



Alert Series:
Do I “Stop,” “Alert” or “Announce” or Does My Partner?
by Bob Gruber

People learning to play bridge have different reactions to the game. Some find it too slow paced; others too complicated; still others find it a fascinating challenge. Those people often go on to become duplicate bridge players where the complexities are compounded by duplicate rules.

One area where these complexities come to the fore is use of the Alert card and the Stop card. The Alert card and subsequent explanation if asked for is the major portion of the Alert System, but not the only portion—it has a subset of verbal Announcements. Knowing the *raison d'être* for these cards and verbal announcements should help in understanding and remembering when and which to use.

Duplicate bridge philosophy and laws prohibit secret agreements. Initially, bidding systems were natural. If you bid hearts, you held some minimum number of hearts. Notrump implied some semblance of stoppers in all suits, but needed invention of the High Card Point (HCP) system to quantify the strength of the hand. Natural bidding systems needed little explanation.

As the game advanced, it was clear some bids would never be used in certain sequences and soon people were inventing artificial meanings for these fallow bids. Then it became clear that artificial meanings for a whole raft of normally natural bids would be more useful because the artificial bids could suggest more than one hand type, could imply holdings in multiple suits, and could convey specifics not communicable by natural bids. As artificial meanings proliferated, no one could be expected to be aware of, much less understand, the full implications of all these artificial bids. Thus, the invention of the Alert System for the benefit of the opponents.

Alerts

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. Certainly, this information is germane to the opponents' subsequent bidding and then to the play or defense of the hand.

So, who issues the Alert, the person making the Alertable bid or the bidder's partner? The person making the Alertable bid knows what he means by that bid, knows that it does not have the customary meaning, and is, therefore, Alertable. But what about his partner? That person may have forgotten the meaning the partnership has ascribed to the bid or, in the heat of battle, may have missed the fact that partner's bid is, in fact, that particular, Alertable bid.

If the bidder alerts his own bid, surely that will wake partner up that the bid is unusual. And that is not the intent of the Alert System. 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. With that in mind, it must be the bidder's partner who issues the Alert, not the bidder himself. Also, reminding your partner to alert your bid is just as big a gaffe.



Asking About an Alert

If you're an opponent when an Alert is given and you'd like further information about the bid, wait until it's your turn to bid and then ask in terms along the lines of:

- “Explain please,”
- “Would you explain the Alert?” or
- “What is your agreement?”

To ask, “Is that weak?” could be construed to imply that you have strength in the suit bid and are a little surprised to hear an opponent bid it. If partner takes that inference, that would constitute unauthorized information. So avoid asking in a way that might imply something about your holding in the suit. If the initial explanation is inadequate, you may ask for a further description.

Premature Volunteering of Information

When you Alert, don't volunteer information about partner's bid unless asked. Some opponents don't want you to confirm to partner that you're on the same wave length, or conversely, that you're not. If an opponent is thinking of bidding and needs to know more, he or she will ask. Wait for that inquiry.

On the other side of the table, if you want to know about the Alert, verbalize your question. Don't stare with what you think is an inquiring look, making the Alerter guess whether you want to hear more or not. Come right out and ask.

Announcements

How does an Announcement differ from an Alert? An Announcement is simply an Alert that may be accomplished in a word or short phrase. Five frequently heard Announcements are:

- “May be short”
- The range of a natural 1NT opening bid, e.g. “15 to 17”
- “Transfer”
- “Forcing”
- “Semi-forcing”

As with a full-fledged Alert, it's the partner, not the bidder, who makes the Announcement. If an opponent wants further explanation of an Announcement, the same rules as asking about an Alert and premature volunteering of information apply.

The Stop Card

The Stop card is the bidding box equivalent of the original, verbal “Skip bid, please wait” warning. That warning was issued whenever you were about to skip a level (or more) in the bidding. That being the case, the next player could easily need to rethink the bid he/she had in mind because, most likely, he/she would have to make it at a higher level. The skip bid warning had multiple purposes: a) to reduce insufficient bids following a jump, b) to prevent a fast pass from conveying a hand too weak to have anything at all to think about, and c) to give the next bidder time to think without revealing that a difficult decision was underway under unexpected circumstances.



Since the next bidder is required to pause (the recommended time is 10 seconds), the bidder himself uses the Stop card to forewarn his Left Hand Opponent. Note, the Stop card should be displayed before the bid card is placed on the table. If you were to rely on your partner to use the Stop card, it may come too late or may not be displayed at all. Clearly, the bidder himself must display the Stop card.

Returning to the list of reasons for use of the Stop card, noticeably absent is any statement about waking partner up to the nature of your bid. Like the Alert system, the Stop card is solely for the benefit of the opponents. It's not meant to be a wake-up call or a secret code that conveys information to partner, but not the opponents.

Please note, the Stop card does not mean stop thinking until the Stop card is replaced in the box or the recommended 10 seconds have passed and only then to start thinking about your bid. *Au contraire*, as already stated, a major purpose of the Stop card is to allow you time to think. Don't fritter it away by staring at the Stop card until it's returned to the box. And if you have nothing to think about, don't defeat the fast pass aspect of the Stop card by making it obvious you're bored or just counting the seconds. At least appear to be engaged in thought.

Finally, are you and your partner consistent in your use of the Stop card? During a session, if either one of you uses it, even once, do you both use it each and every time it's applicable? You should! Either you always use it when you skip the bidding, or you never use it. You don't use it randomly and you don't use it only for specific hand types. Please, be consistent.

Additional Reading

If this article has whetted your appetite about the Alert System, go to www.vcbbridge.org, then to *Writings*, and *Director's Dialog* for the article titled *Failure to Alert / Mistaken Alert*, which is the 2nd article displayed in the *Alert Series* table.