who behave odiously, as is reasonable because certain powers to discipline players, such as by suspending accounts, is only within the power of BBO management. That said, individual tournament hosts can (and do) impose their own

bans on individual black-listed players. That power is also granted to "private" clubs for general club entry but this does not extend to the Acol Club, which is in the class of "public" clubs, except in the case of tournaments which grant to the TD certain additional privileges.

Up to now, all that I have considered is whether the right to impose this ban is in any way fettered by external influences and laws, and concluded that there is no such restriction. Were the Club ever to apply to come into the fold of mainstream Bridge so as (for example) to issue Master Points that have any recognition outside of the Club, then I have little doubt that it would be obliged (at least in tournaments ranking for Master Points) to disband this restriction, but thus far this does not apply.

For completeness we should also consider whether it is fettered by the members of the Club itself, and here we have to consider the process by which the decision was taken, and the constitution of the Club.

The Club's constitution is mercifully brief. The Club has a home page here

<http://www.acolatbbo.org.uk/>

and from that home page there is a link to "Information" which contains among other things the constitution. This is not a complete statement of the Club rules. To play in a tournament, for example, you need (according to the website) to be a "member" of the Club. This is not explicitly stated in the constitution, but other links from the home page, such as "How to ..." makes this clear. This in turn notionally requires you to be introduced by an existing member. Membership is not a requirement to play in the general Club playing area - only in tournaments. I am not convinced that this requirement is imposed rigorously in practice (I have never applied for membership but seem to be allowed to play when rarely I choose to do so), but the issue risks drifting from the purpose of this document.

The point is that the constitution is more dictatorial in nature than democratic. There is no procedure for appointing or replacing Club officials by reference to members' wishes, for example (not that I suggest that any are deserving of that treatment), nor is there any clear avenue by which individual members can influence the way the Club is managed otherwise than (a) by a private email to an officer of the Club or (b) by voting with their feet. This is not a complaint, as far as I am concerned, but just setting context. I would just observe that it appears at odds with the statement under "Information"/"Site information and privacy policy"/"Purpose" wherein it states "The purpose of this site is to provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas between players in the Acol Club." Note that it is only here stating the purpose of the website, not the purpose of the Club. However the opportunities for members to "exchange information and ideas" is hardly fulfilled, in my view, by the structure of the site. This in large part explains why this document is published outside of the Acol Club website.

The Acol Club did at one time operate a bulletin board using InVision software, which I thought was a good, progressive move. It has since discontinued this and no explanation is available on the web site. Cost may have been a factor. I sincerely hope that it was not because views freely expressed therein ran counter to the opinions of the Club's management.

Democracy is perhaps overrated as an ideal. Nevertheless, whatever its internal structure, the Club is subjected to the ultimate democratic force: that of voting with your feet.

Although it has to be the right starting point, and I have probably dwelt over long on the subject, I am not exclusively concerned with rights and powers. I am also (indeed mainly) concerned with what are in the best interests of the Club. It is for the Club management to dictate policy, but a reasonable management would also be alert to the wishes of its members. It would presumably prefer it if its members did not vote with their feet. I have separated myself from the Club's tournament activities because the Club managers and I diverge in our opinions of what is in the best interests of the Club, but this is not what I regard as an ideal solution. The ideal solution would be a meeting of minds so that I did not feel obliged to compromise my principles and then would participate and thereby enrich my own enjoyment of the game and perhaps (dare I be so arrogant) enrich the experiences of those with whom I would then come into contact in the Club.

Unofficially, I am informed that the decision to impose a blanket ban on psychs is at the wishes of the members of whom a significant proportion are beginners or inexperienced players whom the Club wishes to "protect".

My personal suspicion is that the members have not in fact been polled on this subject in anything like a scientific or "above board" manner, and were they to do so the management might be surprised by the responses from members who hold a contrary opinion but perhaps do not feel so strongly as to take the ultimate sanction that I have taken. As discussed above, there simply is currently no published mechanism for the Club to undertake such a survey (there might be if the InVision bulletin board were resurrected). There is no published record of a survey having been undertaken, and there is no published result of such a survey.

A possible explanation is that the rule is imposed more because it accords with the personal prejudices of the Club's management who individually abhor the use of psychs and perhaps count themselves among the less skilled players to cope with them. That suspicion may be wholly unfounded, but the total absence of evidence of member consultation does not help in dispelling a tendency toward the propagation of such a suspicion. The temptation to mould the Club to the personal preferences of the management must be all the greater when the lack of democracy in its structure naturally vests in those individuals the absolute power to indulge those personal preferences.

Or it is possible that a small but vociferous minority in the Club have privately made their personal anti-psych preferences known to the management who, without soliciting contrary opinions, were unduly influenced. It is normal to complain when you don't like the status quo. It is less normal to provide unsolicited positive feedback when you are happy with the status quo. The "noise" level is naturally therefore in favour of change.

A combination of these factors may be the true reason: a small minority of anti-psych pressure group finding a particularly sympathetic ear among like-minded management.

Whatever the truth behind the reason for (and process behind) the imposition, let us try to be constructive about the way forward.

It is alleged (unofficially, as part of the justification for the ban) that the Club membership is largely comprised of individuals who, through inexperience, are ill equipped to handle opposition psych bids. Let us for the sake of argument take this as factually accurate. As discussed above I am

convinced neither of the conclusion nor of the process by which was derived, but put that to one side for now. I also presume that this is the primary cause of their objection to playing against psychs. If you were confident in your ability to handle psychs, it would be a bizarre reaction to object to their use.

A question that the Club would need to address is: does it regard it as its purpose to pander exclusively to the wishes of those affected individuals?

There is a risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophesy, here: The Club and its players accept mediocrity as a goal and so are consigned in perpetuity to a state of mediocrity. Serious players, who appreciate that the psychic bid has its place both in the laws and strategy of the game, shun its events, while inexperienced players flock to it secure in the knowledge that they will only encounter inexperienced players and will, forever, remain inexperienced.

This may indeed be the aim of the Club, and indeed I think that there certainly is a place in the game where inexperienced players should feel welcome and un-intimidated. But if that is what is happening here then I think it is unfortunate that the club should be called the Acol Club rather than, say, the "Beginners and Inexperienced Club". Oh, wait, there is such a club on BBO, albeit with much more restrictive entry criteria. Certainly I think it would be an unfortunate legacy of the Acol bidding system that it be tied in the minds of all to the adjective "mediocre", such that Acol players generally are in need of mollycoddling. I suggest that there are a large number of excellent players who are well capable of defending against psychs and who are quite willing to play Acol.

I believe that most bridge players would, given the chance, seek to improve their game. There are those who are resigned to their current state, possibly with justification, and look upon a game of bridge as nothing more than a social get together for a chit chat among friends. Nevertheless I believe that those who frequent tournaments are those with at least a modicum of a competitive streak and fall into the former category. Protecting them from exposure to psychic bids does not, in my view, assist in their development. Furthermore, the Acol Club does also regularly host classes, which I understand are well attended by just those members whom it seeks to "protect", providing at least some empirical evidence of their willingness to develop.

Perhaps it is reasonable to question whether players who claim a preference not to encounter psychs are those who are best placed to judge what is in their best interests. As adults we decide on behalf of our children that it is in their best interests to eat their greens, despite that our children would prefer avoidance. Eventually they come to know better, but perhaps would not do so if their preferences were satisfied throughout their childhood. I suspect that a beginner would, left to his own preferences, gravitate to a game in which pre-emptive opening bids were banned, despite that they are natural and, according to the Laws, perfectly legal. And yet the Club does not ban pre-emptive openers.

Policing the adopted policy is a potentially serious problem in its own right. According to the Laws, a definition of a psych is "a deliberate and gross misstatement of honour strength or suit length". It is amazing how frequently I have seen mild departures from expectation to be categorised as psychs with consequential sanctions on the offender. Part of the problem may be that those who implement this rule, having already demonstrated a cavalier contempt for the Laws of the game, are

just as happy to redefine the terminology. Unfortunately they tend not to publish their own definition, prior to the point at which they have to implement a ruling.

So, what solutions do I propose? Never let it be said that I am not constructive in my criticisms. The solutions are two-fold.

The first step would be to implement a method by which the stated purpose of the website ("to provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas between players in the Acol Club") can be fulfilled. That solution would not place in the hands of a sole individual, presumably the webmaster, editorial control over what gets posted there, risking the redaction and censorship of dissenting views. As a solution, this goes beyond the problem of allowing or banning psychs, but speaks to the very health of the Club itself in respect of any of its decisions. The bulletin board as previously implemented some years ago would have been a useful method to achieve this, and would allow for proper polls to be undertaken and, importantly, repeatedly reviewed.

The second step would be to recognise that there may be a demand for variety. I am no killjoy who would want there never to be an event in which psychs were banned. The core of my objection is that each and every pairs event run by the Club implements the ban. Why on earth not have some events which ban psychs (if you must), and some which do not? Do you expect players to leave the club in droves? (For that matter, why not have the occasional Match-pointed event? Most of the face-to-face pairs events that the members normally play at local clubs are in that format. The world is large enough to embrace such variety. Personally I prefer IMP-scored events, so I am not being in any way partisan here.)

Incidentally, I could see nothing in the terms of contest of the various teams matches hosted by the Club which state that psychs are banned. And those events are popular with just the same players who frequent the pairs tournaments.

The Laws are a mature body of rules that have evolved after several revisions over a matter of decades, under the steerage of committees of individuals who between them have a vast wealth of experience and skill at the game and no small intellectual capacity. To assume that you can do better than them and make what you perceive to be "improvements" is no trivial decision and such changes should not be adopted lightly on a whim. The justification would need to be compelling in order to overcome that overhead.