



Alert Series:
Failure to Alert / Mistaken Alert
by Bob Gruber

Serious duplicate bridge players recognize that the Alert System is for the benefit of the opponents, not the Alerting side. Alerts are meant to inform the opponents a bid's meaning is not what would customarily be assumed. The Alert gives the opponents—each at their own turn to call, and only their turn to call, not their partner's—a chance to inquire as to the true meaning of the bid. Clearly, this information is germane to the opponents' subsequent bidding and then to the play or defense of the hand and is in accord with the duplicate bridge philosophy and laws that prohibit secret agreements.

The Alert System comes with subtle implications and can be misused in a number of different ways. Specific, detailed information on the subject may help avoid inadvertent violations.

1. Lack of an appropriate Alert is misinformation (but you must be non-reactive and remain mute during the auction lest you alert partner to the nature of your bid). One possibility is that the opponents will assume an artificial bid is a natural bid. Thinking that's the case, the opponents may fail to bid this suit. During the play, if the "artificial bid" hand is hidden, the opponents may mis-defend or mis-declare because they've mistaken the distribution and/or location of high cards in the suit.
2. Alerting when not appropriate is also misinformation. If the Alerter is asked and (mistakenly) gives information not in accordance with the partnership's agreements, clearly, that is misinformation. Again, during the auction you must not react to either the Alert or the misinformation. Even if the opponents don't ask, the Alert implies there is some unusual meaning to the bid when there really isn't, and, again, the opponents may be misled. And just as important, Alerter's partner now has the unauthorized information that he and his partner are not on the same wavelength. Ethically, the partner who made the non-alertable bid must ignore the unauthorized information gained from the Alert System.
3. If you've forgotten your agreement on a bid and partner correctly Alerts as per your agreement, you must not announce that the Alert is correct but that you misbid. Obviously, such an announcement would inform partner as well as the opponents and is prohibited. Any demonstrable reaction is also prohibited. Nor can you let the Alert or its explanation if one is given serve as a wake-up call to guide your subsequent bidding. You must ignore the Alert and continue bidding in a manner consistent with your prior thinking. However, if other clues, i.e. bids, give you reason to alter your bidding path, you don't have to continue to distort your subsequent bids in an attempt to ignore the "wake-up" nature of the Alert.
4. If partner fails to Alert an Alertable bid, you must not react in any way. Furthermore, you must assume partner knows the true meaning of your bid. In this case, the laws require you to assume your partner knows your bidding system and made his/her subsequent calls accordingly. Even if you're a dyed-in-the-wool skeptic, you now must assume partner recognized your bid. The confirmation a failure to Alert confers is unauthorized information. In fact, it has raised the bar on your taking action based on the assumption partner forgot the meaning of your bid. The bar is what the majority of good players would do, not what your normal action would be. Remember, the Alert System is for the benefit of the opponents, not to help you and your partner recognize when one of you has forgotten your agreements. So,



you are required to assume partner recognized your bid and make your subsequent bids according to what most good players—playing your system—would bid.

5. Partner is responsible for knowing—most likely via inquiry at his/her turn—the meaning of the Alerted bid. That’s a major point of the Alert System. If you know the meaning of the Alerted bid—whether through familiarity of the opposing partnership or by having read their convention card or by some other means—you cannot ethically ask about the meaning of the bid. To do so would be for the sole benefit of partner, and, as stated, partner is responsible for knowing or asking about the meaning of the bid. Note, you may ask the meaning of a specific bid at your turn at any time during the bidding or play of the hand. But again, for your benefit, not partner’s.

We can conclude that the Alert System is something of a 2-edged sword for the Alerting side for it must both ignore its Alerts and lack of Alerts and yet pay close attention to them. As we have learned, there are specific reasons for these two opposite and seemingly contradictory positions. Any subsequent action the Alerting side takes must follow the tenets below:

- a. You ignore your side’s Alerts and lack of Alerts when assessing partner’s hand in both the bidding and play:
Since the Alert System is for the benefit of the opponents, any knowledge the Alerting side gains from its Alerts or lack of Alerts is unauthorized information. It must be ignored during the subsequent bidding and play.
- b. You pay attention to your side’s Alerts and lack of Alerts to inform the opponents of possible misinformation at the appropriate time:
 - i. On offense, i.e. declaring the contract, the appropriate time is after the auction has ended but before the opening lead is made. This situation is one of the times when the (presumed) dummy may speak up without another player first pointing out the infraction. Declarer, of course, should have no problem informing the opponents of possible misinformation before the opening lead is faced.
 - ii. On defense, the appropriate time is immediately after play has ceased and the result agreed to. Defenders must wait until this time lest they give unauthorized information to their partner, which, of course, opens up another can of worms. If the declaring side feels damaged, one of them should call the director to seek redress.