

5: Defending against suit contracts

Bridge experts generally agree that defense is the hardest part of the game. In defense, you have to use clues from the bidding, try to figure out declarer's likely game plan, and visualize cards that partner could reasonably hold that would allow you to beat the contract. In other words, a lot of thought and no simple guidelines to follow. Declarer in a suit contract has three ways of getting rid of losers in his hand – what are they? It is your job to foil his plans by defending appropriately.

Defensive strategies often fall into one of the following two classes:

Passive defense, when your main aim is not to give declarer any gifts. Play safe in other words. You do this when you think (or know) that declarer might have trouble making his contract. This could be when the opponents crawl into game, or you push them out of their comfort zone by competing in the bidding.

Active defense, when you take chances in the hope of getting some tricks quickly before declarer can get rid of his losers. This typically happens when there is a strong suit in dummy that declarer can run while discarding losers from his hand. Again, you might suspect such a situation from the bidding, or know it once you see dummy. The problem is, when you see dummy it might be too late!

Trump leads are a form of passive defense. You are usually trying to cut down ruffs by declarer. Either the bidding or the appearance of dummy might suggest that declarer will use dummy's trumps for ruffing. You are in no hurry to take your winners.

Leading the top card of a strong honor sequence, such as the king from K Q J (x), is a good and powerful defense that doesn't really fall into the above categories. It is both safe and attacking.

The bidding, and your hand

Listen carefully to the bidding, it can give you lots of clues. Even a pass by partner can be very informative.

Did the opponents sail into game (they are likely to have extra strength) or crawl there? Did you push them unwillingly to a higher contract? Did partner open or bid at all? Did partner double/fail to double a conventional call/fail to overcall at the one-level? How many tricks do you need to set the contract? The answers to these questions might suggest what sort of help you can expect from partner – the location of his strength, if any.

Do you have a short side suit, especially a singleton? Do you have some length and strength in trumps? Don't look for ruffs if a ruff will take away a natural trump trick (e.g. holding Q J 6, J T 8 3 or K Q T of trumps).

When to lead a trump

More often than not, you should avoid leading a trump, but there are certain situations where a trump lead is definitely called for (you are always West in these examples):

1. Partner passes your takeout double:

You hold: ♠64 ♥KQ86 ♦KT6 ♣AJ86. South opens 1♠, you double for takeout and everyone passes. Partner is really saying “My spades are as good as declarer’s, so let’s draw trumps. Then you can take your tricks in the side suits.” Partner should have something like ♠QJT97 or better (i.e. some honors, at least 5 cards, and good intermediates). Question: given the spade holding above, how many trump tricks can your partner provide?

2. You have the points, they have the contract

Say partner opens 1NT and you have 10 HCP including two small spades, but the opponents end up in 4♠. (Which should of course be doubled!). Your side has 25-27 HCP, so they have 13-15 HCP. How do they plan to take tricks? Almost certainly by ruffing, maybe cross-ruffing. How can you mess up declarer’s plans?

3. Declarer bids two suits, dummy prefers the second one

After a bidding sequence like 1♠ - pass - 1NT - pass - 2♥ - all pass, dummy is likely to be short in spades. You and/or partner are likely to have some good spades. Don’t let declarer ruff them out. Lead a trump at every opportunity.

4. Dummy makes a single raise, you have honors in the side suits.

The bidding: 1♥ - pass - 2♥ - all pass. You hold: ♠AT6 ♥864 ♦KT6 ♣QJ86. Dummy is weak and probably doesn’t have a good side suit. Declarer is minimum strength. It would be risky to lead away from your side suit honors, so cut down dummy’s potential ruffs and let declarer finesse the side suits into your hand!

When to avoid leading a trump

There are two situations where you should definitely **not** lead a trump!

1. When they have had a misfit auction

Dummy could be void, so if you lead a trump you might just be finessing partner’s honor!

2. When dummy has trump support and a strong side suit

When you suspect or know about this situation, you should lead an unbid suit, hoping to take or set up winners there. Declarer is likely to use dummy’s side suit to discard losers in his hand. However, if you are lucky enough to have dummy’s side suit under control (e.g. KQT95), you know declarer will not be able to run that suit while discarding from hand. So a trump lead will cut down ruffs. Your side suit winners are safe.