

Comparable Calls and their consequences

The 2017 Laws extend the possibility that was introduced in 2007 in Law 27 for a player to replace an insufficient bid with a call that:

...has the same meaning as, or a more precise meaning than, the insufficient bid (such meaning being fully contained within the possible meanings of the insufficient bid)

This has been done by introducing the concept of a “Comparable Call” and extending its application to also include calls out of turn as well as insufficient bids, along with the lead penalties that might arise from those rulings.

LAW 23 – COMPARABLE CALL

A. Definition

A call that replaces a withdrawn call is a comparable call, if it:

1. has the same or similar meaning as that attributable to the withdrawn call, or
2. defines a subset of the possible meanings attributable to the withdrawn call, or
3. has the same purpose (e.g. an asking bid or a relay) as that attributable to the withdrawn call.

B. No Rectification

When a call is cancelled (as per Law 29B) and the offender chooses at his proper turn to replace the irregularity with a comparable call, then both the auction and play continue without further rectification. Law 16C2 does not apply, but see C following.

C. Non-Offending Side Damaged

If following the substitution of a comparable call [see Laws 27B1(b), 30B1(b)(ii), 31A2(a) and 32A2(a)] the Director judges at the end of the play that without the assistance gained through the infraction the outcome of the board could well have been different, and in consequence the non-offending side is damaged, he shall award an adjusted score [see Law 12C1(b)].

Taking it bit by bit, the “*same or similar meaning*” indicates that we need not search for minor differences between the two calls – essentially we are encouraged to continue the “liberal” interpretations of this law that were already recommended by the WBF for the earlier Law 27.

The word “*attributable*” is also interesting as it gets away from us needing to know the intention of the player. If it seems obvious to all at the table what the meaning of a call is, then that can be treated as the meaning of the call for our purposes. There may still be instances of uncertainty when you might need to take a player away from the table, but I expect them to be fewer than before.

“*Defines a subset of the possible meanings*” is saying much the same as the previous law did with “*the same meaning as, or a more precise meaning than...*” but is perhaps a bit more precise and may make it a little easier to understand or explain.

Finally, “*has the same purpose*” seems intended to allow those calls that have sometimes given us problems when we made subtle distinctions between the types of hands that might

be held when a player chooses make an enquiry bid. In the past, we did not always allow 2NT-2♣ to be corrected to 3♣ because the sorts of hands that might use Stayman in response to 1NT are more limited than those that might do so in response to 2NT. Now it seems not to matter: both have the same purpose, which is to enquire about major-suit holdings.

Law 27 – Insufficient Bids

The wording of Law 27 has not changed very much apart from updated references, except that as noted above we are now able to allow penalty-free corrections to *comparable calls*, which have been more clearly described and slightly more widely defined than previously.

LAW 27 – INSUFFICIENT BID

B Insufficient Bid not Accepted

If an insufficient bid in rotation is not accepted (see A) it must be corrected by the substitution of a legal call (but see 3 following). Then:

1. (a) if the insufficient bid is corrected by the lowest sufficient bid which specifies the same denomination(s) as that specified by the withdrawn call, the auction proceeds without further rectification. Laws 26B and 16C do not apply but see D following.
- (b) except as in (a), if the insufficient bid is corrected with a comparable call (see Law 23A) the auction proceeds without further rectification. Law 16C does not apply but see D following.

One other thing you will note is that a penalty-free correction to the lowest sufficient bid which specifies the same *denomination* is allowed. This means that you could for example replace an insufficient transfer bid with a sufficient transfer bid, even if they use different suits.

eg 1NT – (3♥) – 2♥ replaced by 3♠ or 4♦; we would allow an insufficient Jacoby transfer bid to be replaced by a sufficient natural 3♠ bid or even a South African Texas 4♦ transfer bid (though only if a natural 3♠ is not available, as that would be a lower sufficient bid), since all specify spades.

Note that as usual we have Law 27D to fall back on if it turns out that the offending side has gained through the application of L27B1, and that allows us to assign a result in place of the one achieved at the table, but only if we think they have reached a contract that they wouldn't otherwise have been able to get to.

Laws 29-32 – Calls Out Of Turn

Currently it is common for a call out of turn to create a requirement for one or other player of the offending side to pass. This creates a frequent incentive for that player's partner to guess the final contract, sometimes with beneficial results, sometimes disastrously, but frequently a random result not based on bridge merit.

The new laws instead allow that when a call out of turn is replaced with a comparable call, the auction just proceeds without any further rectification or adjustment. This has some interesting effects.

Pass – 1♥
1NT/2♥/3♥/4♥

Passing at partner's turn to open would previously have required a pass from offender as their first legal call, but now any call that shows a hand of less than opening strength would satisfy the relevant bit of L23:

LAW 23 – COMPARABLE CALL

A. Definition

A call that replaces a withdrawn call is a comparable call, if it:

2. defines a subset of the possible meanings attributable to the withdrawn call

So now, rather than opener having to guess to open 3NT or 4♥, they can have a normal auction and their opponents aren't subject to the outcome of how good is their guessing on this particular occasion!

Of course, it could be argued that a 2♥ raise is not strictly speaking a subset of opening pass hands, since there might be hands that would open 2♦ weak that would nevertheless raise a 1♥ opener to 2♥. So too, there might be hands that would raise 1♥ to 4♥ but would actually have opened 2♥ themselves had they been dealer. I think though that we can discount such rare and perhaps contrived examples and simply rule on the basis of allowing a normal bridge auction to continue whenever the offending side don't seem likely to have gained anything from the infraction.

Furthermore, we have L23C to fall back on if we allow a call to be considered "comparable" and it subsequently appears to have benefitted the offending side: this allows us to adjust to remove any gain they may have made by it.

Laws 26– Lead Penalties

The first thing that TDs noticed about this updated law when it was first released was how severe the lead restrictions were when they operate. As a consequence, the WBF made a late change to this, deleting the original L26B1 that allowed the lead of any one suit to be required. The amended law is below.

LAW 26 – CALL WITHDRAWN, LEAD RESTRICTIONS

A. No Lead Restrictions

When an offending player's call is withdrawn and it is replaced by a comparable call (see Law 23A), then if he becomes a defender there are no lead restrictions for his side. Law 16C does not apply, but see Law 23C.

B. Lead Restrictions

When an offending player's call is withdrawn and it is not replaced by a comparable call, then if he becomes a defender declarer may, at the offender's partner's first turn to lead (which may be the opening lead), prohibit offender's partner from leading any (one) suit which has not been specified in the legal auction by the offender. Such prohibition continues for as long as the offender's partner retains the lead.

In any case, there are two important counters to that perception of severity: the first is how much rarer will be lead restrictions that are affected by Law 23 under the new laws; the second is how complex the old law was to implement and how often, in cases like two-suited calls when only one was specified, TDs were likely to get it wrong.

So, we now have a law in which there will rarely be lead penalties, but when there are they will be simple to rule on, even if occasionally more severe in effect than formerly.

Laws 72C– Awareness of Potential Damage

You might wonder where to find the old Law 23, which allowed us to adjust whenever an offending side has gained through an irregularity that they might have known could work to their advantage. Well, it has gone back to Law 72 as Law 72C, close to where it was before the 2007 Laws came into effect! It's not likely to be needed in the sort of cases we are discussing though, as they will be covered by Law 23C or Law 27D.