

# Discards

More players experience difficulty with selecting what to discard than with any other aspect of defensive play. It is difficult to comprehend why this should be the case, since it is usually possible to apply straightforward principles to the choice. On balance your first discard should tell partner that you cannot guard this suit. Only secondarily should the discard be taken as a possible suit-preference (McKenney) signal. It follows from this that you are advising partner that he must guard this suit if he can. But how often do you see both players discarding from the same suit, blithely establishing it for the declarer? And how often do you see a player struggling with his discards, simply because he has not taken the trouble to think about what has gone before? The player sitting South on this next deal got his discards all wrong, even though his partner gave a clear indication of the correct line on the opening lead.

## Example 1

♠ A 9 5 3 ♥ A J 6 2 ♦ A Q 4 ♣ 10 5	W  S	♠ K J 10 4 ♥ K 10 8 ♦ 9 7 ♣ A Q 7 4			
N	E	S	N	W	
P	2NT	P	1♥	3NT	
All pass.					

South found the good lead of a low ♣. Declarer played the ♣5 from the dummy, North covered with the ♣8 and declarer won with the ♣K. Declarer then played a small ♦ to the ♦A, cashed the ♦Q and returned to hand with the ♦K to cash two further rounds of ♦s. South had to find a total of three discards. He chose to discard his low ♠, a small ♣ and the ♣Q. Declarer promptly exited with a small ♣ and South was end-played in both majors. Ultimately he exited with a small ♠ to declarer's ♠Q. Declarer then cashed his ♠A and exited with a third round to South's

♠K. South was end-played for a second time, being forced to exit with a small heart to declarer's ♥Q and then suffering the indignity of having declarer take the marked finesse against his ♥K. This debacle could have been avoided if South had taken the trouble to think a little more constructively about his discards.

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

South should have discarded the small ♠ and the ♣Q and ♣A, of course. Had he done so, he could have exited to his partner's ♣J when next in with one of his major suit winners. North would then have been able to cash four rounds of ♣ to set the contract. This defence was marked by the play to the first trick, since declarer had to cover the ♣8 with the ♣K.

Incidentally, the declarer would have done much better to have played the ♣10 from the dummy on the opening lead. This would have concealed the weakness of his ♣ holding and made it much more difficult for South to find the correct discards.

Sometimes it is urgent to transmit important information to your partner and the only opportunity to do so arises when you make your first discard. Here is a prime example of this...

## Example 2

		♠	Q 9		
		♥	J 8		
		♦	A 10 7 5 3		
		♣	J 6 4 2		
♠ J 7					
♥ A K 10 9 6 2					
♦ Q 4					
♣ A 10 3					
	N	E	S	W	
	P	1♠	P	1♥	
	P	3NT	All pass.	3♥	

South led the ♣K. Declarer took the ♣A and switched to the ♠J, winning North's ♠Q with the ♠A. Declarer then played four more rounds of ♠s. On the third ♠ North had to select his first discard. There was only one sensible choice and that was the ♥8. Ostensibly this suggests a ♦ switch, *but its primary purpose was to tell partner immediately that he could not guard the ♥ suit.* Without an immediate discard in ♥s his partner could have had a real problem in deciding which suit to guard.

		♠	Q 9		
		♥	J 8		
		♦	A 10 7 5 3		
		♣	J 6 4 2		
♠ J 7					
♥ A K 10 9 6 2					
♦ Q 4					
♣ A 10 3					
	N	E	S	W	
	P	P	P	P	
				♠ A K 10 8 4	
				♥ 7	
				♦ J 9 8 6 2	
				♣ 8 7	
		♠	6 5 3 2		
		♥	Q 6 5 3		
		♦	K		
		♣	K Q 9 5		

If North fails to tell his partner that he must guard the ♥s if he can, South could well have severe difficulty in deciding whether to play his partner

for ♥J 8 7 and declarer for a void. From South's point of view, if East has a singleton ♥ then 4♥ must be a superior contract to 3NT. On the other hand, if East has a void in ♥s then 3NT is the better contract.

In the event, North discarded two ♣s on the third and fourth ♠s. This was easily the worst possible choice, since now South could not discard a ♣ without giving away a trick. On the fifth ♠ South had to discard ahead of his partner and he decided that since his partner had not discarded a ♥ he must be guarding the suit against a possible singleton ♥Q in declarer's hand. Therefore it was safe to discard a ♥. Declarer now played a ♥h to the ♥Ace and exited with a ♣. No matter who won this trick, North/South could not avoid conceding a ninth trick. If North had discarded an early ♥, followed by two ♦s, South would have had no trouble in holding onto all his ♥s and avoiding the end-play.

On some occasions it can pay to consider the problem of discards before you automatically return your partner's suit.

### Example 3

		♠	K J 10 4		
		♥	Q J		
		♦	K J 7 2		
		♣	9 7 2		
				N	
♠	A 8 7 3				
♥	K 8 5 4	W			
♦	9 3				
♣	Q 5 3				
		N	E	S	W
			1♦	P	1♥
		P	1NT	P	2NT
		P	3NT	All pass.	

South led the ♣4. Declarer won in the dummy with the ♣Q and switched to a low ♥, winning North's ♥J with the ♥A. He then played the ♥10 from his hand and ran it when South played low. North won with the ♥Q and paused to consider the prospects for the defence.

The natural play would seem to be a ♣ continuation, but the danger with this line was that North would be subject to serious discard problems when the remaining ♥s were played, especially if declarer held the ♥9. It

was clear that the 16 HCP that declarer was marked with consisted of the ♠Q, the ♥A, the ♦A Q and 4 HCP in the ♣ suit (either the ♣A or ♣K J.)

South was marked with a four-card ♣ suit from the lead, again headed by either the ♣A or the ♣K J. If North now returned a ♣, whoever held the ♣A would duck. If partner held the ♣A this would not cause a problem. But if declarer held it, North would have no suitable cards to discard on the third and fourth round of ♥s. Inevitably he would be end-played in the suit he had discarded from to set up declarer's ninth trick.

	♠	K J 10 4																															
	♥	Q J																															
	♦	K J 7 2																															
	♣	9 7 2																															
<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%;"></td> <td style="width: 10%; text-align: center;">♠</td> <td style="width: 30%;">A 8 7 3</td> <td style="width: 10%; text-align: center;">N</td> <td style="width: 10%;"></td> <td style="width: 10%; text-align: center;">♠</td> <td style="width: 30%;">Q 9 2</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">♥</td> <td>K 8 5 4</td> <td style="text-align: center;">W</td> <td style="text-align: center;">E</td> <td style="text-align: center;">♥</td> <td>A 10 6</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">♦</td> <td>9 3</td> <td style="text-align: center;">S</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">♦</td> <td>A Q 8 4</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">♣</td> <td>Q 5 3</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">♣</td> <td>A 8 6</td> </tr> </table>							♠	A 8 7 3	N		♠	Q 9 2		♥	K 8 5 4	W	E	♥	A 10 6		♦	9 3	S		♦	A Q 8 4		♣	Q 5 3			♣	A 8 6
	♠	A 8 7 3	N		♠	Q 9 2																											
	♥	K 8 5 4	W	E	♥	A 10 6																											
	♦	9 3	S		♦	A Q 8 4																											
	♣	Q 5 3			♣	A 8 6																											
	♠	6 5																															
	♥	9 7 3 2																															
	♦	10 6 5																															
	♣	K J 10 4																															

North decided he should attempt to deal with the danger of the end-play *before* returning to the ♣ suit. At trick four he switched to a low ♦, putting the ball firmly back into declarer's court.

Although East/West had the values for the no-trump game, their combined holdings were a little top heavy to make 3NT comfortable. There were only two sure tricks in each suit and declarer's best chance to make his contract was to shorten one or both of the opponents in hearts and hope that the play of the ♣ suit would put North under considerable pressure with his discards.

With the ♦ switch from North at trick four, declarer had an immediate guess as to whether to go up with the ♦Q or run it to the ♦9 (best, since North would be put back under pressure later.) Declarer's problems were magnified because he still had to make the right guess in ♥s. When North returned a ♦ rather than a second ♣, declarer was very likely to play for the ♥s to drop. If he did so the hand would become untenable, since North would be able to hold onto the ♣s to keep a safe exit card.

When defending always remember that an elimination and end-play is the most common option that a declarer has to manipulate an extra trick. It is up to you to devise a line that avoids this possibility if you can. Many players have great difficulty in choosing which suit to discard when declarer runs a long suit. How frustrating it is when declarer makes a thin game or slam, simply because one or both defenders have failed to retain a guard in a critical suit. This problem usually occurs because players do not follow three basic principles when selecting their discards. These are as follows:-

1. Guard length rather than strength.
2. Guard what you can see.
3. Guard what has been revealed by the auction.

These principles are well illustrated by this next example...

#### Example 4

		♠	8 4	
		♥	Q J 6 2	
		♦	J 5 3	
		♣	9 7 4 3	
♠	6		N	
♥	9 6 5	W		
♦	9 6 2			
♣	A Q 8 6 5 2			
	N	E	S	W
		2♣	P	3♣
	P	3♠	P	4♣
	P	4♦	P	4♠
	P	4NT	P	5♦
	P	5NT	P	6♣
	P	6♠	All pass.	

South led the ♠10. Declarer ran this around to the ♠J and followed by drawing trumps in four rounds, discarding three small ♥s from the table. On the third trump North discarded a small ♥ and on the fourth he discarded a small ♣. Declarer then played two more rounds of trumps. South discarded the ♥10, followed by the ♣10. Dummy discarded the two small ♦s, while North discarded two more ♣s. Declarer now

claimed all thirteen tricks, since he could overtake his singleton ♣K and run the remaining ♣s, discarding his ♥ and two ♦ losers from hand.

The reason the declarer made his contract was that North was careless with his discards. Declarer was known to hold a long *solid* trump suit and therefore North should have recognised on the opening lead that he was going to be put under pressure with his discards. Before even playing to the first trick he should have decided what his discards were going to be and in which order he would play them. If he had followed the basic principles outlined above, his choice for the first four discards would have been easy. Declarer was known to hold at least six ♠s and at least four ♦s. Therefore North's first four discards must be his four ♥s, relying on partner to guard this suit if required. This guards the ♣ suit in the event that declarer has a singleton and partner has a doubleton and also advises partner *that he must guard the ♥s if he could*. It also follows the principles of guarding what you can see (the ♣ suit in dummy) and guarding what has been revealed by the auction (the ♦s).

	♠	8 4																															
	♥	Q J 6 2																															
	♦	J 5 3																															
	♣	9 7 4 3																															
<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%; text-align: center;">♠</td> <td style="width: 15%;">6</td> <td style="width: 15%;"></td> <td style="width: 15%; text-align: center;">N</td> <td style="width: 15%;"></td> <td style="width: 15%; text-align: center;">♠</td> <td style="width: 15%;">A K Q J 7 5</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♥</td> <td>9 7 5 3</td> <td style="text-align: center;">W</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">E</td> <td style="text-align: center;">♥</td> <td>A 4</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♦</td> <td>9 6</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">S</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">♦</td> <td>A K 10 4</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♣</td> <td>A Q 8 6 5 2</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">♣</td> <td>K</td> </tr> </table>						♠	6		N		♠	A K Q J 7 5	♥	9 7 5 3	W		E	♥	A 4	♦	9 6		S		♦	A K 10 4	♣	A Q 8 6 5 2				♣	K
♠	6		N		♠	A K Q J 7 5																											
♥	9 7 5 3	W		E	♥	A 4																											
♦	9 6		S		♦	A K 10 4																											
♣	A Q 8 6 5 2				♣	K																											
	♠	10 9 3 2																															
	♥	K 10 8																															
	♦	Q 8 7 2																															
	♣	J 10																															

The lead of a trump is the only lead to beat this contract. I am not a fan of trump leads against slam contracts since they are (usually) made from the fear of giving anything away. On this hand it must be correct to lead a trump, however. Declarer has shown a second suit with his 4♦ bid and the length and strength of the ♦s in South's hand makes a trump lead sensible. On any lead other than a trump, declarer will have the time to ruff a ♦ and dispose of one of his losers on the second round of ♣s before returning to his hand to draw trumps.

It can sometimes pay good dividends to defer taking a trick in order to see what partner is going to discard.

### Example 5

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

  

♠	7	N	
♥	A 7 6 5 4 2	W	
♦	10 9 4		
♣	A 7 5		

  

N	E	S	W
	1NT	P	2♦
P	2♥	2♠	3♥
3♠	4♥	All pass.	

A competitive auction typical of duplicate Bridge, where nobody is quite sure whether to bid on or pass and hope to defeat the opponents' final contract. South led the ♠K. When the dummy was tabled it was clear that although East/West did not have the values for game, there was likely to be some play for the contract because of the good shape of West's hand. Clearly East had a maximum for his 1NT opening and he must also have held at least three-card ♥ support for his raise to 4♥.

Declarer won the lead in hand with the ♠A and switched to the ♥Q, running it when South followed with the ♥10. North briefly considered taking the ♥K and leading a second round of ♠s, but he recognised that this was not likely to help his partner a great deal. North could identify 7 of the (presumed) 14 HCP in the East hand (i.e. ♠A and ♥Q J). Therefore he knew that South held at least one of the honours in the ♦ suit and could hold the ♦K J. This would leave the declarer holding the ♦A and the ♣Q J, which would be consistent with his bidding. In those circumstances it would be critical to switch to a ♦ when in with the ♥K, so that two ♦ tricks could be established before the ♣K had been knocked out.

On the other hand, declarer could hold both the ♦A K while South held both the ♣Q J. Now two quick tricks could not be established and defeating the contract would depend on whether declarer could establish a



tenth trick. And this revealed the danger. If declarer had a four-card ♠ suit there was a good chance that South would have discard problems when declarer ran the long trumps. North knew that South was going to have to find five discards and it was vital that if he held only five ♠s that he did not discard more than one while there were enough trumps in the dummy to ruff them out.

Therefore North needed a McKenney signal from his partner to get an idea of how to defend. Accordingly he ducked the first round of trumps. Declarer then led out the ♥J and ran it once again when South discarded the ♠5. North took the ♥K and switched to the ♣4, taken by the ♣A when South covered the ♣9 with the ♣J. Declarer now ran his trump suit. South had no problem in discarding a ♣ under this and then he simply discarded from the same suit as the declarer on subsequent trumps. Ultimately declarer had to cash his nine tricks and concede the remainder.

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

When the board was scored, three of the seven East/West pairs who had played in 4♥ had made the contract. All three successful declarers had elicited two ♠ discards from the South hand, thus allowing them to ruff out the ♠ to establish the last ♠ as the tenth trick. In all three cases North had taken the first ♥ and continued with a second round of ♠.

Time after time you will see both defenders discarding from the same suit, hanging on like grim death to cards that are winners, even when they know that declarer has discarded all his losers in the suit. These results are always a disaster, but the defenders rarely recognise that they could

have avoided the pitfalls by careful *advance* consideration of their discards. Here is a case in point.

### Example 6

	♠	10 9 4 2	
	♥	A Q 5 4 2	
	♦	Q J 9	
	♣	3	
N			
♠	A 8		N
♥	8 7 3	W	
♦	K 6		
♣	K 10 7 6 5 4		
N			
		E	S
		1♠	P
	P	2NT	P
			W
			2♣
			3NT
	All pass.		

South led the ♦ 8. Declarer rose with the ♦ K and crossed to hand with the ♣ A. He then cashed the ♣ Q, on which North discarded a ♠, and crossed to the ♣ K, on which North discarded a second ♠. Three more rounds of ♣ s followed. North discarded his remaining ♠ s and a low ♥, declarer discarded three ♥ s and South discarded three ♦ s. Declarer then cashed the ♠ A and returned to hand with the ♠ K. North discarded a second ♥ and the ♦ J. The ♠ Q drew the ♠ J from South, a ♦ from the dummy and the ♦ Q from North. Declarer then prolonged the agony by thoughtfully cashing his fourth ♠, followed by the ♦ A and the thirteenth ♦, which had now been established. Thirteen tricks magicked out of thin air! Ugh!

When selecting your discards the first priority is to recall the auction. It should not be that difficult, since it only took place in the last few minutes. On this hand East had shown that he had at least four ♠ s. Therefore North should have held onto all of his ♠ s regardless, even if he was forced to discard everything else. He knew that South had three ♠ s or less, and he must hope that partner held one or more of the ♠ honours. Even if South held none of the honours, attempting to guard the suit could not cost. North's first five discards should have been all of his ♥ s, relying on partner to guard the suit. Why? Declarer had shown 15-16 HCP. At tricks two and three he showed up with the ♣ A Q. He was also

known to hold the  $\spadesuit$  A from the lead, since otherwise South would have led his fourth-highest  $\spadesuit$ .

	$\spadesuit$		10 9 4 2	
	$\heartsuit$		A Q 5 4 2	
	$\diamondsuit$		Q J 9	
	$\clubsuit$		3	
$\spadesuit$	A 8	N	E	$\spadesuit$
$\heartsuit$	8 7 3	W	S	$\heartsuit$
$\diamondsuit$	K 6			$\diamondsuit$
$\clubsuit$	K 10 7 6 5 4			$\clubsuit$
		$\spadesuit$	J 7 3	
		$\heartsuit$	K 10	
		$\diamondsuit$	10 8 4 3 2	
		$\clubsuit$	J 9 8	

South should have found the opening lead of the  $\heartsuit$  K, because he should have known that North held at least four  $\heartsuit$ s and the majority of the defensive values. Having said that, partner's failure to find the killing lead is no reason to lose interest. It is still important to restrict the declarer to the minimum number of tricks. Only if declarer discards from  $\spadesuit$ s or  $\diamondsuit$ s should North be prepared to discard from that same suit. Allowing declarer to make all thirteen tricks turned a bad board into a complete bottom.

Frank Groome  
(October 2009)