

Play Passive Defense

- **WHEN THERE IS PROBABLY NO LONG SIDE SUIT AGAINST YOU**
- **WHEN YOU HAVE KEY CARDS IN THEIR SUITS**
- **WHEN DECLARER IS VERY STRONG AND DUMMY IS WEAK**
- **WHEN THEY HAVE BID TENTATIVELY OR PERHAPS HAVE OVERBID, AND THEY MAY NOT HAVE ALL THEIR TRICKS**
- **WHEN YOU LACK AN ATTACKING SUIT AT NT**
- **WHEN DEFENDING GRANDSLAMS OR 6NT**

The Passive Defense

When the dummy hits with a balanced hand, the defenders go into their shells and play the passive game.

--Edwin Kantar, Defense Bridge Play Complete

In the previous lesson we observed that the presence of a long side suit threatens the defenders. Declarer will want to use that side suit to dispose of losers, compelling the defenders to act quickly to take their tricks, even taking chances in order to develop tricks. But when a threatening side suit is not present, the pressure shifts – or at least it will shift if the defenders will allow it to shift. For without the long suit, and if the defenders guard against ruffs in the short hand, declarer is left only with the devices of his high cards. These will take him just so far. So he will have to consider how to take successful finesses, create endplays, and how otherwise to promote his lower cards.

Not always will he be able to deduce how best to do so, and therefore he will welcome the help of the defenders in solving his problems, perhaps even putting them on lead to make errors. When this situation arises, or when you believe from the bidding that it may arise, do not help, do not be ambitious, but go into your shell. The passive defense means that you will make leads that are unlikely to cost tricks. Try to give back to declarer only what he already has, and make him solve his own problems.

Take a look at the circumstances calling for a passive defense:

- When there is probably no long side suit against you
- When you have key cards in their suits
- When declarer is very strong and dummy is weak
- When they have bid tentatively or perhaps have overbid, and they may not have all their tricks
- When you lack an attacking suit at NT
- When defending grandslams or 6NT

The first four of these all indicate some sort of weak point for the declaring side: no long suit, holes in their key suits, a dummy too weak to help much, resources that may be overtaxed. This is far different from the positive declaring resources of running side suits and extra ruffing power. The weight of problems this time are on declarer. Let him figure out where his tricks will come from. Let him guess who has the missing cards. If he can't get to a weak dummy to take his finesses, don't lead anything that will let him take one. If he is stretched too thin, just let him crumble by himself. Seek to give him only what he already has. Try to find safe things to do and just stick with them, and collect your tricks as they come your way.

At the other end of the spectrum in our list of conditions are those when the defenders have bid a grand slam or to 6 NT. Here we can't exactly say they have weaknesses. In fact, they have so very much that you and partner probably lack the resources to mount an attack. All you have is a stray honor or two. Don't play those suits. Don't play a suit that may compromise partner. All you can hope for is that your meagre holding is somehow important to declarer, and somehow you may end up winning your honor, if you don't give it away first. Against a grand slam a trump lead should be automatic, not to reduce ruffing power, but simply to be as passive as you possibly can be.

No sign of a long running suit

Let's look at some hands to see what difficulties declarers are facing and how the passive defense succeeds.

North

♠ A 9 6 5
♥ A 6 4
♦ J 7 2
♣ 10 5 4

West

♠ 7 3
♥ K Q 10 5
♦ A 8 5 4
♣ Q 7 2

	S	W	N	E
1	♠	P	2	♠
	P	P		P

Sitting West you make the fine and sensible lead of the king of hearts. Partner plays the 2 and declarer puts on the 3. Is this just a simple holdup by declarer?

No, it is not. Your king promises the queen, so if East has the jack, he has a helpful card, and he will signal you with a high card. East's 2 indicates he does not have the jack, so declarer does. Declarer is attempting a Bath Coup. If you fall for it, declarer will gain a trick. That is, if you now continue hearts by leading the queen, declarer will take it with his ace, and declarer's jack will be good for a subsequent round.

If, on the other hand, you continue the heart suit by leading low, he will let it ride around to his jack, and his ace will remain for a subsequent round. Either way, if you continue the suit, declarer will have taken advantage of you with the Bath Coup.

Avoiding a Bath Coup is not particularly difficult, especially if partner signals you properly. But even if declarer fails in his attempt to lure you into an error, he accomplishes something very real. He has compelled you to break off your play of the heart suit, so now you must find some other suit to lead. It would appear that declarer would like some help from you in breaking a new suit. Well, if declarer wants it, you should not do it. You need to find the most harmless lead available and play passive defense. Frequently the most passive lead is a trump, just

because it is their best suit, and declarer frequently has it under control. In the present hand, declarer has five in his hand, you have 2, and you see 4 trump in dummy. That leaves just 2 in partner's hand, so you can lead trump without giving declarer any advantage.

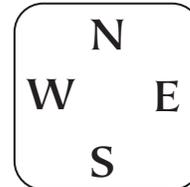
Let's take a look at the entire hand:

NORTH

♠ A 9 6 5
♥ A 6 4
♦ J 7 2
♣ 10 5 4

WEST

♠ 7 3
♥ K Q 10 5
♦ A 8 5 4
♣ Q 7 2



EAST

♠ K 10
♥ 9 8 2
♦ Q 10 9 3
♣ K 9 8 6

SOUTH

♠ Q J 8 4 2
♥ J 7 3
♦ K 6
♣ A J 3

You have switched to the 3 of trump, and declarer surveys his chances. Let's look at diamonds. We have the advantage of seeing all the cards. We can see that if declarer leads diamonds, he will not be able to win any diamond tricks at all. If he leads a low diamond toward his king, West will win and East's queen still sits over dummy's jack. If declarer tries leading the jack first, East simply covers, and when South puts on his king, West's ace wins, and East's 10 and 9 are established for the defense. But if either defender leads a diamond, now declarer can win a diamond trick. If, for instance, East were to lead diamonds, declarer plays low from his hand, and West will have to take his ace or surrender to dummy's jack.

Now check out declarer's club suit. If he were to lead low from dummy and play his jack, West wins

the queen. Subsequently, if declarer tries the finesse again by playing the 10 from dummy, East simply covers with the queen and establishes his 9. In other words, with these cards, the only club trick south can win is his ace. But if the defenders were to lead clubs instead of declarer, now he will be able to win two club tricks.

So declarer needs the defenders to lead the minor suits, and the defenders need to stay passive and avoid leading the minor suits. A game of cat and mouse often arises, then, between the two sides.

Coming back to our present hand, declarer ducks the 3 of spades, and East wins his king. He should be able to understand some key points. First of all, partner is not trying to reduce dummy's ruffing power. Dummy has too many trump and no real shortness. Second, if West had the jack of hearts, he could simply have continued with hearts. Therefore declarer has the jack of hearts, West just the queen. But who has the 10 of hearts? If partner has it, he truly wants East to lead a heart now. If declarer has it, no harm can come from leading a heart because declarer can always play hearts himself. Therefore East's lead of the 9 of hearts will be either helpful, at best, or neutral, at worst.

Declarer plays a low heart, and so does West, so dummy wins the ace. Declarer now cashes the ace of spades, which draws trump and eliminates trump as a safe lead for the defenders. Now declarer leads a heart himself, which puts West in. West is on the spot. He must either lead a minor suit, which we know will help declarer, or he can give a ruff and a sluff, which also helps declarer. West dislikes this circumstance, obviously, and wants to avoid its reoccurrence. He decides to lead his ace of diamonds and he gets out with a diamond.

The clever declarer has been able to win a diamond trick by forcing West's lead, but now his resources are exhausted. He is compelled to lead the clubs himself, yielding 2 more losers. All in all the defenders collect 1 spade, 2 hearts, 1 diamond, and 2 clubs, for a one trick set. The passive defense prevails.

Let's look at another hand:

You hold key cards in their suits

West		S	W	N	E
♠ 9 4 2				1 ♣	P
♥ Q 10 9	1 ♦	P		1 ♥	P
♦ K 10 8 2	1 ♠	P		2 ♠	P
♣ K 7 5	4 ♠	P		P	P

This auction is unusual because South did not bypass diamonds to bid spades. Perhaps this North-South does not bypass diamonds, or perhaps South has 5 diamonds and 4 spades to go with her game forcing points as responder. If South does have 5 diamonds, then West holds key cards in that suit. For that matter, West holds a key card in all of the side suits. This auction is screaming for a trump lead:

- dummy has bid 2 suits and raised a third
- you have a strong holding in declarer's side suit
- you hold key cards in all their suits and want a passive lead.

So you lead the 2 of spades. Here is the hand:

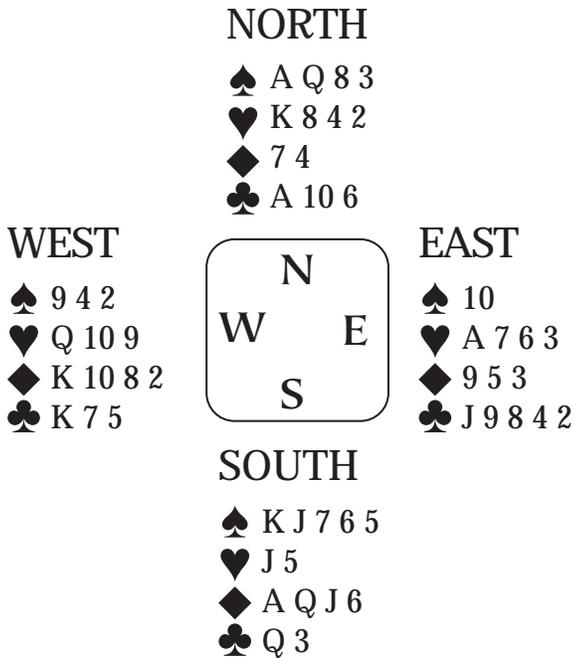
	NORTH										
	♠ A Q 8 3										
	♥ K 8 4 2										
	♦ 7 4										
	♣ A 10 6										
WEST	<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		EAST
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♠ 9 4 2		♠ 10									
♥ Q 10 9		♥ A 7 6 3									
♦ K 10 8 2		♦ 9 5 3									
♣ K 7 5		♣ J 9 8 4 2									
	SOUTH										
	♠ K J 7 6 5										
	♥ J 5										
	♦ A Q J 6										
	♣ Q 3										

South's bidding is peculiar and out of step with common sense. East-West will suffer some confusion as soon as they discover that South has 5 spades. But we sometimes encounter strange bidding and bidding errors.

Examine the side suits, beginning with clubs.

We can see that if South leads hearts, he cannot win any heart tricks and will have two losers. But if East-West play on hearts first, he may escape with one loser only. Now look at clubs. If declarer breaks this suit, he will win only the ace. If the defenders break clubs, declarer may win two tricks. Looking at

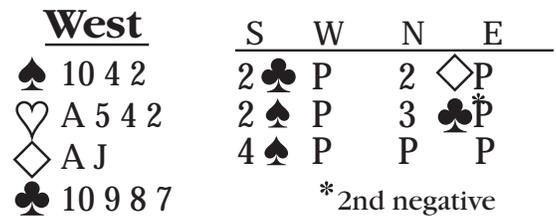
diamonds, the king is offside, so declarer will lose that one. It appears that declarer may have to lose 2 hearts, 1 club, and 1 diamond, which is one too many. But can he do anything to limit the damage? (For convenience, the hand appears again)



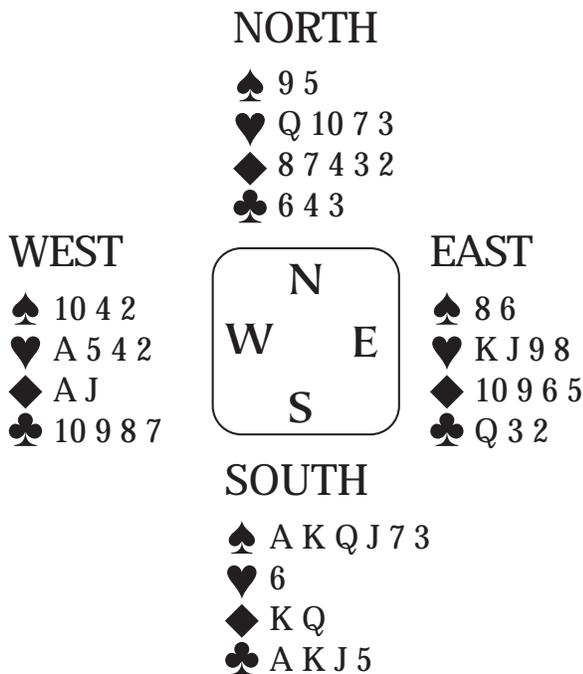
South wins the trump lead in dummy and tries a diamond finesse, his queen losing to West's king. West continues spades again, declarer playing low in dummy and winning in hand. He cashes the ace of diamonds, followed by the jack of diamonds, discarding a club in dummy. He ruffs the 6 of diamonds. Now he cashes the ace of clubs and exits with a club, losing to West's king. Declarer had hoped that East held the club king. If he had, then East would either have had to lead a heart or yield a ruff and sluff. But it was West who held the club king, and West still has a trump to exit with and is not forced to lead hearts. South loses two heart tricks. In all, South loses two hearts, one diamond, and one club, which is one too many. West was always able to find a safe exit card. If South had pulled West's last trump, eliminating it as a safe exit, West still would then have had a safe exit with another club because there would be no threat of a ruff and sluff. Note that West's passive play allowed him to score all three honors in his hand. This was not a hand to be leading from one of them, was it? But why would we, when all indicators pointed to a trump lead.

Strong declarer, weak dummy

When declarer is strong and dummy weak, a communication problem usually exists. Declarer needs to get to dummy to lead toward his strength, but dummy lacks the needed entries, so that declarer may end up having to lead from his hand, away from his strength. He will very much appreciate defenders who attack the side suits, because they will be leading into him, which he may not be able to accomplish on his own. Remember this, and put up a passive defense when the auction shows an imbalance of power between dummy and declarer.



South is willing to try game with no help from his dummy, who expresses a lack of values. Ordinarily the top of a sequence is a passive lead, but the lead of your club sequence should hold no allure for you. You may still be helping declarer locate an honor card in you partner's hand. Spades would be safer. Declarer probably has seven to bid this way, meaning partner will be very short anyway. Or, if declarer has only 6 trump, they will be solid. For safety, prefer a trump lead to a sequence devoid of honors. (The hand appears on the next page.)

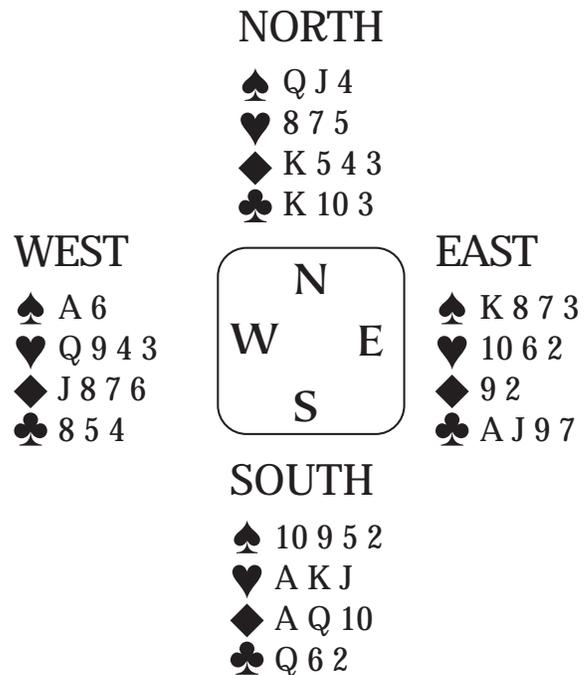


Defenders will always be winning their two aces, but woe to the West who led the 10 of clubs, because he gave up his partner's queen, allowing declarer to make an overtrick. Those defenders who led a trump will also win the queen of clubs to go with their two aces, because declarer can't get to dummy to finesse. These defenders will hold declarer to just 10 tricks. But wasn't it possible that the trump lead could have finessed a spade in partner's hand? Yes, it was possible, but West is shooting in the dark on his lead, and, on balance, declarer will have good cards in his own self-sufficient suit.

No attacking suit at notrump

A well-known rule of thumb tells us to lead 4th down from our longest and strongest suit at notrump. The concept is that notrump is a race between declarer and the defenders to establish their source of tricks. Experts are not unanimous in touting this concept when your suit is only four cards long. They suggest that a source of tricks ought to be greater than a four-card suit; and, when you lead away from your single or double honor, you often help declarer establish an extra trick of his own. The risk taken by underleading an honor or honors in a 4-card suit does not, they suggest, justify the gain, if any. An

attacking suit, then, if we pay attention to this line of thought, is a suit headed by a sequence, or it is a 5-card suit. Lacking such a suit, many experts suggest we consider the lead of the unbid major, if suits have been bid, or else to take a passive approach.



S	W	N	E
1NT	P	2NT	P
3NT	P	P	P

West is on lead, and his suits are nothing to brag about. The lead of a heart or a diamond will give declarer a trick and his contract. The lead of the 8 of clubs, however, keeps West's honors safe in his hand, where declarer cannot get to them. The queen of hearts prevents declarer's jack from becoming a trick. The jack of diamonds prevents South from taking 4 diamond tricks. As it turns out in this hand, the club lead strikes a blow for East's best suit, and the South cannot make 3NT. Declarer will probably call for the club 10, and East should play his jack, surrendering the trick to declarer's queen. Now East has control of the suit, with the ace and nine sitting over dummy's king. When declarer plays on spades, West will win his ace and continue a club.