

ABF Alerting Regulations

1. Introduction

It is an essential principle of the game of bridge that players may not have secret agreements with their partners, either in bidding or in card play. All agreements must be fully available and fully disclosed to the opponents. These Regulations set principles and guidelines for the approved alerting procedures.

The ABF System Regulations require each player to have a legibly completed approved system card on the table, with the partnership cards being systemically identical. The purpose of an alert is to draw the opponents' attention to any call that has a special meaning, or a meaning the opponents may not expect. The fact that the system card explains the meaning of a call does not remove the obligation to alert it when required by these regulations. (However see 2.4 below for self-alerting calls)

Players should adhere to the principle of full disclosure (as required by the Laws) in following these Regulations and in explanations of calls. The principle is to disclose, not as little as you must, but as much as you can, and as comprehensibly as you can. A careless failure to follow this policy may result in an adjusted score, and possibly procedural penalties, where opponents have been damaged. If a player makes a positive effort to meet their obligations under full disclosure, they will rarely if ever fall foul of these regulations.

The methods of a partnership include not only the specific agreements appearing on the system card but also partnership understandings which have arisen through partnership discussion or experience. The opponents are entitled to know about these understandings. General bridge inferences, like those a new partner could make when there has been no prior discussion, are not alertable, but any inferences that can be drawn from partnership experience must be disclosed.

2. Definitions and General Principles

2.1 Convention

A call that, by partnership agreement, conveys a meaning other than willingness to play in the denomination named (or in the last denomination named), or high-card strength or length (three cards or more) there. However, an agreement as to overall strength does not make a call a convention.

2.1.1 Note that 'other than' is construed to include 'additional to'. So, by definition, any bid that shows the denomination named and another denomination also, is conventional. All opening bids and overcalls that show two or more suits, even if one of the suits is named, are by definition conventional.

2.1.2 It is construed that an opening bid of 1♣ or 1♦ which may contain fewer than three cards in the opened suit does not indicate 'willingness to play' and hence such bids are conventional.

2.1.3 Certain calls may not convey any meaning e.g. the enforced 3♣ after a Lebensohl 2NT. Such calls are construed as conventional.

2.2 Natural calls

2.2.1 A **natural suit bid** is one that is not conventional. It follows from the definition of *convention* that a bid is natural if it meets the following criteria:

- Conveys a willingness to play in the denomination named (but does not come under 2.1.1 or 2.1.3)
- Shows high card strength or length (3+ cards) in the suit named.

2.2.2 A **natural NT bid** is a bid that shows a preparedness to play in NT, and conveys no specific information about the suit holdings.

2.2.3 A **natural pass** is a pass that does not convey any conventional message about strength or suit holdings.

Natural calls as defined in these regulations are in general not alertable, but there are important exceptions. (See 3.3.2.)

2.3 Cue bids

For the purposes of these Regulations, a **cue bid** of opponent's suit is defined as a bid of any denomination bid by the opponent or suits shown by the opponent's bid. Example: If an opponent opens 1♦ showing spades, then 1♠ and 2♦ are both cue bids. Similarly a 2NT overcall of 1NT is also a cue bid.

2.4 Self-alerting calls

There are five different types of self-alerting calls, *viz.*

- Doubles
- Redoubles
- Cue bids of an opponent's denomination/suit
- All calls at the four-level or higher, except conventional opening bids
- Any 2♣ response to a 1NT opening bid in an uncontested auction.

These calls carry their own alert and should not be alerted. It may be risky to make assumptions as to the meaning of such a call. A player is entitled (at their turn to call) to ask for their own protection, but bear in mind that unnecessary questions may be more helpful to the opponents than to the enquirer's own side, and may convey unauthorised information thereby limiting partner's options.

2.5 Other definitions

2.5.1 A **transfer bid** is an artificial bid, which promises length in a specified suit.

2.5.2 A **puppet bid** is an artificial bid, which requires a particular response by partner, but does not promise a holding in the suit of the forced response.

2.5.3 A **pass-or-correct bid** or a **correctable bid** is a bid, which, after partner has shown possession of an unspecified suit, conveys the meaning 'Pass if this is the unspecified suit, otherwise correct to the unspecified suit'.

3. Alert Stages

There are three stages of the alerting process. All are important.

- The pre-alert before bidding starts
- Alerts and announcements during the auction
- Delayed alerts by the declaring side before the opening lead.

3.1 Pre-alerts

3.1.1 At the start of a round or match, pairs should acquaint each other with their basic system, length of their one-level openings and the strength and style of their opening 1NT. Subsequent questions about these, whilst legal, may be regarded as unauthorised information.

3.1.2 This is the stage where the opponents' attention should be drawn to any unusual agreement which might surprise them, or to which they may need to arrange a defence. Examples: transfer pre-empts, transfer responses to 1♣, unusual two level openings, canapé style bidding, very unusual doubles, unusual methods over the opponents' 1NT or strong club openings, unusual cue bids of the opponents' suit, *etc.* Pay particular attention to unusual self-alerting calls. These should appear on the system card, but should also be verbally pre-alerted.

3.1.3 Highly unusual carding (e.g. leading low from doubletons) should also be pre-alerted at this stage.

3.2 Announcements

It is the responsibility of the responder to make a prescribed statement (otherwise termed an 'Announcement') whenever their partner opens either 1♣ or a natural 1NT. The form of the announcement required varies depending upon the nature of the opening bid:

(a) Announcements required after a 1♣ opening:

- For Natural-type systems (e.g. Acol or Standard), the appropriate minimum length of the club suit (i.e. "1+", "2+", "3+", "4+") should be announced.
- For Strong Club systems (e.g. Precision or Moscito); the word "Strong" together with the minimum HCP holding (i.e. "16+") should be announced.
- For system options other than those above (e.g. a Polish 1♣, which has multiple meanings), the word "Unusual" should be used.

(b) Announcements required after a natural 1NT opening:

- The appropriate HCP range (e.g. "12-14" or "15-17" etc.) should be announced.

All announcements should be made in a consistent manner using the prescribed terminology. Alternative designations are not permitted.

3.3 Alerts during the Auction

3.3.1 If a call is conventional, it must be alerted (unless it requires an announcement or is self-alerting).

3.3.2 Two classes of natural calls must be alerted (unless they are self-alerting), viz.

- (a) The call is natural, but there is an agreement by which the call is forcing or non-forcing in a way that the opponents are unlikely to expect. Examples:
- Responder's first round jump shift on weak hands.
 - A non-forcing suit response by an unpassed hand to an opening suit bid (whether or not after intervention).
 - A pass which forces partner to take action (e.g. SWINE).
- (b) The call is natural, but its meaning is affected by other agreements, which the opponents are unlikely to expect. Examples:
- A natural NT overcall (or response) in the direct position, which does not promise a stopper in the overcalled suit.
 - A jump raise of opener's one-level bid in an uncontested auction, which may be weak or pre-emptive.
 - A single raise of partner's suit which may be strong or forcing e.g. 1♦ - 2♦ forcing.
 - The rebid in a canapé sequence where the second suit may be longer than the first.
 - A 1♥ opening, which denies holding 4+ spades.

3.4 Delayed alerts

3.4.1 At the end of the auction, the declaring side should draw attention to any unusual features, particularly any unusual non-alerted calls. Upon inquiry, a player must disclose fully, not only the specific meanings of all calls, but also any inferences they have drawn from the auction based on partnership experience (as distinct from general bridge knowledge). These explanations may occasionally need to include negative inferences, such as hand types partner probably does not have for his bidding. Defenders must not, at this time, draw attention to their own calls, nor voluntarily offer explanations (they must of course fully disclose upon inquiry).

3.4.2 Takeout/negative-type doubles and penalty doubles do not require a delayed alert. If interested, the opening leader should enquire before leading, or his partner may enquire after the opening lead has been made face down.

3.4.3 If a possible misexplanation emerges during the delayed alert stage the Director should be called before the opening lead is faced. Defenders however must wait until the play of the hand is completed before calling the Director to report any misexplanation by their partner.

4. Some Common Conventions

4.1 Stayman 2♣ in response to partner's 1NT

This bid is self-alerting because it is almost universally used. The conventional responses to Stayman are alertable, as are natural responses which convey a message about strength or special distribution.

4.2 Transfers in response to partner's NT

The transfer bid is alertable. Acceptance of the transfer, whether or not after interference, is alertable if it conveys any meaning relating to hand strength or length in partner's shown suit.

4.3 Multi 2 bids (e.g. 2♦ showing an unspecified 6-card major with or without other options).

Any 2-level bid with a multiple meaning is alertable. The conventional responses, including correctable bids are also alertable.

5. Specific Examples

This section provides a number of examples by way of illustration and amplification. The list is not exhaustive. It is not necessary to commit them to memory as they follow the principles specified above. There is an overriding requirement that self-alerting calls should not be alerted.

5.1 Opening bids

The following should be alerted:

- (a) 1♦ if it may contain fewer than three cards in the suit named.
- (b) 1♥ or 1♠ if it may contain fewer than four cards in the suit named. Also if a 1♥ bid systemically denies four spades, this is alertable (conveys a surprising message about another suit).
- (c) A non-natural 1NT (e.g. Moscito; showing hearts and spades).
- (d) Opening two bids which do not promise a holding of 4+ cards in the suit named, or which promise a holding in the suit named and another suit. Examples:
 - Alertable: 2♥ showing hearts and another suit (whether specified or not).
 - Alertable: 2♣ where, if there are only 5 clubs, also shows a four-card major.
 - Strong artificial 2♣, 2♦ openings are alertable.
 - Note that a 2♥ bid, which promises only hearts, is not alertable, whether strong or weak.
- (e) Any opening bid, (other than 1♣) which is not natural e.g. transfer pre-empts.

5.2 Development of the uncontested auction

The following should be alerted:

- (a) Weak jump responses
- (b) Inverted minors (1♦ - 2♦ forcing, 1♦ - 3♦ weak)
- (c) Forcing 1NT response
- (d) New suit rebids by opener which may be made on a suit of fewer than three cards in a minor or four cards in a major
- (e) Jacoby style 2NT over a major

- (f) Bergen raises
- (g) Fit showing jumps
- (h) Fourth suit forcing
- (i) Splinter bids (below 4♣)
- (j) Transfer bids (below 4♣)
- (k) Forced bids in a 'pass-or-correct' sequence
- (l) Conventional responses including 'pass-or-correct' bids after a multi-two opening
- (m) Trial bids
- (n) A pass which conveys a special meaning as to strength or distribution

5.3 Competitive auctions

5.3.1 Overcalls

The following should be alerted:

- (a) All overcalls which show two suits, even if one of them is the suit named
- (b) Unusual NT bids that show 2-suited hands
- (c) Natural NT overcalls of RHO's natural suit bid, which may not have a stopper in that suit
- (d) Transfer overcalls and multi-meaning overcalls

The following should not be alerted:

- (a) Single suited overcalls showing only the suit named, whether weak, strong or intermediate
- (b) 1NT in the pass-out seat which may not contain a stopper in the opener's suit

5.3.2 Alertable calls over an opponent's takeout double:

- (a) Any bid in a new suit which is non-forcing (except by a passed hand)
- (b) Conventional fit-showing jumps

5.3.3 Alertable calls over an opponent's suit overcall:

- (a) Any bid in a new suit which is non-forcing (except by a passed hand)
- (b) Any natural NT bid which does not promise a stopper in the opponent's suit
- (c) Lebensohl type responses after interference over your 1NT

5.3.4 Alertable calls after partner's takeout double:

- (a) Any bid that conventionally shows weakness (Lebensohl, Herbert, *etc.*)
- (b) Any minimal natural response that shows some strength

6. Bidding Styles

Players should be aware that there are some different approaches in bidding style in natural systems after a minor suit opening, especially a 1♣ opening. Some players bid 'up the line', some prefer to show a major ahead of a 4 or even a 5-card minor. Further, some players may skip a 4-card major in making a NT rebid or response. These approaches are commonly used, and these regulations do not require them to be alerted during the auction. Players are advised to be aware of these different approaches, and to protect themselves by asking where necessary.

7. Alerting Procedure

7.1

Alerts are compulsory - the opponents cannot be asked not to alert. The requirement to alert applies even though the convention or other agreement may be listed on the system card.

7.2

Self-alerting calls, and bids that require an announcement should not be alerted.

7.3

Players alert their partner's calls, not their own (except when screens are in use). Alerts should be made immediately after the alertable call has been completed.

7.4

Alerts are made by audibly saying, "Alert" and, if written bidding is in use, circling the call on the bidding pad. Circling a call provides prima-facie evidence that it has been alerted. (If bidding boxes are in use, an alert card should be placed across the relevant call.)

7.5

Delayed alerts should be indicated by a small plus sign (+) in one corner of the appropriate square of the bidding pad as evidence of the delayed alert. (If bidding boxes are in use, the declaring side should verbally indicate which unusual calls require a delayed alert.)

7.6

Explanations of alerted calls or delayed alerted calls are given only after a request has been made.

7.7

If a player knows that his partner's call is alertable but has forgotten its meaning, he should nevertheless alert. If asked, he should explain that he has forgotten the meaning, whereupon the Director should then be called. The Director's normal action would be to send the player away from the table and have the partner explain the meaning of the call.

7.8

When a player makes any call in tempo, and an opponent then alerts (late alert), the Director may allow the player to retract the call and substitute a legal call without penalty, provided that his partner has not subsequently called, and it is probable that his action might be different after the alertable bid's meaning has been explained [Law 21B1(a)]. Any call retracted in accordance with the provisions of this Law is authorised information to the partner of the player retracting the call (Law 16C), but not to the opponents.

8. Enquiring about an Alerted Call

8.1

When opponents make an alerted or self-alerted call, a player is entitled to ask specifically about that call at his first turn to call after the alert. Otherwise any questions should be directed at the whole auction, not a specific call; an appropriate method of asking would be "Please explain the auction".

8.2

Any questions about a call or calls must take into account the Laws covering unauthorised information:

“Any extraneous information from partner that might suggest a call or play is unauthorized. This includes...questions...” and *“A player may not choose a call or play that is demonstrably suggested over another by unauthorized information if the other call or play is a logical alternative.”* (Law 16B1).

Hence whilst the Laws grant the right to ask questions, unnecessary inquiries, or questions directed at particular calls, may limit partner's options in the subsequent bidding or play. It is therefore advisable not to ask questions if the intention is to pass regardless of the answer.

8.3

Questions may be asked only for ones own benefit. It is improper to ask questions for the benefit of partner.

9. Explanations

9.1

If an enquiry is made, a full explanation of the call must be given. This includes any conventional or partnership agreement, whether the agreement is explicit or based on partnership experience. Explanations may well include distributions and point ranges specifically excluded by a call, as well as those shown directly. When giving explanations, it is not necessary to repeat information given earlier in the hand, unless such information is requested. When explaining an alerted or self-alerting call, players should indicate if this same call might have a slightly different meaning (e.g. different point range) due to a variation of vulnerabilities and/or position around the table.

9.2

If there is no partnership agreement as to the meaning of a call, the player must say so (by saying, “Undiscussed”, for example), and not attempt to offer a possible explanation. When, however, as a result of partnership experience and style, one is able to form a coherent view of the likely meaning of an undiscussed call, that information shall be given to the opponents. Where a call is undiscussed, the player should not offer statements such as “I take it to mean....” or “I’m treating it as....”. Such a response is improper as it provides unauthorised information to partner.

9.3

Merely to name a convention (e.g. Michaels, Lebensohl, etc.) is not an acceptable explanation. There are many variations of most conventions, and a more specific explanation is normally required. Similarly, the use of "Standard" or "Natural" to describe calls, signals or leads is rarely sufficient - nor are the terms "Weak", "Strong" or "Intermediate" - without appropriate qualification.

9.4

An explanation given in response to an enquiry about the meaning of any call should avoid reference to the meaning of any response yet to be made to that call (unless requested by an opponent).

9.5

A player need not divulge knowledge or conclusions derived from their own card holdings, or as a consequence of their experience of matters generally known to bridge players.

10. Irregularities in Procedure

10.1 Misinformation

Pairs who frequently forget their system or conventions have a damaging effect on the tournament. The Director is empowered by these Regulations to require such a pair to play a simpler system or convention. In extreme cases he may apply a procedural penalty under Law 90A.

10.2 Late Alert

In the case of a late alert (i.e. a member of the non-offending side has taken action before the alert is made), the Director should be called immediately before any further action is taken. (See 7.8) He may be able to take steps to prevent damage at this time. If the non-offending side fails to call the Director at this time, they may jeopardise their rights to obtain redress for damage later.

10.3 Failure to Alert / Mistaken Explanation

When there has been a failure to alert, or a mistaken alert, or misexplanation given, the following principles apply.

10.3.1 If a member of the offending side becomes declarer/dummy:

Before the opening lead is faced, declarer and/or dummy are required by Law to call the Director and, in his presence, correct the failure to alert, the mistaken alert, and/or the misexplanation.

10.3.2 If the offending side become defenders:

No correction may be given until the end of play, at which time the Director must be called.

10.3.3 When there is reason to believe that a failure to alert has caused damage, the Director will consider awarding an adjusted score, providing there is a direct link between the irregularity and the result achieved at the table.

11. Tournament Director's Responsibility

11.1

Tournament Directors will not allow players to manipulate these Regulations to their advantage. For example, opponents must be allowed enough time to alert; a speedy action out of tempo followed by a claim for a late alert will receive little sympathy. Likewise, experienced players claiming damage through a technical failure to alert will need to present a strong case.

11.2

Directors are required, when giving a ruling at the table, to consider whether the players have adhered to the principles of full disclosure.

12. Alerting when Screens are in Use

When screens are in use, the alerting procedures outlined above do not apply. Refer instead to the ABF Screen Regulations.

13. Summary and Guidelines for Players

This summary constitutes part of the regulations, but is intended only as a brief guide to players. Players should be familiar with the full regulations.

13.1

The Laws and these regulations require full disclosure of your agreements. You should make active efforts to ensure the opponents are aware of your agreements. You do so by pre-alerts (before the auction), alerts and announcements during the auction and delayed alerts at the end of the auction.

13.1.1 The pre-alert is the stage where you warn opponents of any very unusual agreements. Pay special attention to self-alerting calls that may surprise the opponents, (e.g. unusual doubles, unusual cue bids of opponents' suit) and to any unusual agreements to which the opponents may need to devise a defence.

13.1.2 Calls are alerted during the auction by audibly saying, "Alert" and by circling the alertable call on the bidding pad.

13.1.3 An opening bid of 1♣ does not require an alert, irrespective of whether it is natural or conventional. Responder, after either a 1♣ or a natural 1NT opening bid, instead makes the prescribed announcement.

13.1.4 At the end of the auction, the declaring side should draw attention to any unusual undisclosed features by placing a plus sign (+) in one corner of the relevant square(s) of the bidding pad.

13.2

Self-alerting calls include all doubles and redoubles, calls at the 4-level or higher (except conventional opening bids), cue bids of an opponent's suit and any uncontested 2♣ response to a 1NT opening bid. These should not be alerted during the auction, but may need to be alerted in the pre-alert or the delayed alert stage. Players should be aware that such calls by opponents may not mean what they assume, and ask if necessary.

13.3

All conventional calls (other than self-alerting calls or those that require an announcement) must be alerted. Note that an opening 1♦ bid that may contain fewer than three cards in the suit is conventional. Note also that any call showing two suits is conventional, even where one of the suits is named, e.g. 2♥ showing hearts and a minor.

13.4

A natural call must be alerted if it is forcing or non-forcing in a way the opponents might not expect (e.g. inverted minor raises, preemptive raises in uncontested auctions, negative free bids) or if its meaning is affected by other agreements (e.g. a 1♥ opening that denies 4+ spades).

13.5

The policy is to alert any call by partner (other than a self-alerting call) that the opponents could reasonably misunderstand.

13.6

In explanations, do not use the names of conventions; give specific explanations. For example, do not just say “Michaels”, but explain the meaning of the bid by saying “At least 5-5 in hearts and a minor suit, any strength”. Similarly, refrain from using the terms ‘weak’, ‘strong’, ‘intermediate’, ‘natural’ or ‘standard’ if there exist, from partnership experience, certain expectations of suit quality and/or point count. The opponents’ views of these descriptive terms may differ from yours.

13.7

You may ask questions only at your turn to call or play. It is improper to ask questions for the benefit of partner.

13.8

Irregularities

13.8.1 Any misexplanation, alert or failure to alert by partner is unauthorised information to you, and you must avoid taking any subsequent action suggested by that unauthorised information.

13.8.2 If you realise that you have given a wrong explanation during the auction or failed to alert, call the Director immediately.

13.8.3 If you believe your partner has given a wrong explanation or there has been a material failure to alert, call the Director before the opening lead if you are the declaring side. If you are defending, you may not call until the end of the hand, whereupon you are required to do so.