

About Polling Players

By Rui Marques, EBL and WBF Chief TD

The WBF Code of Practice establishes that “it is the function of the director to make a ruling in a judgmental matter, having consulted appropriately, that executes most accurately the intentions of the laws.” This little sentence recognizes what for many years has been the normal practice of tournament directors in international championships: TDs systematically consult on judgmental cases. No matter how good a TD is, the general quality of decisions improves if there is a discussion of the case within the directing team, with the input of knowledge of players with adequate characteristics. The CoP mandates that all judgment decisions be submitted to a consultation and polling process at top level competitions, and should be regarded as establishing good practices for other Regulating Authorities and TDs in general.

There are abundant situations where TDs have to use judgment. The two most frequent ones:

1 - A player receives unauthorized information (UI) and takes some action that the opponents consider questionable.

2 - A player gives a wrong explanation of a call or play, and the opponents act on it. Afterward, they consider that with the right explanation they would have acted differently.

Of course, there are many other situations under Law 12 that are judgmental by nature and might require the TD to go through the process of consultation and polling, and we will see some of those later in this article.

In a judgmental case, the TD will very often need to poll players to determine the likely/possible course of action, absent of the wrong explanation, UI or other irregularity.

Let's view a typical example:

East Dealer	♠ K Q J 6 5										
None Vul	♥ 8 4										
	♦ Q J 10 3										
	♣ 9 5										
♠ 8 7		♠ A 9 3 2									
♥ J 10 6 3 2	<table border="1"><tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr></table>		N		W		E		S		♥ 7
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♦ A		♦ K 8 7 5 2									
♣ A Q 8 7 2		♣ K J 4									
	♠ 10 4										
	♥ A K Q 9 5										
	♦ 9 6 4										
	♣ 10 6 3										

West	North	East	South
		Pass	Pass
1 ♥	1 ♠	2 ♦	Pass
2 ♥	Pass	2 N	Pass
3 ♣	Pass	Pass	Pass

West (about 2♦): I'm taking it as Drury

Final result: 3♣ making, +110 EW

The director is called at the end of the auction. E/W had not discussed whether Drury applied in competition. East says that he believed he had another call based on his hand. The opponents think that a "Pass" is automatic given East's hand.

How should the TD approach the case and decide?

We can safely assume that NS would not have taken different actions if they heard the explanation “undiscussed,” so this is a pure UI case: Would East have passed if he had not heard West’s explanation?

The ideal situation would have the TD and the players back at the table without the extraneous information, but that is obviously not possible. The alternative approach substitutes the player by a group of “similar” players (the pollees) and produces a judgment call based on the set of actions taken and opinions expressed by that group of players.

For that, we confront these players with the bridge problem(s) arising from the situation. From the answers, we will hopefully be able to judge if East has a bid, or if Pass is a logical alternative in the example above.

When this situation happened, four players were consulted, and none considered pass a logical alternative. Therefore, the AC decided to maintain the score. This case is extensively discussed in the published casebook, and some passionate opinions there seem to point to a completely different opinion. What should be the correct decision? Did something go wrong with the poll?

My purpose in using this example is to show the importance of adequate polling, more than to establish the “correct” ruling. This case shows how easy it is for a poll to go wrong when certain key aspects are not properly catered to.

Here is another example, illustrating the need for a poll on an unusual situation:

♠ J 8 3 2
♥ 10 4
♦ A J 10
♣ A 7 6 4



♠ A K Q 9
♥ 8 6 5
♦ 5
♣ Q 9 8 5 2

West	North	East	South
			1 ♠ ¹
Pass	2 ♠ ²	Pass	?

1. Canape

2. 6-11 HCP Balanced

After bidding 2♠ (before East’s call), North found one card on the floor and called the TD, wanting to know his rights. TD rules. East passes, South bids 3♣ and North drives to game. The opponents call the TD because of the 3♣ bid (Laws 14C and 16B).

We would like to know what that particular South would have bid if he didn’t know that North bid 2♠ with 12 cards, right? Our best shot at a good judgment call is to inquiry a group of suitable players, not mentioning the “detail” of the incident with the 13th card.

The first example in particular brings to light one of the most difficult problems regarding the polling process. When we poll, we are sampling players and basing our analysis of the actions taken by one particular player (the one at the table) on the sample that was obtained through the poll.

We form a judgment from a limited sample of information. How big should the poll size be (the sample)? Who should be in it? A different set of pollees may easily lead to different conclusions, if proper care is not taken, and that is bad news for the process.

So, how to organize and conduct a poll?

The WBF Code of Practice establishes a roadmap for this purpose: *“The TD who is called to the table will collect the evidence of what occurred. The TDs then discuss the matter between themselves before deciding if an infraction has taken place and that it resulted in damage to the non-offending side. Where the matter involves bridge judgment, the TD will consult 5 players of an appropriate standard and typically ask “What would you do/bid on the following hand after the bidding has gone . . . ?” The answers given by the players will assist the TDs to determine what the ruling should be.*

The paragraph above, helpful as it is, addresses a number of questions that require more elaborate answers. Broadly speaking, we need to address five general points:

1. Basics: Was there an infraction?
2. Facts: What information to collect from the table?
3. Sample: Which players to consult? How many?
4. Poll: How and what to ask?
5. Decision: How to interpret the results of the poll?

“Was there an infraction?” This is the first question that needs to be answered. If Jacques de La Palice happened to be a tournament director, he would not say it better. It is clear and intuitive when we are establishing if a certain action is a mistaken bid or mistaken explanation, or if a player might have based his call or play on UI available to him, but generically speaking it is something that needs to be addressed first and foremost by the TD on every table call, and that sometimes is easier said than done.

Board 29
North Deals
Both Vul

<p>♠ 4 2 ♥ 8 7 5 ♦ A K 10 6 5 4 3 ♣ K</p>	<p>♠ A K Q 7 ♥ K J 10 6 4 2 ♦ — ♣ 9 7 4</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: 0 auto; background-color: #008000; color: white; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">N</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">W</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">E</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">S</div> </div>	<p>♠ 5 3 ♥ 3 ♦ Q J 2 ♣ A J 10 8 6 5 2</p>
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♠ J 10 9 8 6
♥ A Q 9
♦ 9 8 7
♣ Q 3

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 ♥	2 ♣	2 ♥
Dbl ¹	4 ♥	Pass	Pass
5 ♦	Pass	Pass	Pass

1. 10+HCP, not alerted

5 ♦ by West, Down 1 (EW-100)

In the example above, with screens, West’s double shows any hand of 10+ HCP; any other bid denies 10 HCP. There were no alerts of this bid. North claimed that had he been Alerted to the meaning of the double, he would have bid 2♠, and that South would know of the double fit and compete

successfully to the five level, rather than defend 5♦. And beware, you are deciding the result of an important match with your decision...

Maybe N/S have a point about being damaged, but the first question to ask is: “was there an infraction (is this double alertable)?” Then, should N/S have protected themselves? And of course we also need to find if there is damage, if the answer to the first question is affirmative and the answer the second question is negative.

When this case happened, it took consultation with 11 experts to decide that the call was not “highly unusual or unexpected”, and therefore not alertable, according to the rules on alerting at the time. The logical conclusion was that there was no infraction and therefore no damage from the lack of alert. Technology can help in establishing if there was an infraction or not. We have use video recordings, time stamps of keystrokes, and other approaches, to reach out for the “material truth”. But this example is interesting because it shows polling as an alternative way of doing it.

The example also illustrates the importance of careful planning before starting the poll. We will see more examples later, but the TD should resist the temptation to just ask the usual question: “what do you bid in the situation?” Many polls require a wiser approach.

“What information to collect from the table?” In a nutshell, all the information that might be needed. Remember that we will need to put the pollees in the same situation at the table as the players involved (as much as possible). The pollees will need to know the auction and play, the meaning of calls and carding conventions available, general methods and style of the players, and other pieces of information depending on the case itself. So, try to anticipate all the questions that the pollees might be asking and be prepared to answer objectively. In the first example above, questions like: “what is the range and style of E-W weak two bids?”, “does 1♥ always show five cards?”, “what’s the minimum strength for opening one of a major in front of a passed hand?”, “what would 1NT and 2NT by East show on his second call?”, are examples of questions that players might be asking. In the second example, “What is the range and style of the 1♠ bid? Can it have 3 cards? Does 2♠ show any balanced hand in that point range or does North have other alternative bids?”

The TD should never reply to questions by the pollees with what he guesses the answer would be. According to Murphy’s Law, he will be wrong! So, before starting the poll, it is necessary to find from the players all the relevant information about their system, methods, approach, style, and any other factors that might affect the bridge decision to be taken.

“How many players to consult?” This is a critical subject that needs to be addressed in a sensible way. It would be great if we could ask many players, but:

1. We may have a limited number of suitable candidates available, or
2. We may be running a busy session and not have time to poll as many players as we want, or
3. Further questioning doesn’t add useful information to what we already have.

And, furthermore, proper polling takes a significant amount of time. Even on a quiet day we have practical limits to the time we can spend polling for a case. For all the reasons above, we need to establish reasonable and practical poll sizes. The WBF CoP states that “*where the matter involves bridge judgment the TD will consult 5 players of an appropriate standard.*” Some NBO regulations also covered this issue of poll sizing, in different ways. The CoP establishes a broad guideline, but we often need to deviate from it. On a recent championship, the session was running so busy that a decision was made by the Head TD to poll only 3 players on each case, unless it was really essential to poll more. And sometimes 5 is simply not enough...

Of course, if a tournament is organized under a specific regulation establishing a precise number of players to poll, we have to follow it (but it would be a bad regulation...).

Let’s take a look at one example and see the implications on poll sizing:

Auction				E
North	East	South	West	
2♠	3♥	4♠	Pass ¹	♠ X
Pass	4NT	Pass	5♥	♥ K8xxxxx
5♠	Pass	Pass	6♥	♦ J
Pass	Pass	6♠	Pass	♣ AK102
Pass	Pass			

Swiss Teams. All vul. High level. West hesitates for 1 minute before passing. Is Pass by East a logical alternative?

According to Law 16B1b, “a logical alternative is an action that a significant proportion of the class of players in question, using the methods of the partnership, would seriously consider, and some might select.”

Let’s say for the sake of argument that the first two pollees that we ask say that they “pass all the time and that the hesitation suggests bidding.” Do we really need to continue polling? We seem to have already established a “significant proportion” of players taking that action, independently of the poll size being two, three, four, five or six players. Alternatively, suppose that four of a total of five pollees say that they “bid on, and it’s not even close,” and one says “of course I pass all the time.” Did we run into the one crazy bidder in the whole tournament, or is this one lone voice an indication that pass is a logical alternative? Is this one a “significant proportion” or should we ask some more players? Maybe we should proceed using a different approach to establish the “significant proportion” threshold?

The problem of poll sizing relates deeply and inevitably with the definition of LA. For starters, what is a “significant proportion?” Several NBOs established guidelines for this. Two quotes:

- *Australian National Authority: (...)* a significant proportion is defined as more than one in four players.
- *White Book EBU: The laws do not specify a figure, but the TD should assume that it means at least one player in five.*

“More than one in four” and “at least one in five” are significantly different guidances! Let’s say, just for an instant, that we go with “one in five”. This translates to saying that any action that is chosen by more (less) than 20% of the players is (not) a logical alternative.

Imagine a 10% action (an action seriously considered and maybe taken by only 10% of all the player’s peers). This would not be a logical alternative, by any of the standards published. And...

make a poll of five (adequate) players. What distribution of opinions will we see in the poll?

Maybe all five are players that take the majority action, maybe one or more take the minority

one... Of course that if we analyse a 10% action, the most likely result is that all five pollees are on the 90% side, and it would be really unlucky to have all five on the minority side, but a probabilistic study reveals some surprising results!

For a 5-player poll of a 10% action, the probability of finding one or more players that take the minority action, “apparently” (and wrongly) making it a “1 in 5 or better” LA, is a whopping 41%! And if we analyze a 25% action, in a sample of five players the probability of finding none taking that action, apparently making it a non-LA, is 24%!

This example shows that strict rules for poll sizing are a dangerous thing to have. “1 in X” in absolute terms does not translate at all into “1 in X” in a random sample. When we are dealing with what I call borderline actions (in the range of 10% to 25%) the probability of making an error if we blindly go with specific proportion guidelines is too high for comfort (at least for me).

In practical terms, and taking into account the time involved in a poll, a size of five is a reasonable compromise. However, we must be prepared to be flexible. Sometimes, we just don’t need that many players in the poll, and other times we will wish to be able to ask some more. And maybe

when we come to decide if an action is a LA or not, there is a lot more judgement than arithmetics involved (more on this later).

“Who to ask?” Law 16B1b points to players of “*the class of players in question, using the methods of the partnership.*” Note that 16B1b relates to UI cases only, but the principle is clearly applicable to other judgmental cases. Here, “class of player” doesn’t mean only the level of the player, it also relates to his type (junior, senior, man, woman) and style (aggression level, for example). The polled players should use or be familiar with the base methods of the pair in question (“polish club” players think differently than “two over ones” about some auctions, for example).

Max Bavin has a delicious story about a top player that asked him who were the polled players, and when replied that they were peers of him, said “But I have no peers”. Max quickly answered “I’m sure that all of them think the same way as you do”!

It helps to be aware that some top players can quickly change their thought processes if we tell them that the player in question is an “average player,” a “club player,” an “aggressive junior,” etc., but the reverse is usually not true (one cannot ask an average player to think like a pro). It is perfectly fine and often necessary to give to the pollees information about the type of player involved, but never his name.

Although some players can ignore what they already know and be completely unbiased about a hand, it’s very recommendable to ask players who don’t know the hand in question, and it’s also a matter of common sense to not ask players that have connections to the player in question, like teammates or relatives. Also, as a general rule, don’t poll regular partners about the same hand, because they tend to have the same frame of mind and end up skewing the poll’s results.

“How to ask?” Never rush players. If a player is busy, skittish or angry with something when you approach him, he will probably not be fully engaged with the problem. Better to find someone else! Never argue with the players being asked. The TD is asking THEIR opinion, not asking if they agree with HIS opinion. What matters most is what the players think. Having an opinion as a TD is fine, but we need to be careful not to subconsciously coach the pollees into our opinion through smart questions or selective information. But it is ok to argue with the pollees, in a constructive manner, when we want to obtain more information on the reasoning process behind a player’s options.

Always avoid asking players in a group, because most frequently the dominant player of the group will forward his opinion first and the others will take his cue, skewing the poll. Isolate the player and talk with him one-on-one.

As much as possible, the players being asked should be confronted with a normal bridge situation like if they were at the table. It’s a frequent phenomenon for example when we are polling average players for them to try to be “smart” and choose an action completely different from the one that they would have chosen if they were at the table because they associate the fact of they being asked with the need to do something “special” in order to be “right.”

It is useful to develop your own network of “potential pollees”, good players that you are friends with and don’t mind to help. Social networks are a blessing, for this purpose. One of our international colleagues, when he doesn’t have enough suitable pollees available in his tournaments, regularly uses Facebook to do his polling, for example!

The poll questions should be designed to keep the pollees in a normal bridge situation and to determine if there was damage or not. Do not zoom to the moment by just asking what the pollee would do in the critical situation point, because the pollee will often identify the irregularity and skew his opinion. Show the hand as a movie. In the first example above, I would give East's hand and start with “What is your call?” If the player opened the hand, I would continue with “Can you live with a Pass?” A player that would never pass initially with East’s hand will probably not be a good candidate to be polled on this hand, being in a different “class.” If he accepted the Pass, I would continue with "Pass Pass 1♥ 1♠, and now?" Probably most would say 2♦. For the ones that chose something else, "Would you ever bid something else?" Like with the initial Pass, a player

that never bids 2♦ with East's hand should probably be excluded from the poll. Continuing, "the action proceeds as Pass 2♥. If North passes, what would you bid?" This last bit, "If North passes," makes the pollee think that the problem is related to North's pass and not to West's previous actions.

It should come without saying that it is also very useful to ask the players the reasoning behind their options. Even when you end up excluding players from the poll like in the example above, the reasons they present for their actions may help you establish important points on a case.

When performing an oral poll with a number of players, and several questions in sequence, it's very easy to forget bits and pieces of information or to lose something in translation. The poll should always be recorded. Most frequently it is done in writing, but it's possible, for example, to use a tape recorder if you have it. This way, you will not lose a single bit of information. And never forget to take the names of the pollees. It doesn't look good for the TD when the Reviewer/Appeal Committee asks him who were the players asked and he doesn't know the answer!

As a general principle, the questions should not be limited to the damage immediately claimed at the table. The classic example of this is the call because of mistaken information by a player that doesn't realize yet that there's also unauthorized information dangling around.

Sometimes, part of the case revolves around deciding if a certain action was an "extremely serious error (unrelated to the infraction) or a wild or gambling action." For this purpose, the TD can always ask the pollees, as one of the last questions, how do they value that action and check their reactions. Gordon Rainsford, in "Notes on Polling and Consulting," suggests the "shudder test" for this purpose: "When you tell the pollee what the player at the table did, he physically recoils or asks you to confirm what you just said." When the pollee reacts like this, it's a pretty good indication of his opinion...

If you need to poll about more than one position at the table, you need a group of pollees for each position, and sometimes you need to be creative. Let's see this nice example:

Board 21 ♠ 10 8 3 2
 North Deals ♥ J 8 7 6
 N-S Vul ♦ 9 7 3
 ♣ K 6

♠ A K 4 ♥ 10 ♦ A K J 6 5 4 2 ♣ Q 7		♠ Q 6 5 ♥ A K 5 3 2 ♦ Q ♣ J 10 9 3	
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♠ J 9 7
 ♥ Q 9 4
 ♦ 10 8
 ♣ A 8 5 4 2

West	North	East	South
	Pass	1 ♥	Pass
3 ♦ ¹	Pass	4 ♥	Pass
6 ♦	Pass	Pass	Pass

1. Alerted and explained as Bergen raise, 11-12 with 4-card support (correct agreement)

6 ♦ by West, EW+920

West tells the TD that he forgot they were playing Bergen raises and intended his bid as a strong jump shift. West got UI from partner's explanation. We need to know what would happen without the UI. When this hand came up in real life (DIC Matt Smith), the poll was made with pairs of

players in a way that no player was aware of the potential misunderstanding. The Wests assumed that their partner knew the 3♦ bid was a strong jump shift, and the Easts assumed that partner had made a Bergen raise. All the Easts bid 4♥ over 3♦, and the Wests followed with 4NT. None of the Wests bid 6♦.

When dealing with cases of mistaken explanations, one of the main points is to establish if there is damage created by the wrong information being given. The other is to establish what would the outcome be if the right information was given instead.

West Dealer ♠ A J 10 5 4
 None Vul ♥ 9 7 4
 ♦ A 8 6
 ♣ A 8

♠ 8 ♥ Q 8 3 ♦ 9 5 4 ♣ K 10 9 6 5 2	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> N W E S </div>	♠ K Q 7 6 2 ♥ K J 5 2 ♦ J 10 7 3 ♣ —	
	♠ 9 3 ♥ A 10 6 ♦ K Q 2 ♣ Q J 7 4 3		

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
Pass	1♠	Pass	2♣
Pass	2♦	Pass	2N
Pass	3N	Dbl	Pass
Pass	Pass		

3NTX made. After the board, East calls the TD because of different explanations. East asked the meaning of 2NT to his screen mate before he doubled. It was explained as “invitational, maximum 12 HCP”. South on the other side of the screen explained it as “forcing.” NS do not have a CC or system notes available. 2♦ was alerted as 11-17 HCP 3+ card. East states: “Had I known that 2NT was forcing, I would not double 3NT, and when I do not double, normal lead of my partner is ♥, and 3NT goes down”. When the TD investigates a little further, he learns that for West “forcing” meant 12-14 HCP. During the process of ruling the TD will want to verify if East would double or not with the explanation “12-14 HCP”. So, we give East’s hand to a poll of players, and the auction in steps: “Pass 1♠, what do you bid?”, then “2♣ Pass 2♦ alerted as 11-17 3♦+, what do you bid?”, then “2NT explained as 12-14 HCP Pass 3NT, what do you bid?”. Let’s say that we find four players that pass and one that doubles. It looks like East was damaged, right? However, suppose that the players that pass always pass with either explanation, or the player that doubles always doubles with either explanation (11-12 or 12-14), is East really damaged?

To establish if there is damage caused by the mistaken explanation, it’s not enough to know what would the players’ actions be with the right information. We also need to know what the players would do with the wrong information. Damage probably doesn’t exist if the action is the same with both explanations. Of course the TD should ask also if they consider alternative actions, and if one of them is more likely with one information or the other. It’s also useful to give the pollees the arguments of the player at the table and ask their opinion about it.

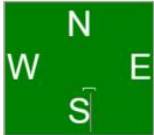
Breaks in tempo typically create problems of unauthorized information for partner. Ruling on BIT cases, we need to establish if the BIT demonstrably suggests the action taken by the player over other less successful LAs (Law 16).

Law 16B1(b) : A logical alternative is an action that a significant proportion of the class of players in question, using the methods of the partnership, would seriously consider, and some might select. The wording of the law establishes a roadmap for the way that we should handle a poll when here is UI involved. And just as an aside, the concept of “logical alternative” does not apply to misexplanation cases, where we are analysing the consequences of an infraction for the possible actions of a non offending side, but only for UI cases, where we analyse the consequences for the actions of the offending side.

First take the UI out of the picture (sometimes tricky, but possible), by asking the pollee about his choice(s) without mentioning the UI. Ask about the reasoning behind, and what other choices he seriously considers. After that, put the UI inside the picture. Ask what does the BIT might suggest. You want to know if it suggests the action taken by the player, but ask more generically: “If there is a hesitation by your partner, what do you think it means?” With screens, “If there is a break in tempo on the other side of the screen, what do you make of it, who is hesitating, what could it suggest?”

Avoid asking the players if "action X is a logical alternative." It is up to the TD to judge if some action is a LA, considering the inputs he gets from the polled players, not for the players to say if the action is a LA by themselves.

	DUMMY	
♠	76	
♥	K8	
♦	AQ10632	
♣	Q96	
	YOU	
♠	K5	
♥	QJ1076	
♦	J5	
♣	10853	



North is dealer and auction goes “1♦ 1♠ 3NT all pass”.

You lead the ♠K. Dummy comes down. Partner fiddles and hesitates, finally playing the Jack. You continue with the ♥Q and the final result is -3. Another continuation leads to +1.

Opponents object.

Are there less successful logical alternatives to the ♥Q at trick 2 (spade five, for example)? Is the ♥Q suggested over the LA by the BIT? We could approach the poll like this:

“This is your hand. Auction goes ... What is your lead?”

Most players will lead the ♠K. If not, “Can you live with a ♠K lead?”

If the player would never lead the ♠K he should probably be excluded from the poll (but his opinion may be useful anyway). “Dummy spreads ...” (show the player dummy’s hand) “It goes Six, Jack, Three. How to you continue? Why?”

“What are my carding methods?” “Standard, high encourages.” I lead “...” because ...

“Do you consider any other plays instead? Might you choose one of them?” (at trick 2)

“If partner fiddles and hesitates before the Jack, what do you think that it suggests?”

The “why” here is important. The Jack denies the Queen and if a spade continuation is correct partner can overtake and continue spades himself. ♠J looks like a signal for hearts in case opening leader has the ♠K singleton. Therefore, we want to know if there is useful UI from the BIT, not replicated by the AI available to the player.

This is the main question that we need to address on the poll (players will probably say that the BIT suggests a switch to hearts, but that is not enough because the AI might suggest the very same thing).

Another example:

S		YOU
♠	K852	
♥	Q72	
♦	K10543	
♣	2	

Auction			
North	East	South	West
1NT ¹	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♦	3♣	3♦	Pass
3♥	Pass	3♠	Pass
3NT ²	Pass	4♦	Pass
Pass	Pass		

1: 15-17 HCP
2: Alleged Break in Tempo

EW call the TD because of 4♦ after the BIT, feeling that pass is a LA. South argues that the auction itself had already revealed that 3NT was a doubtful final contract and that 4♦ could be better. Does the BIT suggest bidding on? It seems so, but keep an open mind.

Doing the poll, start from the beginning “Partner opens 1NT 15-17. Next hand passes. What is your bid?” Proceed.

When you reach 3NT, don’t mention the BIT. Players will either pass or bid 4♦.

“What other bids do you seriously consider? Might you choose them?”

“Does a BIT by partner before 3NT suggest pulling to 4♦?”

We always need to establish if there are logical alternatives to the action taken by the player and if that action could demonstrably have been suggested by the extraneous information. The questions in the poll must always take this into account.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, not all the problems that require polling relate to mistaken explanations and breaks in tempo. Here’s an example related to Law 73E:

East Dealer	♠ 5													
N-S Vul	♥ A 8 7 6													
	♦ Q 8 7 2													
	♣ K Q J 10													
♠ 10 4		<table border="1" style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border-collapse: collapse; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="background-color: #cccccc;"></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ K J 8 7 6 3 2		
	N													
W		E												
	S													
♥ J 9 5			♥ 10											
♦ A 4 3			♦ J 9 6 5											
♣ A 8 7 5 4			♣ 2											
	♠ A Q 9													
	♥ K Q 4 3 2													
	♦ K 10													
	♣ 9 6 3													
West	North	East	South											
		3♠	Pass											

Pass¹ Pass

1. Break in tempo

West hesitated before passing 3♠. North states that he didn’t double for takeout because of the hesitation. West claims that he was trying to decide whether to make a sacrifice or not.

Judging this type of cases, we have to approach the problem from two angles: we need to establish (1) if the player could have known that the BIT could work to his benefit and if there is a demonstrable bridge reason for the BIT, and (2) if the actions by the non-offenders were influenced by the BIT. Therefore, we potentially need multiple sets of pollees. In the example above, we need to poll players with West’s hand to understand if there is a bridge reason for the BIT and (other players) with North’s hand to establish if the final pass was induced by the BIT.

About West's hand: We can expect that most of the players will pass, so we can start the poll with "What call do you make after the auction goes 3♠ Pass? Do you seriously consider any alternative calls?" and finish with something like "Do you see any reason to think for some time with your hand?" As you can guess, we are especially interested in their answer to the last question.

About North's hand: We approach the case as a mistaken information one, in terms of structuring the questions. "What call do you make after the auction goes 3♠ Pass Pass? Do you seriously consider any alternative calls?" If they pass and don't consider any other calls, we have no more questions. But if they double, we can further ask "If West huddles before passing, would you change your call?" Maybe players will double or pass independently of the hesitation, and in that case, even if there is no demonstrable reason for the hesitation, the conclusion would be for score stands. If some players change their call to pass after the BIT, or seriously consider changing and we judge that they actually might change even if they don't, the conclusion would be for adjusted score.

Another example on the same theme:

Board	9	N			
Dealer	N	♠ 8			
		♥ AJ10764			
Vul	E/W	♦ A72			
		♣ A73			
W				E	
♠ KQJ1063				♠ A75	
♥ Q8				♥ K2	
♦ Q109				♦ K653	
♣ 106				♣ J542	
		S			
		♠ 942			
		♥ 953			
		♦ J84			
		♣ KQ98			

North	East	South	West
1♥	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♥	Pass	Pass	2♠
Dbl	Pass	3♥ ¹	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Swiss Teams. Finals. 3♥ by N made 4. There's a BIT before 3♥. East calls the TD saying that he didn't compete in 3♠ because of the BIT. The double by North just showed values.

Could South have known? Judging from his hand, very likely yes. Is there any demonstrable reason to think? We poll players with the South hand following the same lines as in the previous example. When we reach South's third bid, if all the pollees bid 3♥ quickly without seriously considering any other bids, we pretty much establish that there is no demonstrable bridge reason to hesitate. We can further ask what they think about South's argument that he was thinking if game could make. This case is interesting because the most useful piece of information is the manner in which the pollees bid 3♥, and to get that piece of information the TD must have the poll planned and know what to look for. Rainsford's "shudder technique" is also useful here, when we ask players about the hesitation and observe their reaction.

There are many other types of judgmental situations where we can use polls to help us decide. For example,

- Is a certain call "highly unusual or unexpected" for the class of player involved?
- Is a given line of play merely inferior, or irrational?
- Partner concedes showing his cards, immediate objection, exposed cards are UI for the defense. Is a given line of defense demonstrably suggested by the UI?
- Opponent explained a call on a paper pad. Player claims that the scribbles misled him. Was there misinformation?
- A player claims that something was overheard from another table.

- A withdrawn card is UI for the offending side (Law 16D). Did an offending player make a play that could demonstrably have suggested by the UI?

“How to interpret the results of the poll?” Always keep in mind that we have to answer the following questions:


1. Was there an infraction?
2. Was there damage resulting from the infraction?
3. What would be the possible outcome (or outcomes) without the infraction?
4. Would these have been more favorable to the NO side?
5. Is there any damage subsequent to the infraction that should not be compensated for?

To reach the final decision, we need to take into account the choices of the pollees, the reasoning behind, alternatives considered, and any other factors that may be useful like in the example above the tempo and body language of the answers, and the reactions of the pollees.

We cannot use a hard-wired rule to fit all cases. For example, establishing if a minority action is a logical alternative or not, blindly following a rule of “1 in X” is a recipe for disaster. It’s much more sensible to examine the information coming from the poll as a whole and use our judgment for that. Consider a situation where we have polled six players, and five of them say that a certain action is not a logical alternative but one gives you a very compelling reason for it, and you suddenly realize that it actually is a very smart bid only accessible to really top players. No wonder that guy is multiple times world champion, you think to yourself! This is an extreme example of a situation where, for one reason or another, the opinion of a player ends up being more important than the total tally of answers in the poll, but frequently (and especially when we are judging borderline cases) we need to look at all the information from the poll, including the arguments presented by the pollees, their thought processes, maybe even their names and perceived reputations, to adequately ponder everything and come to a fair judgment.

It should be clear from the examples above that before starting a poll we should give it some thought. A good decision may be very easy with a well thought poll, and extremely difficult with a hurried one. Let’s see an example of how the design of a poll can make our life easier or harder:

Board 15 ♠ 9 8 7
 South Deals ♥ A 10 5 2
 N-S Vul ♦ A 8 5 4
 ♣ 9 4

♠ A 4 3 2 ♥ J 8 7 6 ♦ K J 2 ♣ K J		♠ K Q 5 ♥ K Q 3 ♦ 6 ♣ A 10 8 7 6 3
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♠ J 10 6
 ♥ 9 4
 ♦ Q 10 9 7 3
 ♣ Q 5 2

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			Pass
1 ♣ ¹	Pass	2 ♣ ²	Pass
2 N ³	Pass	3 ♦	Pass
3 N	Pass	Pass	Pass

1. Could be 2,
2. Inverted raise
3. Showing stoppers in both majors

NS are very experienced players, EW not so much. 3NT made 10 tricks, on a ♠9 lead. North/South called the director as soon as dummy appeared. North/South say 3♦ was not alerted. East and West both said, independently, that they thought that 3♦ asked for a stopper, but that they had not a specific agreement on that. South said away from the table that he would have doubled 3♦ if he had been Alerted that 3♦ was artificial. During the play of the hand, West guessed clubs incorrectly, finessing into South. North/South stated that if North had led a diamond in response to her partner's double and South made the same misguess in clubs, they would have defeated 3NT.

What are we interested to know from the poll, if we decide to make one? Depending on further investigation with the players, we may decide that EW have an implicit agreement and therefore NS should have been alerted. In that case we want to know what South would do over 3♦ if there is no alert, and if the bid is explained as asking for a stopper. Also, we would want to know if West gets the club suit right when South doubles 3♦ (we therefore need a second set of pollees). So, we can plan to start with the first main question about South's call, because if that comes out with all pass we don't need further inquiries, right?

However... there is, in my opinion, one major question that needs to be investigated. Is South, a very experienced player, really unaware that 3♦ is artificial? Give the South hand to the pollees. "It's your call" (pass) ""no alternatives, I guess? 1♣ alert (explain if asked) pass 2♣ alert (same), your call" (pass) "still no alternatives? 2NT alert (same), pass 3♦ your call". Some will ask what's three diamonds, or if there is an alert. Tell them there is no alert and see the reaction. If they still ask more questions, tell them that it asks for a stopper. They will choose (pass or double) "alternatives?" (some may mention double or pass) "why did you select your choice". Now ask them (in case you gave the information about the stopper) if they bid differently with the explanation "natural", and observe their reaction. "3NT all pass". If they didn't say anything about the possible meaning of 3♦, "by the way, what do you think that 3♦ means?" and listen to the player's thoughts about it.

Analyzing the results, the first thing that we want to know is if it is possible that a player like South may think that 3♦ is natural, per opposition to some sort of showing/asking a diamond stopper. The second one is if the explanation of 3♦ makes any difference in South's choice of call. If the answer to any of the two main questions is negative, we saved ourselves an additional poll, about West's lines of play when 3♦ is doubled and when it is not.

When giving the decision, the TD should always say that he polled suitable players, and how many, but never tell the involved parties who the polled players were. The Reviewer/Appeal Committee can and often does ask who were the players polled, to judge if the poll was adequate. That is information that the TD may or may not give to the AC if requested, depending on local regulations. The Australian National Authority, for example, decided that the outcome of any poll may be shared with the Appeals Committee, but the identity of the players consulted, and their opinions, must remain confidential to the Director. This strikes me as odd, at least by the way it is worded, because of the importance of the thought processes behind the opinions when forming a judgment. At the EBL and WBF levels, the identity of the players can be shared with the reviewer. Conclusions:

- Tournament directing has evolved a lot in the last years. Polling is a fine art and must be done correctly otherwise it will lead to serious mistakes and wrong conclusions.
- Polling players is a crucial part of a TD's job. The TD needs to do his best to get objective and unbiased answers in order to exercise his judgment and give the best possible ruling to the players.
- The right questions to ask are sometimes not evident. The wrong questions may transform the polling into a waste of time. And sometimes during a poll we may find out that we might have started on the wrong foot with the wrong questions. It's better to reanalyze the problem and restart the poll, than to insist on the mistake.

- We must not stop using our judgment and replace it with some automatic formula. The “new polling culture” partially relieves the TD, in a certain way, from the burden of thinking as a player at the table, but gives him much bigger responsibilities in using his judgment in the analysis of the information coming from the poll. For that purpose, the reasoning behind the answers is sometimes much more important than the answers themselves.
- Now that organizations recognize that most of the time the TD’s decision is final, we really need to get it right.
- We will never achieve 100% perfection in decisions involving judgment, but good polling helps us to make fewer errors and dramatically improve the quality of our decisions.