

Here is the definition of a "relay system" from the GCC: Adam Parrish

"A sequence of relay bids is defined as a system if, after an opening of one of a suit, it is started prior to opener's rebid."

Amazing that an explanation is not given for either "sequence" or "relay bids." For an ACBL definition of "relay," we can consult the Tech Files:

"RELAY: A bid which does not guarantee any specific suit; partner is requested to make the next-step bid (usually) or make another descriptive bid if appropriate (e.g., a diamond bid which usually shows hearts but may not have hearts in some cases)."

This is not the same definition of "relay" that is meant when we talk about a "relay system," where "relay" means an artificial bid (usually the cheapest bid available) that asks partner to describe his hand. But this definition is not supplied anywhere (that I can find, at least) by the ACBL. (The closest I can find is from the ACBL Limited Conventions Chart, for games with an upper limit of 20 masterpoints: "Relay systems (one player tells nothing about his own hand while interrogating partner about his hand through a series of conventional calls) are not allowed.")

Applying the Tech Files' definition of "relay" to the GCC definition of "relay system," I know of no system that would qualify as a "relay system." To be a "relay system," there would have to be a sequence of "relays" -- bids that asked partner to bid step 1 -- and the first one would have to be either the opening bid or response. That's fairly ludicrous.

Clearly this is not what was intended by the writers of the GCC. (Unclear language in the GCC! Never!) A relay system is one where the general partnership philosophy is to adopt an asker-teller dialogue on strong hands, with one partner asking (typically with a Step 1 bid) and the other telling (either naturally or using artificial step responses). We all know this is what is meant by a "relay system," but this is not what the GCC says. I have received this crazy interpretation from senior ACBL TDs, who ruled that a system that was clearly exactly the sort of "tell me more" system the GCC is trying to disallow was GCC legal, because none of the bids met the Tech Files definition of a "relay."

I think that if you are going to outlaw something, you need to be specific about it. At the very least, you need to provide definitions of the terminology you are using, in this case "relay" and "sequence." Even if you took the Limited Conventions Chart's language as a definition for "relay" -- a conventional call that asks partner about his hand while telling nothing about your own hand -- I don't think the definition is sufficiently precise. I don't think anyone would object to a (relatively) straightforward keycard auction, but doesn't the following meet this definition of a "relay system."

1♠ 4NT(1)
5♣(2) 5♦(3)
5NT(4) 6♣(5)
6♣(6)

1. Asking for keycards
2. 1/4
3. Asking about ♠Q

4. ♠Q, no kings
5. Asking about third-round control(s) in clubs
6. No third-round control

All of responder's bids meet the Lined Convention Chart definition of "relay" (responder "tells nothing about his own hand while interrogating partner about his hand through a series of conventional calls"), and the relay sequence (I assume 3 asks qualifies as a sequence) begins before opener's rebid. The asking bid is even Step 1 each time (though this common feature of relay systems is not spelled out as a requirement anywhere).

There's also a big difference between a "system" and a "sequence," though neither is defined. To me, system means general approach and philosophy -- a relay system is one designed around a one-sided, asker-teller approach. A specific relay sequence can occur within any system, and can be fairly standard (as seen above). What is the GCC actually trying to outlaw?

It's worth mentioning here, as an aside, that I don't really understand the thinking behind disallowing relay systems, especially when they are game forcing. They tend to be easy to deal with as an opponent -- there may be lots of artificial bids and alerts, but it's clear what a double means. If they're in a GF, you're usually just letting them bid (with perhaps the occasional lead-directing double), so who cares? One of my friends told me that a client told him he wished all of their opponents played relay systems: "At the end of the auction, they tell you declarer's exact shape. You never have to give count!"

Anyway, I think given the current wording no one could really get in trouble for playing a relay system, unless their opening bids or responses actually call on partner to bid step 1. Since I don't think actual relay systems pose any sort of threat to anyone I don't consider this a significant problem, but it's just another example of how the ACBL's convention charts need to be totally re-thought.

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<https://bridgewinners.com/article/view/relay-system-tell-me-more-under-midchart/>