



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(311) The Forcing Defense

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Level: 2

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General

As a defender we must work together with partner to attempt to defeat the declarer's contract. Many partnerships focus their defensive work on signaling (and signaling agreements). Though these are valuable tools for a defender, defensive strategy is a far more important thing to focus on. As a defender, one of the most valuable assets we have (and should spend some time thinking about how to best make use of) is our trump holding. These trumps can be used to make tricks in a variety of different ways – scoring natural tricks (using honors), getting ruffs (hopefully trumping one of declarer's winners), or attacking the declarer's control of the hand. This final approach is called a *forcing defense* and is commonly used when we hold trump length. Let's see how this works and when it is best to attempt this type of defense.

The Forcing Defense

When we hold long trump, one of our defensive tactics is to try to get a ruff. But another strategy is to force the declarer to ruff and to create a situation where we have more trump than the declarer - this is called taking control of the hand. Once this happens, the declarer is unlikely to make their contract and will often go down multiple tricks.

Example 1

Imagine our initial trump holding is ♠Kxxx and the declarer is in a 5-3 ♠ fit. If we lead another suit in which we have length and can force the declarer to ruff with a trump from their 5-card suit, then declarer now has the same number of trump as we do. When we win our ♠K we can hopefully continue our side suit and force declarer to ruff again, reducing them to one fewer trump than we hold. We are then in control of the hand.

This "forcing defense" is an excellent use of a trump suit, particular one that has natural trump tricks and will not gain us to ruff from. For instance,

- QJTx
- KJTx
- KQx
- AQJ



Note: From holdings like Axx or Kxx it is often effective to try to produce extra tricks from our trump suit by getting a ruff – leading our outside shortness, instead of our outside length.

Many players think that when they have a singleton, they must lead it, but that is only using the tactic of using your trump to produce additional tricks by getting ruffs. We also have the option of leading our outside long suit in an attempt to force the declarer to ruff and whittle them down to fewer trump than we hold.

Promotion

The forcing defense can be used to develop a long trump holding into a winner (take control of the hand) but it can also be used to promote our honors or spot cards into winners.

Example 2

Imagine that this is the trump suit:

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      KQJ
ATx      xx
      9xxxx
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Here we can develop or promote our Ten into a winner if we can force the declarer to ruff with one of the honors in the dummy. If we can force declarer to ruff in the short side (North), either from the start or after we get in with our trump Ace, then our Ten will become an additional winner in the trump suit.

Note: Forcing declarer to ruff with an honor (either as in the example above or because of a trump promotion) is another excellent way to produce additional winners from our trump holding.

Conclusion

The forcing defense is a powerful technique for putting the declarer in a difficult situation and turning our trump into a threat that might allow us to take control of the hand. When you hold long trump, be sure to consider this forcing defense as one of your options when you are thinking about your opening lead. Adding this technique to your repertoire of defensive tools will make you a much dangerous defender.