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PO Box 14915 ♠ Tallahassee, FL 32317

info@advinbridge.com ♠ 850 570 6459

www.advinbridge.com

(64) Defensive Concepts – Types of Defense

Date: September 2013 © AiB

Level: Intermediate

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

When we defend a hand there are a lot of things to try to do and a lot of things to think about. We have to *Count* – our hand and partner's hand and Declarer's hand. We have to watch our partner's signals and make sure that we make good, clear signals ourselves. It is easy to get bogged down in all of these details of bridge and "Miss the forest for the trees!" Here we take a step back from all of these details and look at the big picture of how to defend the hand. Only after we understand the macro (big picture) issues related to defense can we make use of the micro (specific) information that we obtain from counting and signaling in order to defend our best.

Type of Defense – *Active vs. Passive*

As we try to focus on the big picture of defending a hand we need to ask ourselves an important question: *Do we need to go get our tricks (set them up as fast as possible) or do we need to be careful not to help the Declarer (not set up any tricks for them?)* The answer to this question will determine our general approach to defending a hand. If we feel that the hand is a race, that we need to go win our tricks before the Declarer sets up their tricks (discards their losers) then we need to make aggressive, attacking plays – called *Active Defense*. On the other hand, if we think that Declarer is going to have a hard time making their contract without any help from us then we try our best to not give the Declarer any help and we lead suits that we think are safe. This is called *Passive Defense*.

Active and Passive defense are not binary concepts, they are ends of a spectrum of ways to defend a hand. These concepts are fundamentally determined by the balance of Risk and Reward. Any time we choose to make an active play we must consider what is the risk and what is the reward of the situation. The reward is stopping declarer from making more tricks (if they have tricks to be developed) and the risk is how much we will help Declarer if the defense does not go the way we are hoping.

The decision of how active vs. passive to be on a hand is not easy and one that a good defender continues to ask themselves all throughout the play. Our level of aggression will change as we receive more information from the dummy, the Declarer, and Partner. So how much we attack will change all throughout the hand: before opening lead, in the middle of the play, and in the endgame.



Attack!!

Declarers are generally very adept at making tricks out of thin air. It is amazing how many ways the Declarer can find to try to make extra tricks if left to their own devices. Thus, we cannot leave the Declarer alone to do as they please. We have to put pressure on them and cut down on the number of “bites at the apple” that they get at scoring extra tricks. The way we do this is to attack! Our general approach to defense will be attacking – trying our best to set up winners for our side.

Examples

Let's take a look at some basic ways we make attacking defense.

- *Lead away from an honor* – try to set up later winners for our side.
- *Lead a singleton* (shortness) – try to get a ruff.

There are some other defensive plays that straddle active vs. passive defense. These plays can serve to both set up tricks for our side while being careful not to give up tricks to the declarer.

- *Leading touching honors* – these set up tricks for us while being less likely to cost a trick than leading away from a single honor.
- *Leading Trump* – this can be an attacking lead if it is done to cut down on dummy's ruffing values OR it can be a passive lead if it is trying not to lead any new suits for the declarer.

There are times when it is correct to do something that seems *crazy aggressive*. We do this when we think our tricks are going to disappear – out of a sense of desperation. Some examples of these are:

- *Leading an unsupported Ace* – making sure to take your trick before it goes away.
- *Leading from Kx* – desperately trying to setup a trick or get a ruff!

Understanding our options and how much risk-reward is related to each kind of play takes experience and paying attention to when a play has gained you a trick and when it has cost you one.

Danger Suits (Danger Cards)

An important skill in helping us determine if we need to get active or stay passive is to recognize *Danger Suits*. Danger Suits (or *Danger Cards*) are potential winners for the Declarer. These are cards that we recognize as potentially turning into an extra trick – even if it seems unlikely, we still need to recognize what are the Danger cards. These cards are generally length cards (long suits) that the declarer can set up, though they can also be high cards they declarer can make use of. One important thing to keep in mind is that these danger cards can be in the dummy or they can be in Declarer's hand. As you might imagine, it is much easier to spot these danger suits when you see them on the dummy. We must make use of information from the auction, from partner, and from the actions taken by the Declarer to help us recognize when Declarer may hold a danger suit in their own hand.



Card Combinations

Another very important part of understanding how the play of the hand is going to proceed is to have some basic knowledge of card combinations. The way you should learn these is not by studying them in a book - it is by paying attention to the spot cards when you are either the declarer or a defender and focusing on when you win (or give up) extra tricks because of a particular play. One of the important ways we make use of card combinations as a defender is to know when not to break a suit – when it is too risky to attack a suit and when we need to sit back and force the Declarer to do so themselves. (This concept of waiting for the other suit to break a suit is also useful as Declarer.)

Example.

Qxx opposite Jxx. If the opponents lead this suit then we will always have a trick (by playing second hand low), but if we lead this suit ourselves then we could easily have 3 losers and no winners (by allowing the opponents to play second hand low.)

Conclusion

Many bridge players learn to count and discard and communicate with their partner. But after they have done all of these things, they still don't know what to do with the information. A good defender needs to figure out where the declarer is trying to develop tricks. One of the best ways of doing this is to try to think like the Declarer – “get up out of your chair and sit in the Declarer's seat” (mentally, that is.) By seeing the hand from Declarer's perspective we will more easily recognize where danger lies (what are the Danger Suits and Cards.) Only then can we make a plan for how to stop that from happening. This stage of recognizing danger is a difficult one, but it is only the first step. We then must determine how aggressive we need to be in order to thwart the declarer's plans (active vs. passive.) Putting these two skills together in an effective way is what makes a truly great defender.