

Coughing Fits

Cheating allegations rock the bridge world.

BY SUE MUNDAY

Lance Armstrong, Barry Bonds, Enron, Martha Stewart, Richard Nixon ... from sports to business to politics, society does not tolerate cheaters. Add proof to rumor, and the miscreants may end up stripped of wins or medals, suspended, imprisoned or even impeached. But only if they get caught.

The bridge world is not immune from cheating. National and international championships through the decades have been tainted by scandals involving partnerships who used everything from fingers, foot taps, blinking, sniffing and pencil placement to cigars, cigarettes and even smoke signals to exchange information.

According to the Laws of Duplicate Bridge, “the gravest possible offence is for a partnership to exchange information through prearranged methods of communication other than those sanctioned by the Laws.”

It is this law, 73B in the rule book, that Dr. Michael Elinescu, 61, and Dr. Entschow Wladow, 71, stand accused of violating. Elinescu and Wladow are members of the German team that won the d’Orsi Senior Trophy at the 2013 World Team Championships last fall in Bali. While the pair was found guilty by a World Bridge Federation Disciplinary Commission in March, they are appealing the decision. The case before the WBF’s Appeal Tribunal is pending.

Rumblings

Nearly as grave as breaking Law 73B is accusing a player or pair of cheating. It’s not a topic players are comfortable talking about; in fact, nowhere in

the Laws of Duplicate Bridge will you even find “the c word.” With reputations and livelihoods on the line, it takes solid evidence and courage to formulate and pursue an accusation of cheating, and once there, it’s tough to prove.

The unimaginatively nicknamed “German doctors” have been playing together for two decades. Players and vugraph operators have described the doctors’ bidding and opening leads as “eccentric” or “peculiar.”

“Entschow Wladow’s peculiar bidding does not always pay off” appeared on Italian bridge great Fulvio Fantoni’s website (July 27, 2012). On one deal from the 2008 European Bridge Champions Cup, Wladow abruptly passed partner in a game-forcing sequence to land in the only makeable spot.

Fantoni says, “The Italians did not feel comfortable with the situation and called the director just to have the facts recorded.”

He continues, “Some boards later, Wladow passed out a good 14-count. He probably miscounted, for everybody knows that he likes to declare whenever he gets any chance at all.”

The Daily Bulletin in Bali included a write-up of board 16 from Germany’s quarterfinal match against Indonesia. Wladow, South, heard West open a strong 1NT on his left. Partner passed and East bid 4♥ – a transfer to 4♠. Holding:

♠5 ♥Q4 ♦J9874 ♣K9764,

Wladow bid 4NT at favorable vulnerability, and caught partner with:



Michael Elinescu



Entschow Wladow

Photos by Elisabeth van Ettinger

♠102 ♥98653 ♦A63 A Q2.

Mark Horton’s commentary: “The German doctors are renowned for their eccentric bidding so it was no surprise to see South take a speculative view of his hand (at the other 23 tables, only China’s Shi and Ju reached 5♣).”

Evidence gathering

The knockout phase of the d’Orsi Senior Trophy championship reduced the field of 22 teams to eight. Germany beat Indonesia in the quarterfinals and France in the semifinals; USA2 beat Scotland in the quarterfinals and Poland in the semifinals, setting the stage for a showdown between USA2 and Germany.

Playing on the USA2 team were Carolyn Lynch, Mike Passell, Eddie Wold, Roger Bates, Garey Hayden and Marc Jacobus. The squad was captained by Donna Compton. Foreseeing the possibility of meeting the German team in the final, Compton began following the doctors in the vugraph room and online during the quarterfinals.

“The commentators continuously talked about the doctors’ unusual jumps to good contracts and their spot-on leads,” Compton says. “I began analyzing their hand patterns and opening leads in an effort to find a pattern and break their code.”

Before the start of the two-day

final – following the captains’ meeting – Compton says she met with WBF Championships Manager Maurizio Di Sacco and asked that the German doctors be monitored for possible Law 73B violations. Lacking compelling evidence, Di Sacco declined the request. He did, however, leave the door open should Compton return with more persuasive information.

Wold and Passell faced the doctors in set three – the last segment of the day. On the first board, Wold heard his opponent on the other side of the screen cough.

“The sound of it was just a little off,” he says. “I took a mental note. On the next board, I heard my screenmate cough, and it sounded really forced. Then it dawned on me – and I decided to keep track of the coughs.”

Wold noticed that the doctors were coughing on nearly every hand – “12 out of 16, as it turned out. I also soon realized that these coughs were only coming right after their hand was taken out of the board or just before their partner was about to lead.”

Here is what happened on board 5:

Dlr: North ♠ J 10 6 4
 Vul: N-S ♥ 10 6 5 3
 ♦ Q J 9 6 4
 ♣ –

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

♠ 7 5 3
 ♥ –
 ♦ 10 8 5 3 2
 ♣ Q 10 8 6 5

West	North	East	South
Passell		Wold	
	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♥	Pass
4♦	Pass	5♠	Pass
7♥	Dbl ⁽¹⁾	Pass	Pass
7NT	Pass ⁽²⁾	Pass	Pass

(1) One cough.

(2) Two coughs.

Opening lead: ♦ 3

The clincher for Wold occurred on board 9 when his screenmate led a club immediately after getting one cough from his partner.

“In the finals of a world championship, everyone takes a couple of seconds to think before putting their lead on the table. But not this opponent. His lead was really, really quick.”

On board 12, Wold says he was about to declare 4♠ when his screenmate coughed once. “I had already figured out I was about to get a club lead. When the screen came up, the ♣10 was on the table.”

Dlr: West ♠ 9 8
 Vul: N-S ♥ A 5 4
 ♦ J 10 9 4
 ♣ Q J 5 2

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

♠ Q 10 6
 ♥ 6 3 2
 ♦ K Q 7 5 2
 ♣ 10 6

This deal was played at three more tables in the d’Orsi Bowl, four tables in the Bermuda Bowl and four tables in the Venice Cup. 4♠ was declared by East in 11 of the 12 instances. Against every one of those 4♠ contracts, the South player led the ♦ K (or a conventional ♦ Q).

Board 16 was the last deal of the day:

Dlr: West ♠ J
 Vul: E-W ♥ A 8 5
 ♦ A J 10 7 4 2
 ♣ Q 8 2

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

♠ K Q 9 5
 ♥ 7 6
 ♦ K 9
 ♣ A K 6 5 4

West	North	East	South
Passell	Elinescu	Wold	Wldow
Pass	2NT ⁽¹⁾	Pass	3♣ ⁽²⁾
Pass	3♦	3♠	Dbl
All Pass			

(1) 10–14 HCP and both minors (5–5) or six-plus diamonds.

(2) Nonforcing.

Wold says, “After the auction came back around, I looked at North pointing to the 3♣ bid and said ‘weak,’ since he had been verbalizing all Alerts during the quarter. He nodded and bid 3♦, indicating he had the diamond hand. I now bid 3♠, thinking we could still have a vulnerable game if responder had a weakish hand. I realized I had been had when the dummy came down.” North–South set 3♠ doubled four for plus 1100 and 12 IMPs.

Wold summoned the director.

With 15 HCP, Wldow risked missing game if his partner, holding the club–diamond hand, passed 3♣. He defended his action by saying that because he “knew” partner had diamonds and not

diamonds and clubs, he would get another chance to bid.

After the set, Wold gave Compton his annotated convention card. He told her, “I’m 100% sure they’re

using coughs to exchange information. I’m virtually certain they’re using coughs for opening leads and they may be using them for something else.”

Compton turned Wold’s card over to the director-in-charge and the tournament manager and reiterated the request for a monitor.

“Even though far from conclusive, the evidence was, in our opinion, good



Donna Compton, captain of the USA2 squad.

enough to grant a monitor,” said Di Sacco.

That night, Compton entered Wold’s notes into a spreadsheet, and added columns representing the doctor’s hand patterns and opening leads. She broke the code. It appeared that coughs at the beginning of the hand showed a singleton or void – one cough for club shortness, two for diamond shortness, etc. Likewise, coughing at the end of the auction indicated which suit to lead – one cough for clubs, two for diamonds, etc.

Testing the hypothesis

To make the monitoring on day two “as discrete and evasive as possible,” Di Sacco appointed his assistant, Manolo Eminenti, to be the BBO vugraph operator at Elinescu-Wladow’s table. Video cameras would also record the doctors in action.

Meanwhile, the USA2 players were obsessing about ways to interfere with the doctors’ illegal system. They thought about offering cough drops or coughing every time Elinescu or Wladow coughed.

Passell says, “What our team really wanted was just to confront them and play the rest of the match on a level playing field.”

So that they might obtain the evidence needed to effectively make charges against Elinescu and Wladow stick, however, WBF officials asked the USA2 team to stay quiet and play as if nothing was wrong.

“The WBF did what it had to do,” says Passell. “They had no reason to be convinced of the cheating. They requested that our team play the last 32 boards with their cameras rolling so that their experts could analyze the findings. We were asked to comply, and we did.”

At the end of segment five, Di Sacco and Eminenti met. “He [Eminenti] expressed, in his opinion, that signals had been exchanged through coughing,” reported Di Sacco. “Mr. Eminenti also stated that he had been able to break



The USA2 team:

Roger Bates, Garey Hayden, Carolyn Lynch, Eddie Wold, Mike Passell and Marc Jacobus.

the code of three different signals:

- Mr. Wladow always picked his cards from the pocket while the screen’s aperture was still open, and then made different gestures according to the hand’s strength.
- Coughing at the beginning of the hand signaled shortness (no coughs when there were neither singletons nor voids).
- Whenever the pair was defending, the coughs signaled the opening lead.”

Eminenti confirmed his opinion at the end of the sixth segment.

Compton says that she believed the WBF had the evidence they needed to disallow Elinescu and Wladow from playing in the sixth segment.

“Again we were told to play bridge and good would win out,” she says. “Can you imagine playing a match in which every time your opponent coughed, you knew you were being cheated?”

Phillipe Vanhoutte, whose French team was beaten by the Germans in the semifinals, sympathizes. “We lost, not

because they cheated, but because of the nervousness of having to meet,” he posted on BridgeWinners.com. “During the 16 boards I played against them, I mostly wasted my time trying to dissect their code.”

USA2 lost the match – and the world championship gold medal – by 11 IMPs.

Thanks to the team’s cooperation, however, the WBF had everything needed to charge Elinescu and Wladow with violating Law 73B of the Laws of Duplicate Bridge.

The hearing

The WBF Disciplinary Commission took up the charges against Elinescu and Wladow on March 21 in Dallas TX. As the chairman of the WBF’s Disciplinary Committee, Georgia Heth from the U.S. presided over the two-day hearing; David Harris from England and Mazhar Jafri from Pakistan completed the committee. WBF General Counsel Jeff Polisner prosecuted the case.

The German Bridge Federation protested the hearing, saying that the date conflicted with the GBF’s previously scheduled annual general meeting,

making it impossible for a member of the board to attend. Moreover, having conducted their own internal investigation, they were not able to confirm any suspicion of deceit. The letter is signed by GBF President Ulrich Wenning, who was also a playing member of the German Senior team.

Elinescu and Wladow submitted objections. They asserted that because the complaint emanated from the USA team, no U.S. citizen should take part for fear of prejudice.

The Disciplinary Commission gave serious consideration to these objections and found, to their satisfaction, no basis for canceling the hearing or closing the proceedings. The defendants and GBF representatives rejected the opportunity to attend the meeting via Skype.

The Commission heard first from Wold. The convention card on which he recorded the pattern of coughing in the third segment was entered into evidence, as was Compton's spreadsheet.

After summarizing how the evidence gathering was instigated and authorized, Di Sacco testified as to what his assistant, Eminenti, discovered, and submitted the video.

"We had the benefit of viewing video and audio evidence of the later segments in the match," reads the Commission's report. "This evidence showed that there was a clear pattern in the way that Elinescu and Wladow communicated information to each other."

Di Sacco knew that Elinescu and Wladow would be competing in the Cavendish pairs in October. He asked Bertrand Gignoux, the WBF chief tournament director, "to discretely monitor the pair," and gave him the coughing code.

Gignoux testified before the Disciplinary Commission. While unable to monitor the entire match, he was at the doctors' table on 24 occasions when one or both of their hands contained shortness. His report calls out one hand from the qualifying stage in which the South doctor had two singletons:

♠4 ♥K Q 10 9 4 ♦6 ♣A J 10 9 7 4.

"South signaled both singletons," according to Gignoux. "He coughed twice, then 10 seconds later, four times."

The Disciplinary Commission's hearing report indicates that the evidence provided by Gignoux "demonstrated 100% correlation between coughing and shortage in accordance with the code that had been previously identified." While this evidence was not directly related to the charges brought against the defendants, it provided useful corroboration according to the Commission.

The findings

The Commission found the evidence compelling. "We are satisfied, so we are sure that Michael Elinescu and Entschow Wladow are guilty of reprehensible conduct as defined within the disciplinary code of the WBF."

Subject to appeal, the Commission imposed a lifetime ban on the pair that forbids them from playing together in any WBF event. Moreover, the men individually are banned from playing in a WBF event for 10 years.

The GBF subsequently banned Elinescu and Wladow from participating in GBF tournaments, and team competitions pending the outcome of the appeal.

Not only did the verdict send shockwaves through the bridge world, but it caught the fancy of the popular press, as well – partly, perhaps, because it amused headline writers, but primarily because the lay population is baffled by the notion of cheating at bridge.

"What a pair of knaves!" the UK Daily Mail (March 30) cries: "Cheating? At bridge? The complex, classy card game for sophisticates, much loved by maiden aunts with high morals and retired military men in the shires? Surely not."

The story made the sports page or society page of a number of newspapers: "Cough's the word: Bridge world champions found guilty of cheating" from the UK Independent (March 30);

"Dirty dealings: bridge world champions caught cheating" from the UK Telegraph (March 29); "Genuine cough or card trick?" in the Bergedorfer Zeitung (April 6).

In Spiegel Online: "Scandal in bridge World Championships: Husten, we have a problem!" (Husten is German for cough.) Wladow called the 10-year ban from WBF play "an impudence" and said, "I have asthma, so of course I cough a lot."

The appeal

On April 21, Elinescu and Wladow appealed the Disciplinary Commission's findings. In accordance with WBF policy, a three-member Appeals Tribunal appointed by WBF President Gianarrigo Rona has 90 days to render a decision.

Beyond banning the offenders from WBF events and ordering them to pay hearing costs and/or a monetary fine, the Disciplinary Code is silent. Whether Elinescu and Wladow will be allowed to keep their gold medals is unclear. The status of the rest of the German team (none of whom are in any way implicated in the cheating scandal) is also unclear. Will the German team go down in history as the winners of the 2013 d'Orsi Trophy?

As we went to press

On April 6, the GBF asked five top German players – Christian Schwerdt, Jörg Fritsche, Michael Gromöller, Wolf Stahl and Peter Jokisch – to review the evidence against Elinescu and Wladow. This Independent Commission's conclusion was announced on the GBF's website on May 6: "We are 100% convinced that unauthorized information was exercised."

On the basis of this report, the GBF's Steering Committee and Advisory Board voted unanimously to instruct the organization's Judge Advocate General to conduct investigations and, if necessary, open Arbitration and Disciplinary Court proceedings against Elinescu and Wladow. ■