

The new *Orange Book* will apply in England and Wales from 1st August 2006 and players will find several changes. Many of the differences may not matter, for example the wording of some obscure rules has been tidied up. The most important changes come in defining the methods that are permitted to be played, which are more numerous than before, and in alerting, which has had its first major change for more than a dozen years.

Alerting above 3NT

We have already seen in the last issue of BRIDGE that announcements are introduced for opening 1NT bids, and Stayman and Transfer responses to them, as well as for all natural openings of two of a suit. This is the most exciting change in alerting, but not the only one.

The most important changes otherwise are to the alerting of doubles and minor-suit openings, and alerting above 3NT. Otherwise alerting is much the same. Artificial bids and passes will continue to be alerted; also any strange bids that have meanings that would be a surprise to the opponents. But let us look at the new rules.

You know what happens in some clubs (not yours, of course!). Opener bids 1♣, responder bids 4♣ and looks expectantly at opener. If opener alerts, responder knows he has got the message – it is Gerber. If not, responder thinks for ages (they always do) and bids 6NT (they always do that, as well).

The solution is simple: since the opponents are not really likely to bid at this level, nothing above 3NT is alertable, whether artificial or natural. Now alerting cannot be used to help partner decide what a bid means. Perhaps I should point out that I know it should not be used that way but, sadly, some players do.

When I say nothing should be alerted, that is not quite true. Artificial opening bids above 3NT are to be alerted. Also, if a pass is lead-directing, or a double, or redouble, is lead-directing for a suit other than the suit doubled (or redoubled), then they need an alert. But these are high-level expert conventions, rarely played in clubs, so you will not run into them much except in national and maybe county events.

Does anyone remember that not alerting above 3NT is not a new idea? It was tried many years ago, though with different rules, but eventually discarded. The time

has come to try again; it seems a sensible idea.

Alerting 1♣ and 1♦ openings

Now, how about an alert of 1♣? What does that mean? In a lot of clubs it means that the opening bid may be on a three-card suit. And what use is that? Do you know anyone who defends differently over a three-card club opener than over a four-card one? Most of the rest of the world considers three-card minors standard. They are not so common here because we play mainly weak no-trumps and four-card majors, but even so they are quite common. So in future they will not be alerted. Of course, opponents can ask, or look at the convention card.

The effect of that is that if a 1♣ or 1♦ opening is alerted, then it is artificial. It might be a Strong Club or Diamond, or it might be a modern-style Short club which may be based on two cards (or even one). It might be a Precision diamond, or a Nottingham loose diamond. But it will not be an ordinary opening bid that might be based on three cards. Note that any defence is permitted to Short Clubs and Diamonds.

Alerting of doubles

The alerting of doubles was never understood properly, so it has been simplified. If a suit is bid naturally, then an unalerted double is for take-out at any level (up to 3NT, see above). This also applies to Short Clubs and Diamonds, which show normal opening values but not necessarily length in the suit bid.

Doubles of no-trump bids, if not alerted, will be for penalties.

Doubles of artificial suit bids, if not alerted, will be for penalties, i.e. they will show a holding in the suit doubled.

Redoubles are to play if not alerted.

These rules may come as a surprise to many and some people will complain that they are “forced” to alert some doubles which have the “obvious” meaning. But if the rules can be understood that is an improvement.

New rules for what you can play

What can you play that’s new? Nothing really at Level 2, the level for holiday bridge, social bridge clubs, and novice events, but there has been some relaxation at the higher levels. The remainder of this section deals with those higher levels,

Level 3 which is normal for clubs, and Level 4 which is for tournaments and some advanced clubs. Note that the view is now taken that Level 3 is unsuitable for national events: the EBU and WBU will use Level 4, and it is hoped that all Counties and Areas will follow.

Any response (to any opening bid) is now permitted, but that will not matter much unless you have a pet special response! The biggest changes actually took place in April 2005, when it was decided to allow any defence to a 1NT opening, also to allow a Multi 2♦ with a Weak Two in hearts but not spades or a strong hand. The reason for these changes is changing attitudes amongst players.

Light openings

For a long time, experts have recommended light third- and fourth-hand openings. Yet it has not been legal to agree to play them as very light, which many players have found confusing.

Now the rules have changed to allow such openings so long as the hand has at least 8 points (fewer than 8 at Level 4), but the opponents must be told of such agreements. If you open light in third or fourth seat, put it on your convention card! (There is no reason to alert it since it is not part of the alerting rules.)

Also, the basic rules for first- and second-hand openings, that is Rule of 18 (Rule of 19 at Level 2), or 9 points for 1NT, are the same now for both Levels 3 and 4.

Other changes

One or two other changes are made; for example, transfer openings are permitted at Level 4. This means you could find a pair playing a 1♦ opening to show spades, as in a popular Australian Strong Club system, or my own favourite transfer system, Gnats. But I do not think you will find these in your local club – even if they permit Level 4!

Finally, I must add that there is one growing problem: a Benjamin 2♣ shows a “strong” hand with eight or more playing tricks: note the word “strong”. There are a growing number of people who count up to eight playing tricks and open 2♣. It has been made clear that this is illegal: no strong opening will ever be permitted without a least 14 points. ■