

The Eleven Commandments

By Vince Remey

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One of the after session talks at Portland was by Mike Jones and was about Barry Crane. Mike became one of Barry's favorite partners after first kibitzing him for some years. In fact, their first game arose when Mike watched Barry put together games of 132 and 136 (proving that such things did happen) and he then asked Mike to play the next day. He, of course, jumped at the chance and thus started a successful partnership of many years.

It was a very interesting talk and if Mike should give it at another National I would urge you to attend. Mike realized, as did all Barry's partners, that you did everything his way and could expect to be harshly criticized if you deviated in any way from his system. And since you had to open all eleven point hands, even if part of the eleven points was a singleton honor, it was with some trepidation that you would open one diamond with Kxxx, Qxx, Kxxxx, K. Mike tells about one hand he opened one spade on AQxxx, KQxxx, Qxx and when Barry raised to two he thought his hand warranted another call and ventured three hearts which worked out fine as Barry had bid two spades on Jx, Axxxxx, Jxxx, J.

Barry had many nicknames on the coast but two of the best known were His Holiness (you don't argue with the Pope, do you?) and the Hideous Hog. This led to the jest that Barry was a well known member of the Four H club.

Mike said he had to play Barry's Eleven Commandments, which were as follows:

1. Never pull partner's penalty doubles
2. Always take a sure profit.
3. Watch out for the three level.
4. The more you bid, the more you got.
5. Sevens are singletons.
6. Don't bid grand slams in Swiss Teams.
7. Don't put cards in partner's hand.
8. Jesus saves.
9. Don't eat between sessions.
10. Never ask "How's your game."
11. Never gloat.

The first one was easy enough to follow as if the opponents made the doubled contract there would ensue no criticism from partner. And, Mike added, it was surprising how rarely many matchpoints were lost when the contract was made.

The second commandment was also not hard to abide by but required some will power particularly in situations where the opponents sacrifice at 4 spades non-vulnerable against your vulnerable and you were pretty sure 5 hearts was cold. But with Barry you quietly took your plus and worried not about that lost 650.

The bit about "watching out for the three level" was just Barry's way of saying anything goes when you compete at the two level but at the three level they are more likely to say double.

The fourth commandment was really old fashioned and was simply Barry's way of emphasizing that each bid promised extra values.

The fifth commandment was as much a hunch as anything but Barry always felt that the lead of seven was more likely to be a singleton than, say, of a five or a six. Mike said that in many cases it was true but, of course, they had no statistical proof.

The caution about not bidding grand slams in Swiss Teams made a lot of sense particularly if your opponents are not all that skillful as nothing is more demoralizing than to go down one at seven while the other team only reached game. In fact, I remember the original Four Aces of forty or more years ago had a rule that if you bid seven once and went down you would be forgiven but if you did it the second time you were off the team.

The seventh commandment was Barry's pet peeve. Nothing irritated him more than when partner made an unsuccessful bid and then said: "But if you had had such and such it would have worked." His answer always was, "I never do so don't plan on it."

The "Jesus Saves" was, of course, Barry's way of warning partner not to make sacrifice bids.

The ninth commandment was the one that Mike found the hardest to follow. He would come back to the table half-starving and the only comment he would get from Barry was, "Don't complain. Everybody plays better when they are hungry."

The last two commandments were, of course, personal foibles of Barry as he never liked anyone to ask about his game and he would never ask anyone else. He also did not like anyone who gloated.

Incidentally, as one who watched Barry play quite often I think most of the rules his partners had to follow were not the same ones he himself followed. His bids were often baffling and undisciplined and he was fun to watch for that reason. Also, he held his cards so you could see them, bid fast and played even faster. He was not very talkative but one time he got to an uncontested and hopeless six clubs, down two, and turned to me and said, "I think I could have bid that a little better." Actually, that was at the same tournament where I played in the one session Senior Citizens Pair and some one in the elevator asked me how I did. I replied facetiously that I had played in the Senior Citizens Pair and what a coincidence that the first time I was eligible to play in it I won it. "Hell," Barry said loudly from the rear of the elevator, "You were eligible 20 years ago." That's the trouble, when you have known somebody 35 years nothing is sacred.

Everybody who came to the talk was given a copy of Barry's Convention Card which was surprising as it violated Remey's Theorem, to wit: The better the player the more illegible and complicated the convention card. Barry's was neat and uncomplicated and without boring you with a list of what he played, though it would not be a lengthy list, it is probably more interesting to emphasize where he differed from most of the other experts.

1. His opening one spade bid promised five but one heart promised only four in any seat. He did occasionally open a 3 card club suit but the one diamond opening always promised four. He did not play 1NT forcing and a jump to 3H or 3S was game forcing and 2NT was natural.
2. His opening preempts were sound and 3C or 3D guaranteed AKQ, AKJ, or AQJ.
3. His opening no trumps were 15-17, 21-22, and 25-26.
4. He did not use Michaels and the cue bid of a minor or a major was a strong takeout.
5. Under Defensive Card Play all that was listed was 4th best, top of three, and Q from KQ10.
6. His overcalls were often very light and the convention card under "Simple Overcall" showed 1+. However, I suspect this was done merely to voice his irritation at this unnecessary feature of the card. I have seen other experts put in figures like 2 to 22 to express their feelings.
7. Finally, and most surprising, his opening 2D, 2H, and 2S bids were all strong in the first and second seats and weak (5-11) in 3rd and 4th. I asked him about this one time and he said he did it because he had so little discipline that prior to switching to the strong two he would open just about any hand with a weak two, often with bad results. Of course, he might have been spoofing me with that answer but it is what he said.

I remember only a year or so back asking Barry if he planned on writing a book on his philosophy and his system. He replied: "Are you kidding, do you realize how much you make with a bridge book?" Sure, as a top television producer and director he made lots of money and who could blame him for not wanting to spare the time. But wouldn't it have been nice if he had.