

Penalty Cards

One aspect of play that is often over-simplified on club nights is the way we deal with penalty cards.

Everyone knows the basic rule that “a penalty card must be played at the first legal opportunity”, but there are some qualifications that are often overlooked.

Major or Minor?

Most penalty cards that occur are major penalty cards. These are cards that are exposed by a defender by some deliberate action such as revoking. Any card, of whatever value, exposed in this way becomes a major penalty card. A card is exposed if it is placed in a position in which the offender’s partner could possibly see its face. You can show your opponents as many cards as you like without them becoming penalty cards provided your partner couldn’t have seen them.

A card exposed accidentally, such as a card dropped while playing another card, becomes a minor penalty card if it is a nine or lower value. Any honour (10 to ace) becomes a major penalty card even if exposed accidentally. If a player has two or more penalty cards all become major penalty cards.

Disposing of a Penalty Card

With a major penalty card the rule about “first legal opportunity” applies, but with a minor penalty card that is not always the case.

If a player has a minor penalty card they are entitled to play an honour card in that suit instead of the penalty card. For example, I have the six of spades as a minor penalty card. Declared leads a small spade, my partner plays low and the king of spades goes up from dummy. I am entitled to take the trick with my ace of spades rather than having to play my six.

Declarer

No card in declarer or dummy’s hand ever becomes a penalty card and declarer is not subject to any penalty for exposing a card. Declarer is not required to play any card dropped accidentally.

Restrictions on Offender

The offender must play the major penalty card at the first legal opportunity whether leading, following suit, discarding or trumping. If the offender has two or more penalty cards then declarer decides which is to be played to that trick.

Restrictions on Offender’s Partner

Offender’s partner must not lead to any trick when there is a major penalty card on the table without first getting a direction from declarer.

When offender’s partner is on lead at any time during the play of the hand, and while a penalty card is on the table, declarer has three options available.

- Declarer may require the lead of a card of the same suit as the penalty card. In that case the penalty card may be picked up and returned to the offender's hand and is no longer a penalty card. It does not need to be played to that trick.
- Declarer may forbid the lead of a card of the same suit as the penalty card. In that case the penalty card may be picked up and returned to the offender's hand and is no longer a penalty card. In addition, offender's partner must not lead that suit for as long as he or she retains the lead.
- Declarer may make no lead requirement. In that case offender's partner may lead any card but the penalty card remains on the table as a major penalty card and must be played at the first legal opportunity.

If offender's partner regains the lead later in the hand, and if the penalty card is still unplayed, then the same restrictions apply and no lead may be made until declarer has indicated which option is taken.

More than one Penalty Card

If there is more than one penalty card on the table and they are of the same suit then all of them may be picked up and returned to hand if declarer requires or forbids the lead of that suit.

If there is more than one penalty card on the table and they are of different suits, declarer may require or forbid a lead in any suit in which there is an exposed card. If that is done all the penalty cards in that suit may be picked up.

All penalty cards remain on the table if declarer makes no lead requirements.

Minor Penalty Cards

When offender's partner is on lead and there is a minor penalty card on the table there are no lead penalties. However, the information gained by seeing the penalty card is unauthorised and offender's partner must take care to make sure that they do not adopt a line of play that takes advantage of that knowledge.