Disappointing the Declarer

How to take *all* your tricks on defense

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Aspects of Good Defense

- Planning
  - Initial
  - Adjusted as you learn more
- Signals — making them, and reading them
  - Attitude — most important in your suits
  - Count — most important in declarer's suits
  - Suit preference — less used than you think!
  - Other (Smith echo)
- Counting
  - Declarer's tricks
  - Points (declarer's, and partner's)
  - Cards, especially in important suits

Planning the Defense

The auction will tell you a lot about what your general approach to defense should be. Then you adjust that approach as you learn more.

Common Defensive Approaches

- Attacking (cashout, or setup and run a suit)
- Ruffing
- Forcing (forcing declarer to ruff)
- Drawing trump
- Passive

Consider your goals

At IMP scoring (most team games), it's almost always worth taking risks to set the contract. If you're not sure whether to attack, do it if otherwise declarer has enough tricks to make the contract.

At matchpoint scoring (most pair games), it's more complicated:

- If the opponents are in an unusually good contract (a good game or slam that others won't bid), you have to find a way to beat it
- If they're in an unusually bad contract, just don't screw up
- If they're in the normal contract you need to consider everything, but…
- If in doubt, take some risks (but not ridiculous ones) to set the contract.

The Attacking Defense

- Against games that the opponents seems happy to bid, it's usually best to attack; passive won't work. The stronger their bidding the more this is true.
- By contrast, if they barely made it to game it is often better to be passive — don't give anything away and all they'll get is what they started with.
- An attacking defense often involves underleading honors to set up tricks. Just because it's risky doesn't mean it's wrong!
- Often you don't realize that it's right to attack until after the dummy comes down. But don't give up — there may still be time.

The Ruffing Defense

- Possibly the best known defensive approach — lead a singleton or doubleton, get a ruff (or two).
- You usually need a good reason to take this approach because if you don't get your ruff it can be costly.
- Best when everything else looks bad and the opponents seem to be on track to make their contract.
- Much improved when you have trump control (especially the ace)
- Do not work to set up ruffs if you're likely to score those trumps naturally.
- Do not use it if partner can't possibly have an entry!

The Forcing Defense

- This defense consists of forcing declarer to ruff, ideally in the "long" trump hand
- To use it you need to have winners (else declarer won't need to ruff)
- Works best when you — or your partner — have a lot of trump: Shortening declarer's trump holding may set up one for you!
- Does not work if declarer has trumps to burn (but this still may be the best approach because it's passive)
- Timing may be critical to ensure that declarer is forced to ruff at the right time

Drawing Trump (before declarer wants to)

- Used when declarer is planning on getting ruffs in the "short" hand
- Sometimes the auction suggests it:
  - Dummy rates to be very weak
  - Declarer has shown two suits (especially if partner preferred the second suit)
  - The defense has good stuff in a side suit declarer probably holds
  - Consider it if it sounds like they are in a 4-4 fit
- Tend not to use it if it can't help (for example, because dummy rates to have lots of trumps)
- Tend not to use it if it will cost a trump trick (in your hand or partner's)

Passive defense

- Consists more of trying not to give tricks away than trying to set them up.
- In general being the first to "break" a suit is risky so you need a reason or a safe holding (usually, a sequence) to do so
- Best when declarer is likely to struggle without your help
- Also good when declarer has no source of tricks other than the suit you'd have to break
- Just because you don't have honors to protect doesn't mean partner doesn't!

Signal Types

- Attitude
- Count
- Suit Preference
- Other: The Smith echo

Note that I assume "Upside Down" count and attitude, which is what a majority of experienced payers play. If you play standard, that's fine, adjust accordingly.

The Attitude Signal

- Generally your first card played in a suit that is, or might be, a good one for the defense, is an attitude card (if it's a signal at all)
- Exception: If your card is necessary to win the trick or to force a high card, it's not a signal at all
- Exception: If it's obvious what your attitude is (usually because dummy is very strong in the suit, or because you can't beat the dummy even though dummy's card isn't very high) then your card isn't an attitude signal.
- A special case: When you are leading a new suit (after the opening lead), a low spot card tends to suggest that you want partner to return the suit (positive attitude).

The Attitude Signal (cont.)

- The meaning of an attitude signal can be somewhat different depending on the situation:
  - When we are first attacking a suit, a "positive" attitude tends to say you'd be happy if partner led that suit again. (Imagine her underleading an honor — would that be good?)
  - It doesn't necessarily mean you do, or don't, have an honor, just that as far as you can tell, continuation is best for the defense. If you want partner to shift, don't encourage. If you can't stand a shift you might encourage even with very little.
  - When discarding, an "encouraging" card shows something in the suit, but maybe just a stopper
- Beware discarding a "useless" low card if partner might interpret it wrong. Good partners watch the spots!

The Count Signal

- In general when attitude is known, the next card (which may be the first one) is a count signal. Signal your count at the time of your signal:
  - With an even number, signal low (upside-down count) if this is the first time the suit has been played, high ("standard" count) if the suit has already been played at least once.
  - With an odd number, do the opposite
- When is attitude known?
  - When you've already told partner
  - When it's obviously declarer's suit (but not trumps)
- Do not signal count in the trump suit

The Suit Preference Signal

- If a signal is neither attitude nor count, it *might* be suit preference (but don't assume it is unless you're sure)
- If it's suit preference, a high card shows something good (but what?) in the higher-ranked of the other possible suits, a low card a preference for the lower-ranked suit.
- Suit preference is the least commonly used signal… and the most abused. If you're not sure it's suit preference, it's not.
- Best is to use suit preference only in specific, agreed situations:
  - When giving partner a ruff
  - When you have lots of equivalent cards you could play (because they're winners, or because they're losers). Partner must also know you have lots!
  - When following with low cards as declarer draws trump (but talk with partner about this first)

The Suit Preference Signal (cont.)

- Special case 1: When dummy has a singleton in the suit of the opening lead, and third hand doesn't need to win the trick, is third hand's card suit preference?
  - Usually, NO! (even though many players were taught yes)
  - But, if third hand is known to have lots of cards (for example, she preempted in the suit), then
    - A high card is suit preference high
    - A low card is suit preference low
    - A *middle card encourages continuation* (e.g., to make dummy ruff)
- Why only this case? Because it is important to be able to ask for continuation, because making dummy ruff is often right. Suit preference is nice but secondary.

The Suit Preference Signal (cont.)

- Special case 2: When you're known to have several equivalent cards (usually honors) and it's not important to show exactly how many, the order you play them in is suit preference
  - Example: Against notrump, you lead the king from king-queen-jack. Dummy has ten-deuce, so partner knows your honor holding. Declarer holds the ace but doesn't play it at trick 1.
    - If your next card is the queen, that's suit preference high
    - If your next card is the jack, that's suit preference low
- Beware: If partner doesn't know about your honors, then dropping one unnecessarily is not suit preference: Instead, it promises that you could afford to do it (meaning you have at least the honor below it). Do this with the TOP of a sequence if you are sure you can afford to.

The Suit Preference Signal (cont.)

- Special case 3: When following suit as declarer draw trump, if you have only small cards (usually, the eight or lower), then you can signal suit preference *if you have agreed to with partner to do that.*
    - With two trumps, you can signal only high or low; high tends to be suit preference high (among the two "possible" side suits); a low card may be suit preference low but can also be neutral.
    - With three trumps you have options. General, low-middle-high is suit preference low, high-middle-low is suit preference high. Starting with the middle card can be suit preference middle, or no preference.
    - Getting subtle about this probably isn't worth it. In fact, trump suit preference in general isn't worth it until you've mastered other signals.

Another Signal: the Smith Echo

- Against notrump contracts (only), the Smith echo can be remarkably useful. Here I discuss "reverse smith", which is now most common:
  - Suppose that based on the dummy and the early play, it is not entirely clear whether continuing the suit that was first led is best. Then…
  - An "echo" (high card, followed by a lower card if there's a chance to) says to partner that you do NOT want a continuation of the original suit. Why?
    - Maybe another suit is best to attack.
    - Maybe opening leader led low from a three card holding
    - Maybe the original suit is good to attack, but not from partner's side.
  - A low card is either encouraging regarding the original suit, or neutral.
  - This applies from *both* partners.

The Smith Echo (cont.)

- Note that reverse Smith goes with upside down carding: high discourages, low encourages
- There is an important situation when Smith does not apply at all. If:
    1. Dummy has a long suit that isn't completely solid; and
    2. You have a stopper in that suit, or it's possible that partner does; and
    3. It is possible that dummy doesn't have an entry outside that suit; then…
- … Smith echo is off; it is more important to give count so the player with the stopper knows whether, and for how long, to hold up (to "kill" the dummy).
    - The player without a stopper gives true count (upside down, assuming you agreed on that). e.g., with 62, play the 2; with 762, play the 7.
    - Generally the one with the stopper gives false count. Or put it this way: Give true count but don't count the stopper card. (e.g., treat A62 as an even holding, and play the 2)

Counting Tricks

- Every book on defense says counting is important
- But they usually don't admit that counting is hard and that you don't always have to count everything.
- The most important thing to count is declarer's tricks:
  - Trump tricks (once you've seen how many there are, or the auction has told you)
  - Ruffing tricks (can be hard to estimate)
  - High card and long suit tricks you can see
  - Estimation about unseen suits
- If declarer has enough tricks, it may be time to get active
- If declarer doesn't seem to have enough tricks, usually stay passive

Counting high card points

- When dummy comes down, count the high card points. Add that to yours, and then add what you think declarer's minimum is.
- Subtract from 40. What's left is what partner *might* have.
- If you can tell from the auction, consider declarer's maximum too. Sometimes the range is narrow (especially after notrump auctions).
- Use this to get a range for partner's high card count.
- Next, consider where partner's cards might be. Usually you'll have to guess at first.
- As play proceeds, every time partner comes up with a high card reassess what she might have left.
- Notice this is easier when partner can't have much!

Counting shape

- The most difficult defensive counting tasks involve shape
- Luckily you'll rarely have to work out declarer's exact shape (but sometimes you can)
- Focus on the suits that matter, and don't try to get an exact count on a suit until:
    - Someone shows out; or
    - The bidding tells you, almost for sure, how many someone has; or
    - Partner gives you a count signal and you can tell within one card who has what
- You will almost always have to draw some of your count estimates from the bidding. This isn't perfect, but against most decent players it works OK.
- The most important thing: Stop and think whenever you need to! Bridge is a thinking game and learning to count is the most intensive thinking you're likely to do. Take the time you need.

Counting shape — Memory Aids

- Counting gets much easier when you have memorized the way 13 cards can divide, especially the common ones. This is absolutely *not* necessary, but it makes your life easier
- This applies to hand shapes (declarer's hand, or your partner's) and to the way an individual suit divides
- The most common shapes:
  - 4333
  - 4432 (the most common)
  - 5332 (second most common)
  - 4441
  - 5422
  - 5431
  - 6322
  - 6421
  - etc.

Counting shape — Other Steps

- It's also easiest to start with suits in which you can see lots of cards (or you know them from the bidding)
- When the dummy comes down, consider first the suit of the opening lead. Can you tell who has how many?
- If there's a trump suit, think about that (assuming declarer has the minimum she's suggested). Does partner have any trumps? How many (probably)?
- If there's a suit that you can tell will be important, think about it next. You may not get very far with this one, so don't worry if you can't.

About this Presentation

- Prepared and presented by Doug Couchman

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  - He has been involved in bridge since the late 90s:

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