

Law 23A – Comparable Calls

The 2017 Laws introduce a new concept: *comparable calls*. This concept will be used when an insufficient bid or a call out of turn has been made and not accepted; if the offender makes a comparable call at his legal turn, his partner will not be obliged to pass in the continued auction, and there will be no lead restrictions.

In all the examples in this article, it is assumed that South made an insufficient bid or a call out of turn, and it is understood that West does not accept the infraction.

I will make some assumptions about the meaning of the calls, mostly according to popular use among tournament players. In practice, the Director must always investigate the methods used by the actual pair.

Definition of Comparable Calls

Let us first see the definition of comparable calls as given in Law 23A:

A call that replaces a withdrawn call is a comparable call, if it: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 has the same or similar meaning as that attributable to the withdrawn call, or*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 defines a subset of the possible meanings attributable to the withdrawn call, or*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 has the same purpose (e.g. an asking bid or a relay) as that attributable to the withdrawn call.*

The intention is clear: If the illegal call does not provide any substantial information other than what is subsequently conveyed by the legal call, that legal call is deemed to be a ‘comparable call’.

Same or Similar Meaning

In practice there will be a ‘grey area’, as indicated by the wording in Law 23A1, “same or *similar* meaning”. A difference in meaning will normally be either in terms of strength or distribution. We will discuss these one at a time.

Similar Strength

Consider the following everyday example. East is dealer, but South opens 1♥ out of turn (not accepted). East now opens 1♠:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♠	2♥

Obviously, the 2♥ overcall does not have exactly the same meaning as the 1♥ opening. The opening bid shows about 11-20 HCP, whereas the overcall shows about 9-16 HCP.

The difference in the maximum strength of the two bids is rarely relevant in this auction, so let us focus on the minimum. The overcall can be made with reasonable playing strength on a hand which is just short of an opening bid. The difference in strength, both at the top and at the bottom of the range, is small, and we can accept the meaning as “similar”, i.e., it is a comparable call. There is a good chance that South’s mistake will not influence the result.

Should however South’s mistake nevertheless affect the auction or the play, i.e., if the additional information from the illegal opening bid (which is *authorized* for North) turns out to be useful for North, the Director adjusts the score. Note that the Director must not apply UI principles; instead, he must assess the likely auction and play had the illegal call never occurred at all. (This issue is worthy of a separate article.)

The problem is somewhat different if South overcalls at the one-level after an opening bid out of turn. Now the overcall might be made on certain hands containing just 6-7 HCP, and the potential difference in strength could be quite large. Deeming this type of overcall comparable would now be quite dubious.

Another example of “similar meaning” pertains to a 1NT opening out of turn. Let us assume that it shows 15-17 HCP. When South overcalls 1NT or 2NT in the legal auction, it will be a comparable call even if the overcall shows 15-18 HCP (and promises a stopper). We can also accept this if the opening shows 14-16 HCP, but not if it shows 12-14 HCP.

Similar Distribution

We can also accept differences in the distribution shown, but not as freely as strength differences.

North is dealer, but South opens 1♥ out of turn (not accepted). North now opens 1♥:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1♥	pass	2NT ¹

1) 4-card support, game-forcing.

South’s 2NT response is game-forcing with at least 4-card support. Even if N/S play 5-card majors, 2NT should be accepted as being a comparable call. Both calls show a heart suit.

Let us instead consider the following example: East is dealer, but South opens 2♠, systemically showing at least 5-4 in spades and a minor, and 6-10 HCP (not accepted). East now opens 1♥:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	?

South is facing serious trouble. If he overcalls 2♠, he shows the same approximate strength, but the call only shows spades. This is not acceptable as a “similar meaning”, and it will not be a comparable call.

Alternatively, South could consider overcalling 2♥, a Michaels Cue bid. We can easily accept “at least 5-5” instead of “at least 5-4” (which we would do automatically under Law 23A2), however, the strength might be completely different; instead of the original 6-10 it could be extremely wide –ranging or maybe even two-tiered. Here a significant difference in strength will mean it is not a comparable call.

Subset of Meanings

Law 23A2 deals with situations where the calls clearly do not have “same or similar meaning”, but where the error is clearly of no importance because the legal call provides more precise information than the illegal call gave.

A typical example is the following. East is dealer, but South opens a Multi 2♦ out of turn (not accepted). East now opens 1♦:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	2♠

South’s two calls definitely do not have “same or similar meaning” – but when we include the fact that South has (legally) shown which major suit he holds, 2♠ is a comparable call.

Same purpose

The following accident has happened more than once:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	2NT	pass	2♣ ¹

1) Stayman after 1NT

South wants to hear about North's major suits, but he thought he saw North opening 1NT. Does South's 3♣ bid have the same or similar meaning as 2♣ ?

Not if we define "meaning" in terms of the set of the hands that could make the call! After the 2NT opening, South could easily hold 5 HCP and a 4-card major, wanting to enable N/S to make a qualified decision between 3NT and 4 of a major.

South's insufficient bid tells North that South either has both majors or a much stronger hand than 5 HCP. We should not really squeeze this in under the "same or similar" clause. But the auction has quite a different balance when one player asks and the other responds. This is the reason for Law 23A3: South asks for majors in both cases, so we deem 3♣ a comparable call.

Opening Pass Out of Turn

There is a particular subtopic of comparable calls pertaining to an opening pass out of turn. If East is dealer, but South passes out of turn, South must also pass at his legal turn regardless what East does. Even if it can be argued that South's legal pass has no meaning at all because it is required by law, we have to consider it a comparable call, particularly to avoid lead restrictions. And so, since it is a comparable call, information from the opening pass is authorized for North.

If South passes at North's turn, we must first await North's call. The most interesting case occurs after 1 of a suit from North, e.g., 1♥. There are several responses that deny an opening hand, e.g., 1NT and 2♥. These are comparable calls under Law 23A2. One might object that South has denied a pre-emptive bid by passing out of turn, which he might have had for a 1NT response, but this small difference is easily contained by "similar meaning" (which is also applicable under Law 23A2). A response in a new suit, being forcing and unlimited, is not a comparable call.

Concluding Remarks

The concept of comparable calls is fundamental to the rectification of insufficient bids and calls out of turn.

When determining whether a call is a comparable call, some flexibility towards the offender is in order, especially concerning the strength shown.

If there is additional information from the illegal call, but the legal call is a comparable call, this information is authorized for the offender's partner. If this turns out to give the offending side an advantage, the Director adjusts the score considering the likely outcome had the illegal call never occurred at all.

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