

## Defence - what cards to keep, what cards you can let go

Way back in weeks 7 & 8, we covered signalling in defence, by careful choice of what card to lead to a trick, and what card to play on a trick already in play. We also explored signalling with what card to discard, once we're out of a suit that's been led and we have a choice what to throw away (discard), so as to give information to partner to help her know what suit to lead if she gains the lead.

All of this is important stuff, as it can make the difference between putting a contract off and giving declarer an easy ride. You should get into the habit of choosing carefully whenever discarding, to give as much useful information to partner as you can, and, of course, watching like a hawk when partner is discarding, so you spot their signal, and make use of it.

But there's another aspect of **discarding** which is often overlooked, and which even quite experienced players sometimes get wrong. Declarer leads a card in a suit you're out of, and you HAVE to throw something away.

Perhaps you want to take the opportunity to signal, perhaps you don't, but in either case you want to avoid throwing a card away which presents declarer with a free extra trick.

It's a very common problem, and much of the time we just guess, and often just throw away a little card in a suit where we have 4 cards.

This is not easy to get right, and often the most experienced players won't manage it, but there are a few tips which allow you to do better more often.

### 1 Protect your honours

Say this is your hand, in defence

♠	K 9 4
♥	A K 7 2
♦	Q 9 4 3
♣	Q 2

How many cards can you safely discard in each suit, and keep your high cards protected?

- In spades, you can throw at most one spot card. If you throw both ♠9 and ♠4, your ♠K will fall under declarer's ♠A.
- In hearts, your ♥A and ♥K are bosses and don't need protecting, so you could discard two hearts.
- In diamonds, you need to keep two spot cards to protect your ♦Q, to play under declarer's ♦A and ♦K, so at most you can safely discard one diamond (but remember to try to keep all your cards in a 4-card suit if you can, as we'll see below).
- In clubs, your ♣Q is already exposed, and could fall under declarer's ♣A and ♣K if she holds both. Discarding a club might be OK, or might not – it depends on what else is going on with the club suit.

What about this suit: ♦10 6 4 3 ?

Is there any point in trying to protect your ♦10? There are four diamonds higher than your ♦10, and you have only a four-card suit. But consider what happens if one of the outstanding honours is captured by a higher honour (quite likely). They both get played on the same trick and your ♦10 becomes the fourth round master -- provided you don't discard any of your diamonds.

## 2 Try to keep 4 card suits!

The most likely division of a suit round the table is 4432. Unless partner has four cards, either dummy (which is obvious, because you can see it) or declarer (which is trickier, because you can't) is likely to have 4 cards. If you throw away a little one from your 4-card suit, there's a good chance you'll promote a small card for the opposition, and present them with an extra trick! You need to keep all four of your cards to match their four cards, yet how often do you throw away a little card from your 4 card suit when you have to make a discard?

Here is an example, defending 3NT

	Partner	
	♦ J 10 9	
Declarer		Dummy
♦ K 8		♦ A Q 6 2
	You	
	♦ 7 5 4 3	

If you discard a diamond when out of another suit, ("I only have small cards so they're of no value") you will gift declarer a free extra trick, as dummy's 4<sup>th</sup> diamond will be good. Here it's fairly obvious, because dummy's 4-card suit is visible.

So the message here is to **try to keep equal length with dummy**. It doesn't apply to shorter suits, with 3 cards or fewer, as your partner (with the assumed greater length) will normally be in charge of keeping such a suit.

However, this does depend on the spot cards involved:

Again you're East, defending 3NT, but this time dummy holds ♦ A Q 10 8 and you have 4 cards in diamonds, as follows

- a) ♦ J 9 3 2      b) ♦ 9 4 3 2      c) ♦ 7 4 3 2

If you have either a) or b) you MUST KEEP ALL YOUR DIAMONDS, or you'll promote dummy's ♦ 8.

But if you have hand c), you can afford to throw diamonds away, because your highest card is lower than dummy's lowest, so you can't prevent ♦ 8 winning a trick.

It's a bit harder when you can't see the 4-card suit because it's sitting with declarer, rather than in dummy. Look at this Club suit:

	Partner	
	♣ ?	
Dummy		Declarer
♣ K 8		♣ ?
	You	
	♣ 7 5 4 3	

You can't see declarer's hand, so it's not obvious that she holds 4 clubs. But the bidding, partner's signals, and the play of the hand so far will give clues. Here you have to visualise the possibility of declarer holding 4 clubs, and realise the importance of hanging on to your 4-card suit if you can.

If in doubt, hang on to 4-card suits if you can.

Quite often, you'll be defending and have a very poor hand, with (you think) no part to play in the defence. So you lose interest, and discard randomly. BUT your seemingly innocuous 4-card suit was the difference between declarer making her contract and going down!

### 3 Try not to reveal you have no more cards left in a suit.

	Dummy	
	♠ Q 10 5 2	
West		East (you)
♠ J 9 8 6		♠ 7 4
	Declarer	
	♠ A K 3	

Say declarer is running off a long heart suit, and you need to find some discards.

Now West should be alert and keep her four spades to match dummy's length, but this is tricky for you as East, because you can't see the layout of the spades. If you throw away a card from what looks like your useless spade doubleton, you will show out of spades on the second round, and declarer will have a marked finesse against your partner's ♠J, and score both ♠Q and ♠10. If you don't show out, declarer might play for a 3-3 split when leading up to her ♠Q, to try to make her long spade.

Here's an example of the value of paying attention to what you discard

	♠ K 3 2	
	♥ K 10 3 2	
	♦ A 3	
	♣ A K Q J	
♠ 8 6		♠ J 9 7 4
♥ J 9 7 5		♥ 8 6
♦ J 10 9 4		♦ Q 8 7 5
♣ 10 6 3		♣ 9 8 5
	♠ A Q 10 5	
	♥ A Q 4	
	♦ K 6 2	
	♣ 7 4 2	

South opened 1♠, North responded 2♣, and South rebid 2NT, showing 15-19 points. North with her balanced 19 points, optimistically bid 7NT, and West led J♦.

Seeing all 4 hands, you can spot that declarer has 12 top tricks: 3 spades, 3 hearts, 2 diamonds, and 4 clubs. She needs a 13<sup>th</sup>, which could come from a successful finesse in spades, leading up from dummy through East's ♠J, or in hearts, leading up towards dummy through West's ♥J- or, by playing for a 3-3 split in hearts or spades, to make a long card. As the cards lie, both finesses will work, but playing on the 3-3 split in hearts or spades will not. Declarer, of course, does not know that. She doesn't know the layout of the opposing cards, so you, as EW, are not going to make her life easy – **EVEN THOUGH YOU ARE WEAK!**

When West led J♦, East encouraged with the 8♦. Declarer won dummy's A♦, and proceeded to cash her 4 club tricks. Both East and West had to find a discard on the 4<sup>th</sup> club – but what? East couldn't let go a spade, as South had opened 1♠, so must have 4, so a spade discard immediately gives declarer her 13<sup>th</sup> trick via a small spade. If she discards a heart, from her apparently useless doubleton, this could be just as fatal, as she'd then show out on the second heart trick, exposing the heart layout- declarer would have a marked finesse through her partner's presumed 4 card heart suit. (She must presume partner has 4 hearts, as she can see 4 hearts in dummy, and 2 in her own hand, and if declarer has 4, the contract is making anyway).

So East discards the 5♦! (KEY PLAY). Declarer threw 6♦ on the 4<sup>th</sup> club, and now over to West. She can't throw a heart, as she must try to keep equal length with dummy – if she does, dummy's 2♥ will score a trick. But by the same logic as partner, she can't throw a spade, or she will show out on the second round, and expose the spade layout. So she throws 4♦ (SECOND KEY PLAY).

With no help from the opposition, declarer takes the percentage line of 2 chances of a suit breaking 3-3 (2 x 38%) rather than a 50-50 finesse, and tries for a 3-3 split in a major – either will do. She tries hearts (no good) then spades (no good either). 1 down, undone by careful choice of discard by both opponents on trick 5, dummy's 4<sup>th</sup> club winner.

Any other discard by either East or West and declarer is home!

Jim Steele, May 2022

