

Basics of Good Defence – notes accompanying 34 hands – D.R.Green

1. BIDDING CONSIDERATIONS IN DEFENCE

Good defence is often more difficult than declarer play. For a start you only see one hand when you make the opening lead and then you have to visualize partner's hand to see where your defensive tricks are coming from. Preparation for good defence starts by paying close attention to the opponents' and your partner's bidding. Below are a few points to consider from the bidding:

Suit Quality Overcall Test (SQOT)

Simple overcalling may vary from 8-18 hcp but usually guarantees a hand not suitable for doubling (which needs support for the other three suits and an opening hand). It can be single- or two-suited (with shortage in one of the other three suits, e.g. ♠KJxx ♥AQxxx ♦Kxx ♣x. Overcall 1♦ with 1♥. A take-out (t/o) double has the danger of partner bidding ♣s).

- A guideline for whether a suit is suitable for a simple overcall is SQOT. Add the number of cards in the suit overcalled (Min=5) to the number of honours (AKQJT all count) in that suit. The total should at least equal the number of tricks bid.
- So a 1-level overcall needs a minimum of JTxxx; 2-level needs JTxxxx or QJTxx with only a 5-card suit
- My view is that overcalls need to be a little better than the minimum for three reasons:
 1. Quite a lot of the time when you overcall you will be defending and you want to suggest a good lead
 2. If you have scattered values, e.g. Q3, QTxxx, Kxx, Qxx you may do much better passing over their I♣/♦
 3. There is often a second chance to compete on a poor suit when the opponents' bidding stops at the 2-level

Five-card major (M) openers

There are great advantages for responder when opener guarantees a 5+card suit with a 1♥/♠ bid. Even opening one of a minor (see below) you learn a lot about the partnership's distribution before the defence starts.

- Most Strong ♣ systems and almost all European & American players play 5-card M systems.
 - If you play Acol you can, of course, still play 5-c Ms : open 1NT (12-14); With a 15+ balanced hand open 1D if you have 4♦s or 1♣ when you have both Ms (4432 or 4423) or one M (4333 or 3433) and no 4 card ♦ suit rebidding 1NT (15-16), 2NT (17-19) unless partner bids a M in which case you support
 - After 1♣:1♥/♠:1NT or 2NT many responders then use Checkback Stayman (2♣/3♣) to see if partner has the other M. If you have you bid it as first priority or support partner's M with 3 cards, otherwise bid ♣s (5cards), rebid NT or show 4-c ♦s
 - After 1♣:1♦:1NT or 2NT: 2♣/3♣ is again Checkback Stayman as you don't know yet if part has a ♣ suit As before you again show a M (lowest if two), bid ♣ (5cards), support ♦s or repeat NT
- So if partner bids another suit after your response to 1♣ he always has 5♣ and 4 of other suit. With 44 in minors always open 1♦.

Law of Total Tricks - Larry Cohen's principle (A guideline to competing at a high level)

- Add together the combined length of your best fit to that estimated for your opponents and that number is the total number of tricks that can be made if both suits were trumps. e.g. if you & partner have a combined eleven hearts and the opponents a combined ten spades, then 21 tricks can be made. So, if you can make 4♥ (10 tricks) your opponents will make 5♠ (11 tricks) or if your side has the higher point count and can make 6♥ (12 tricks) then the opponents would be -3 in 6♠ (9 tricks). This can be helpful in defending unbalanced hands.

Splinters and mini-splinters (usually in support of a major)

A splinter is a bid of a singleton or void with 4+card support for partner's opening bid or overcall. This can be vital information to declarer and the defence in the play of the hand.

- A splinter bid is made just below the game level (so 3♠,4♣,4♦ or 4♥)
- A mini-splinter is a jump bid of a singleton at the 3-level with 3- or 4-card support for partner's bid or overcall. It is made only after partner's bid has been doubled or overcalled & is equivalent to a single raise of partner's suit

Jump-fits (an alternative to splinters and usually in support of a major)

A jump-fit is an immediate bid below game level (3♠ to 4♥) which shows a good 5-card suit and 4-card support for partner's M. It can have game or slam-interest values or be weaker preparing for a sacrifice. Again the knowledge of a two-suit fit can be helpful to the defence.

- Some players do not splinter in the spade suit when there is an opposition double or minor-suit bid but use jumpfits reasoning that the ♠ splinter may get opponents to 4♠ via double of a splinter from LHO

2. OPENING LEAD AGAINST NT

4th highest lead against NT & the Rule of 11 (useful for placing missing cards both as declarer and in defence)
When the 4th highest card of a suit is led against a NT contract the Rule of 11 applies.

- The rule states that there will be: (11 - the number of the card led) number of cards higher in other 3 hands. So if you lead the 7♣ there will be 11-7, i.e. 4 cards higher than the card led in the other three hands. This makes sense: if you were to lead a J (11th card, Ace= 1) as 4th highest you would hold all cards higher

Bad suits - What is a bad suit?

Most top players play 2nd from a 4-card suit not headed by A/K/Q, only 4th from a 5-card suit headed by J
Some players also take the pips into account and only lead 4th from a 4-card suit headed by Honour 8 or better
With holdings like J9xx or J8xx some lead 3rd not wanting to waste the 9/8
It makes good sense to regard the 7 as the highest dispensable pip.

Honour Leads against NT contracts

The Rule of 11 does not apply when leading an honour. Instead use the lead to ask for attitude or unblock. Most players use A/Q asking for attitude and K/J for unblock – this is only against NT contracts.

1. Ask for **attitude** (A or Q)

AKxx(x) Lead A

AKJx(x) Lead A

AQTx(x) Lead Q

KQ9xx(x) Lead Q (partner unblocks with T)

AQ98(x) Lead Q

2. Ask for **unblock** (K or J)

AKJT(x) Lead K (You want partner to drop the Q)

KQJT(x) Lead K (You want partner to play A)

AQJT(x) Lead J (You want partner to play K)

KJT9(x) Lead J (You want partner to play A/Q)

JT9x(x) Lead J

An internal sequence: Overleading (top) or Underleading (known as an interior sequence lead)

An internal honour sequence is **a)** JT (junior honours) holding the A or K (but not both as you would lead the King for partner to unblock) or **b)** T9 with senior honour (s) -A/K/Q e.g. KT975

- Underlead (interior) T from JT or 9 from T9 with an internal seq. e.g. A or K with JTx(x) or A/K/Q with T9xx
- In line with my valuation of useful pips to include the 8 I also underlead an interior sequence with 98 e.g. A/K/Q/J (but obviously not T) with 98x e.g. Q9864
- Leading interior from an internal sequence complements AQ (attitude) and KJ (unblock) method.

3. OPENING LEAD AGAINST A SUIT

3rds & 5ths from a suit with a senior honour (2nds from bad suits again as against NT)

Sometimes it is right and necessary to make an attacking lead (active defence) from a suit with an honour
Against NT you do this a lot as you are trying to set up long winners in the suit and are generally leading from a 4-card or longer suit and the Rule of 11 is valuable for the defence.

Against a suit it is often more useful for partner to get a count on your length in a suit as you may only have 1 or 2 tricks in the suit and may need to switch to another suit to win or create winners there before declarer gets rid of losers, for instance, on a long suit in dummy.

- So 3rd & 5th leads are more useful (e.g. QT872 lead the 2; from Q84 or Q842 lead the 4) in assisting partner with the defence.
- By the same reckoning it is useful to make a count lead of partner's suit which you have not supported. Of course at times you may wish or need to lead an honour in that suit if you have one. However it is valuable for the defence to lead, for example 2 from 752 of partner's suit as he will know how many tricks the suit will produce in defence.
- If you have supported your partner's suit it is likely you may not make more than 1 trick in the suit in defence and in this circumstance it can be useful to make what is called a suit-preference lead, e.g. with ♠74 ♥Q874 ♦T84 ♣KJT3 defending 4♠ with partner having bid ♥s which you supported it would be good to lead the ♥4 suggesting a useful club holding.

Honour leads against a suit

Players used to differentiate an A lead (AK and others) from a K lead (either AK bare or KQ sequence)

- Now many players prefer to play A for Attitude (Response: Hi aye; Lo no) K for Count (Response: HELO - Hi even; Lo odd). Some players reverse the attitude/count lead.
- Leading the Q can only sensibly be from a sequence 98% of the time. Occasionally on lead (not opening lead) lead Q from AQJx(x) when K is in dummy to keep communication with partner
- Overlead an internal sequence (e.g. KJTxx) the opposite to leading against NT where you would lead the T.

4. OTHER ASPECTS OF BEING ON LEAD

Returning a suit

- vs NT. If your partner led 4th & your initial card (3rd to play) did not show count, give count on return e.g. Partner leads the 4 of a suit and starting with Q93, the Q losing to declarer's A or K, you regain the lead, then return the 9 (play 'top down'); if you had held Q952 return the 2 (to show 4 or 2 cards in the suit)
- vs NT. However, take care not to block a suit: if you held QT93 in the above example it is better to return T. Partner may have K8642 & dec AJ
- vs suit If you gave count on first round complete it, so with T862 return 2, with T92 return T (top) - as per NT

Passive defence

Passive defence is doing nothing new, for instance continuing with suit led when regaining the lead or not opening up other suits; when wrong it can be seen as 'wooden' defence

- Continuing with your suit - this is often correct from AK & others esp. if partner has signalled attitude / count **or** the 2nd honour won't get ruffed **&/or** set up a discard for declarer **or** there is no 'danger' suit in dummy **or** if continuing your suit forces declarer (i.e. shortens his trumps and causes him to lose control of hand)
- Returning partner's suit - this is often correct against NT if partner's lead shows a future in the suit **or** for the same reasons as continuing your suit against a suit contract
- 'Safe' leading: from a sequence e.g. JT9x **or** an internal sequence (Memo: **overlead** vs a suit; **underlead** vs NT) **or** not opening up new suits or leading away from unsupported honours that will give away tricks

Active defence

Active defence involves changing strategy when on lead during play after seeing dummy or because of a signal or play from partner. It is often prompted by a 'danger' suit in dummy providing discards/tricks in NT or by shortage in a side suit

- Switching to a new suit: perhaps suggested by partner's signal **or** to knock out an entry in dummy **or** to attack a weakness **or** cut communications **or** the only hope to break the contract
- Switching to lead a trump: to cut down possible ruffs in dummy. If you are leading a trump from Kxx you may still make your K if Ace is with RHO or with partner. Leading from Axx of trumps: Lead x if you think partner is more likely to regain the lead first & if he has xx trumps he returns to your A & for you to play a 3rd round.

5. SIGNALLING (known as Carding Methods)

Signalling, as the word implies, is a legal way of passing info to partner (declarer as well, remember). It is done by the size and order of the pips (most of the time) you choose to play in certain circumstances. This can happen on partner's or declarer's lead, even on your own lead, and also when discarding.

- On partner's lead two basic styles are popular: Attitude (Hi-Go; Lo-No) and Count (HELO: Hi=even; Lo-odd)
- On partner's lead when there is a need for an 'Obvious Shift' Suit Preference (Hi-higher suit; Lo=lower suit)
- On declarer's lead it makes sense to show Count as you need to know when to take an honour or hold up
- When discarding, signalling should be used sparingly but many players play Suit-preference when needed.

Attitude

Attitude is a binary concept (True or False) showing encouragement (hi pip) or discouragement (lo pip). Some players play it in reverse, i.e. hi=discouragement, lo=encouragement

- It is used in response to partner's lead by playing a high or low pip
- Responding by playing an honour is either unblock (vs NT) or suit preference (vs Suit)
- Some players use attitude leads against NT contracts: lo=good suit, hi=bad suit (= to 2nds from bad suits)
- A '*Smith peter*' shows attitude to partner's opening lead (vs NT) with the 1st card played to declarer's next suit led (assuming you do not need to give count or cover or win the trick.

Count (to show high 1st and then low 2nd is to 'peter' or 'echo')

Giving a 'count' of your length in a particular suit is the most important defensive carding weapon. It often gives partner (& declarer of course though vital for defence) a blueprint of the shape of the whole hand

- It is used primarily in response to declarer's lead when suit-preference or attitude are not an issue
- Most European players also use it as a 1st signal to partner's lead. The system is based around distinguishing an even or odd number of cards in the suit (1,3,5) or (2,4)
- Some advanced players also play a count lead of partner's suit, opened or overcalled, that has not been supported in the bidding

Suit-preference (also named after players - McKenney & Lavinthal - who popularised the convention)

This is the play of a card in one suit to indicate that you have a good holding in another suit.

Like 'Attitude' it is a binary concept, the two other side suits, when defending a suit contract, being considered. The standard signal is to play high for the higher-ranked suit & low for the lower-ranked (some reverse signals)

- It is most commonly used in a suit contract when you think partner might get in, to encourage him to switch
- It is very useful when there may be a need for an 'Obvious Switch', e.g. sing. of the suit led in dummy
- Suit-preference is also commonly used (and over-used) when discarding
- Discarding against a NT contract one of 3 suits can be signalled (some players by using one suit as a vector)
- Defending a suit contract advanced players use a suit-preference lead of a suit that has been bid or overcalled by partner and supported on the grounds that partner might need to find an early switch.

6. OTHER ASPECTS of DEFENCE

Counting out a hand - Remember it all adds up to 13 cards in a suit.

The bidding, dummy and play to the first few tricks will often indicate the distribution of the whole hand

- This is vital info for good defending: what to discard, when to hold up, switch or be passive
e.g. if partner has petered in a suit (hi-lo) you can usually work out if he has 2 or 4. Can declarer have 2 less or more in the same suit?
- Remember also that the unseen hands (partner's & declarer's) may have shown specifically-shaped hands in the bidding

Placing high cards - Remember it all adds up to 40 high card points (hcp) in the pack.

Another important calculation for a defender is working out who has the missing honour cards

- Detecting the location of the top pips (98) can also be important (Thus 2nd high leads from bad suits vs NT)
- Honour card detection helps accurate defending by realising where your tricks can come from
- Again, the unseen hands may have shown narrow-range hcp holdings (e.g. NT openers & rebids, pre-empts)

Discarding (not as a signal)

Discarding happens a lot of course as sooner or later you will not be able to follow suit. If you know you have a lot of discards to make you should plan the order carefully & co-ordinate with partner e.g. Do not discard 1st from a 5-card suit when there are 4 in dummy (Declarer will realise you have 5 cards or <4 cards)

- Both defenders may have to hold suits as a guard (e.g. with Kx, Qxx, Jxxx)
- Also, a common situation is the need to hold the same length in an unplayed suit as dummy or declarer. This is to prevent winner(s) being set up by ruffing or by declarer having the extra length.
- When it is likely that your 5-card suit led against NT will prove the defeat of the contract retain the four cards left, otherwise consider discards from the suit.
- More difficult but ensure that you discard cards (esp. high pips but also honours) that may block a suit for partner's winners.

2nd hand low

Along with 3rd hand high this is an old whist maxim which does apply to bridge as a basic rule.

- If you are 2nd to play after a lead from dummy, your partner will have the last say & may capture declarer's honour
- The rule, however, has many exceptions: e.g. play a winning honour to stop declarer sneaking a trick for his contract; to get the lead to return partner's suit; covering an honour; splitting honours; forcing declarer to win 1st trick with AJT in dummy *et al.*

3rd hand high

Clearly as 3rd hand you often have to play your highest (lowest from a sequence) to stop declarer winning the trick cheaply.

- There are again exceptions: when you know declarer will have to win a trick with bare hon(s); in Rule of 11 cases; not providing an entry for declarer or dummy; not winning an honour in order to keep communication with partner *et al.*

Ducking

When you do not win a trick which you could have done, this is known as ducking or holding off.

- A reason for ducking is to cut communications (esp. in NT contracts) in that suit, forcing declarer to use an entry elsewhere.
- Also to give declarer a guess over missing honours, e.g. ducking KQT with the Ace after declarer leads to Queen 1st time.
- Also to preserve an entry for potential winners if partner gets in to knock out the only guard in that suit.

Covering an honour

Again this is a general rule of play that comes from whist & is basically sound.

You may need to cover pips as well as honours; also you often have to cover with a non-touching honour (e.g. even the T with the K). The purpose of covering is to stop 'unchallenged honours' scoring tricks. If covered lower cards can take tricks.

- If there are touching honours in dummy e.g. QJx(x), in general don't cover the 1st honour when you have the K
- Deciding when to cover trump honours depends on whether you think it likely that you will set up a trick for partner e.g. With Qxx and AKTxxx in dummy & declarer leading Jack you will never set up a trick for partner so don't cover
- In general, therefore, don't cover if you can see that declarer may have another option for making his contract

Ruffing & over-ruffing

Naturally, defenders are always pleased to be in a position to trump (ruff) declarer's winner or over-ruff

- There are times, however, when you should not ruff, especially in front of dummy, as declarer can often pitch a loser and you gain nothing and may lose a trump trick that the partnership would have made anyway.
- Also, if you discard when declarer ruffs in hand you may end up promoting two trump tricks not otherwise makeable. e.g. If declarer has AQJT_x and you K9_{xx} and he ruffs high with the T. If you discard you make K & 9
- It is bad technique to get partner ruffing with natural trump tricks, even worse if declarer is discarding.

Maintaining Communications in defence

An important aspect of play for declarer & in defence is keeping communication between the two hands.

As defenders, there are many occasions when you need to be able to lead back your partner's suit or winner(s).

- So it is important not to discard that suit or at times play a controlling honour in that suit too soon. e.g. With A(xxx) in a suit and a probable doubleton lead from partner, hold up your Ace 1st round as he may get in before you and be able to lead his 2nd card in the suit while you still have your Ace and can give him a ruff.
- A difficult thing to do is to ditch high cards. Most of the time, don't, except to unblock a suit & keep communication. e.g. you hold K_x, partner leads 4th vs NT, dec plays A from A_x in dummy. You should play K so the x keeps communication and partner may hold QJ(xx) or QT(xx) for instance.

Cutting declarer's communications

On the other side of the coin you should attack declarer's entries and communication to dummy or hand

e.g. By holding up an honour taking away declarer's comm. with dummy's 'tricks' suit before trumps are drawn.

- The most spectacular (called appropriately the *Scissors Coup*) is to lead an unsupported King to drive out dummy's Ace – the only entry to his long suit.

Trump Promotion

There are occasionally opportunities to promote a smaller trump into a winner. This happens particularly when declarer is ruffing out losers in a suit in dummy before drawing trumps.

- You ruff in front of declarer with a high enough trump pip or junior honour (J or T) to fetch what would have been a trump-drawing senior honour in the over-ruff perhaps promoting a trump (s) in your partner's hand. This is called an 'uppercut' and you may have promoted a trump in partner's hand to trick-taking capacity.

Discarding as a signal

Most of the time the discarder should apply himself to the needs of the hand.

Many players use (and overuse) discard signals often telling declarer what he wants to know or dictating partner's interpretation of the hand.

- The most useful system is to discard low in a suit you have little interest in rather than play high in one you do. This does not waste what might be useful cards and often gives no special message to declarer.

Rixi Markus told her partners: "Don't signal; after 2 or 3 tricks I'll know what you've got better than you do!"

Sources for improving your bridge

- **Books:** Texts presented as problems are most useful: What do you bid, lead, play single & double dummy? How do you defend seeing only your hand & dummy? Who was to blame for a disastrous contract or defence? What do you and your partner bid in certain competitive auctions? Are you in agreement?
- **Magazines:** Reports on matches, articles, bidding forum, e.g. NZ Bridge, Bridge World (US),; Bridge Plus (UK) - <http://www.bridge-plus.co.uk/> even Le Bridgeur (France) if you want to improve your bridge and French at the same time
- **CDs & Memory stick:** There are many bridge lessons in digital form nowadays. For example, try the 34 hands that go with these notes on Defence (Leading, Signalling and other aspects of defence) that are on this disc/ USB stick. They were originally set up as animated digital lessons (2008) using a computer program but appear here as a 'final screen'. Declarer is always South and West always on lead so to get best value do not look at North and South hands before you decide on your opening lead and then only at North (the dummy). The comments below the hand originally appeared line by line in the digital lesson but appear also here as a 'final screen'. To get the best out of them read only one line at a time before deciding what to do next.
- **Websites:** e.g. <http://online.bridgebase.com/> - allows one to play online but significantly for improving your bidding and play you can watch Vugraph presentation of international matches (players from our Club have been on recently). Commentators discuss the bidding and play as continuous text messages with each animated hand. The program can be downloaded or accessed free.
Many useful articles and links can be found on: <http://www.michaelslawrence.com/About/contact.html>
- **Newspaper columns:** - You can see Bridge content every day on The Times (UK) website <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/puzzles/bridge/> or via the iPad App. This is free if you get The Times every day, alternatively £1 for the first 30 days thereafter £2 a week. For non-subscribers, you can see a taster via <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/public/bridge/>
Also, Andrew Robson (one of the world's best bridge teachers runs a daily "Animated Hand" - a *Son et Lumière* commentary on a hand. Basically he talks through the daily deal, removing the cards as he does so. By way of a taster, here is a fabulous recent deal, aimed at the more experienced player : <http://www.vimeo.com/22402896>
- **System Card:** Fill in a more system (convention) card. This will help you and your partner discuss what you do in many more bidding situations. You can download for free a copy of the Standard English Modern Acol convention card from: <http://www.ebu.co.uk/publications/> or basic Standard American bidding at <http://home.comcast.net/~kwbridge/basics.htm>