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This Week in Bridge

(447) When You See a Discard Coming, Get Active!

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

One of the skills that we need to develop as a defender is seeing how the rest of the hand will play out. Part of that skill is recognizing when there is danger that our tricks might go away. One specific kind of danger that we may face is dummy providing a discard or discards for declarer. (When we say dummy here, we actually mean the side we are not counting losers from, but we are going to assume that is the dummy on the board for purposes of this discussion.) In this case, declarer may be able to get rid of their losers if we just sit back, so we may need to get active and go get our tricks before they go away. It may seem that concern over declarer having a discard available is a basic concept, but there are a large number of variations in these situations that we need to learn to recognize and act upon before it is too late. Let's take a look at some examples and work on developing the skill of recognizing these potentially dangerous situations before it is too late.

Suit Is Breaking Well for Declarer

When a suit is breaking 4333 around the table and there is a 4-card suit in the dummy, then this suit can provide a discard for the declarer. If we see a 4-card suit in the dummy and we hold 3 cards in that suit, we should recognize this as a danger that the suit may be 4333.

Another situation where we can recognize that a suit may set up for discards is when dummy has a 5-card suit and we hold 3 cards in that suit. This is especially true if declarer has shown a balanced hand (often with 2 cards in the suit in question) - the suit may be 5332 and declarer may easily set it up by ruffing it out, finessing, or giving up a loser.



Friendly Layout for Declarer

A long suit can produce discards for declarer if a finesse works or honors are falling so that dummy's spot cards become winners. Here is a classic example of a time that we face danger and should get active on the defense.

Example 1

AQJ64

K83

In this case, we can see that if declarer has 2 cards in this suit (or more), then they can take this finesse a couple of times and run the suit to produce discards. When we have a poorly situated holding like this, we need to get aggressive before our tricks go away on this long suit.

Another example of when to get aggressive is when we can see that dummy's spot cards are going to set up because our honors are falling.

Example 2

AKQ9

JT3

Here we can see that dummy's 9 will become a winner and likely be a discard for declarer if declarer has 1 to 3 cards in this suit. We should get aggressive.

Example 3

AQ97

JT3

Again the 9 in the dummy is a threat to set up. If declarer has a holding like Kx then this suit could provide 2 discards for declarer. We should get aggressive and go get our tricks before they go away.

Example 4

AKT9

5432

If declarer has any 3 cards, this suit will produce a discard for declarer. Also, if declarer has Qx then the suit can produce 2 discards. In either case we know that partner's Jack is falling ("Good things are happening for declarer!"), so again we need to get active and get our tricks before they disappear.



A Surprising Danger

When the dummy has a holding like Axxx and we hold the King with some length (like Kxxx or Kxx) behind it, this may be the position:

Example 5

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      A874
J964      KT5
      Q3
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In this case (and in several similar positions) we can see that although we will win our King (when either partner leads the suit or when declarer leads the suit from dummy towards their Queen), this will give declarer a discard later in the hand. If we win the first round of the suit with our King, declarer wins the second round in hand with their Queen, and then declarer will be able to use dummy's Ace to discard a loser from hand.

Example 6

Another situation similar to the example above can result in even more discards for declarer.

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      AT74
8652      KJ3
      Q9
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In this case, on the same line of play, we win the King first and declarer wins the Queen next. Then declarer will get to use dummy's Ace to discard on the third round of the suit, but our Jack will fall and promote dummy's Ten for another discard for declarer. This is a particularly dangerous position for the defense.

There are many variations on this type of situation, where once we win our trick, declarer will have lots of discards by using dummy's suit. Some of them are obvious, but others require more focus and experience to recognize the danger. We work hard to ask ourselves "Can our tricks go away?" or "What holding could declarer have that would be bad for us?" when we are trying to find the best defense of the hand.



Placing Honors – Partner Wins a Trick Surprisingly High

Imagine the following auction and defensive situation:

Dummy

♠ KQJ75

♥ A84

♦ 762

♣ T8

You

♠ 94

♥ QJT9

♦ AQ54

♣ 743

S	W	N	E
1NT	P	2♥*	P
2♠	P	3NT	P
4♠	All Pass		

We lead the ♥Q and declarer wins this in the dummy with the ♥A. Declarer then traws trump (in two rounds), ending in their hand. Now, declarer leads a ♣ to the ♣T and partner wins the ♣A. The ♣T forcing partner's Ace is surprising! We now know that declarer started with ♣KQJx (and possibly more). If partner is wise enough to shift to a ♦ (which we hope they do by watching our trump suit preference signals, playing high-low in ♠ to ask for a ♦ shift) then we need to take our tricks now before they go away. If declarer plays the ♦J, forcing our ♦Q, then we should now cash our ♦A – before declarer uses the ♣ suit to discard ♦ losers from the dummy.

There are many situations where partner may win a trick with a surprisingly high card. In these cases, we can place the missing honors in the declarer's hand and this can help us know how to better defend the hand by helping us recognize the danger that our tricks might go away or helping us count the declarer's points and place partner with a valuable missing card. Be sure to make use of this information when partner wins a trick surprisingly high!

Conclusion

As a defender it is frustrating to see your tricks disappear when declarer gets to discard their losers on dummy's winners. This is especially frustrating when you could have done something about it, when you could have taken your tricks before declarer got rid of their losers. The first step to preventing this from happening is to recognize when the declarer has a discard coming. Work on trying to recognize these danger situations so you can know when to get active about getting your tricks. Do not let declarer have the satisfaction of preventing you from taking the tricks to which you are entitled!