



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(306) The Idle Fifth

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Level: 2

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General

When declaring a hand, we often run a long suit and one or both of our opponents are no longer able to follow. This forces our opponents to discard from another suit. We then have the opportunity to learn more about the opponent's hand – from which suits they choose to discard and which they avoid. Let's take a moment to place ourselves in the opponent's shoes and see how understanding their difficulties can help us to better "read" an opponent's discards.

The Opponent's Attitude Discards

When most players discard a suit, they are giving attitude signals (whether they play standard or upside down). By reading an opponent's discards (interpreting their size and how much you should believe them), we can try to determine if an opponent has an honor in the suit they discarded from. Just as we work hard to read partner's discards when we are defending, we need to work hard to interpret the opponents' signals when we are declaring. In some ways it is more difficult to do this as declarer because we have to interpret the discards of both defenders (where on defense we only have to interpret partner's discards).

The "Idle" Fifth Card in a Suit

Reading the opponents' cards, inferring what they hold from the actions that they take and the actions that they do not take, is one of the beautiful arts of bridge. So many of the inferences that we make are not absolute conclusions but are uses of inferential reasoning that help us slightly better judge what to do next. One of these inferences has to do with an opponent's first discard – called the *Idle Fifth*.



Consider the following holdings (and there are many others):

- Ax Axx ATxx
- Kx Kxx KTxx
- Qx Qxx QJxx
- Jx Jxxx Jxxx

In each of these cases, discarding from the suit could be costly – unguarding the suit or shortening our honors.

However, it is rare that discarding from a 5-card suit will cost a trick because it is unlikely that someone else will also have the same 5-card suit. Thus, when making a discard it is safest to do so from a 5-card suit. The fifth card in the suit is called the idle fifth because it is not likely to be that useful (and thus it is usually safe to discard). The way to we make use of this information when we are the declarer is that frequently an opponent's first discard (in a suit contract) will be from a 5-card suit. This is particularly true when a player discards on the first or second rounds of a suit (if they have a singleton then they must have a 5-card suit, unless they are 4441). A simple assumption that is often useful is to play the opponents for discarding from a 5-card suit or that they do not have one.

Example 1

We are the declarer in 4♠. We win the opening lead and draw trump, with RHO showing out on the second round of ♠ (having a singleton) and discarding a ♣. Later in the hand we play the ♥ suit and discover that our RHO had exactly 3-card ♥. We can infer from their discards that RHO's shape was probably 1-3-4-5 (or possibly 1-3-3-6). If RHO had been 1-3-5-4 it would be unusual for them to discard a ♣ so early. Discarding from their 4-card ♣ suit could cost them a trick.

These kinds of deductions can be useful is visualizing the opponents' hands and thus determining what the likely layout of the cards is.

Conclusion

Interpreting the opponents' discards to allow us to understand the location of their honors and the distribution of their hands is an art form, not a pure science. It is a skill that you must work at in order to improve. One of the simplest yet most useful inferences available to you when attempting to read the opponents' discards is keep in mind the *idle fifth*. You cannot make a 100% certain conclusion about an opponent's shape, but this turns out to be correct far more often than you would expect. Make use of this concept to help you better visualize the shape of the hand and help you determine what is going on.