

ALCATRAZ COUP

In the middle of San Francisco Bay there's an island known as Alcatraz or The Rock. It's had many purposes over the years serving first as a lighthouse, then a military fortification, then a military prison, then a Federal prison. As a prison it was home to such well known figures as Robert Stroud (the Birdman of Alcatraz) and Al Capone. It was closed in 1963 and is now a national recreational area.



Supposedly contract bridge was very popular at Alcatraz the prison and now has its name associated with the coup of the same name. Normally as it relates to bridge, a coup is thought of as some clever action or strategic maneuver that accomplishes an altruistic purpose. However, an Alcatraz Coup, while clever in accomplishing some goal, is normally very illegal according to the Bridge Laws and can carry huge penalties if discovered.

I have a bridge partner who frequently mentions situations in which he (or I) could have applied the Alcatraz Coup and made some contract. He, of course, does this in jest but some of the opponents have taken him seriously until he explained the Coup to them. So perhaps it is worthy of discussion.

The Alcatraz Coup is a deliberate attempt by declarer to gain information about his opponent's card holdings by failing to follow suit during play of the hand. The example usually used to illustrate this maneuver is something like AJ10 opposite Kxx.

The declarer needs to take three tricks in order to make his contract so therefore must find the Queen of the suit. Since declarer has no other information to go on he leads the Jack of the suit from the dummy. When his RHO plays a small card in the suit, declarer revokes.....fails to follow suit. He then waits until his LHO plays to the trick. Now if LHO ostensibly wins the trick with the Queen, declarer discovers his mistake and replaces the erroneously played card with the King, probably apologizing as he does so. LHO is now allowed to put the Queen back in his hand, but of course, declarer's mission has been accomplished and he can now finesse LHO for the Queen on the next play.

Now if his LHO does not produce the Queen but a small card instead, declarer again recognizes his failure to follow suit but this time corrects his play with a small card. Either way declarer has made his three tricks in the suit.

There are some bridge laws covering the crimes of the declarer. First, he has revoked, but the Laws of Duplicate Bridge state that declarer is not subject to penalty for exposing a card. Thus no card of declarer's or dummy's hand ever becomes a penalty card (Law 48A). However, Law 12A states that the director may award an adjusted score under Director's Discretionary Powers. In addition Law 73F2 provides for situations where an injured player can get redress.

Bridge is a game where ethics are all important. Just as full disclosure as to system methods and defensive signals are integral to the game it is also important to adopt the attitude of total honesty in declarer play instead of trying to perform clever and sometimes illegal but successful actions like the Alcatraz Coup.

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