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This Week in Bridge

(500) Middle of the Hand Defense

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Level: 6 of 10 (2 of 6)

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

When we defend a hand, we have many options available to us to attempt to prevent the declarer from accomplishing their goal. Our goal for this discussion is to overview these tools (not all, but many of them) and make sure that we are aware of what options are available to us as defenders. Some of a defender's tools can be used on their own while others need cooperation from partner. Only if both we and partner are aware of our options and we are both awake enough to spot them will we be able to successfully execute our best defense.

This is not a treatise on defense, nor are we trying to understand every option available or teach how to defend every hand like an expert. Our goal is the big picture - to make sure that we are armed with the concepts and options that will allow us to formulate a plan and then execute it successfully.

Trump-Related Plays

When we are defending a trump contract, we have a central suit to focus on – the trump suit. This is because we will learn a lot about the entire hand from the trump suit (our honors and/or distribution) and a lot about the hand from what the declarer does (or does not do) in trump – do they draw trump, or do they try to make use of their trump in another way?

In addition to finding out more information about the hand because of the play of the trump suit, we will have different defensive options available to us in suit contracts. Let's look at some of these options:

Ruffs

The simplest and most valuable of all our defensive options vs. suit contracts is the ruff. Getting a ruff (and as importantly, giving partner a ruff) is something that we should have in our mind the entire time that we have trump remaining in our hand (or we think partner has trump remaining in their hand.) Most defenders do a good job of looking for a ruff on opening lead or in the first couple of tricks of defense, but this is not enough. We should continue to focus on the idea of getting or giving a ruff until we are certain that it is no longer a possibility – until all the trump are drawn.



Uppercuts and Trump Promotions

We score tricks with our small trump by getting ruffs and with our large trump just on power, but now we want to work on ways that we can score our mid-sized trump. The most common tools (other than ruffs) for scoring these tricks involve working together with partner to turn our middle-size cards into natural winners. One of the ways that we turn our mid-sized trump into winners is by a *Trump Promotion*. A trump promotion occurs when we are ruffing behind the declarer/dummy. If they ruff low (or middle) we can overruff and if they ruff high, our trump becomes a natural winner. Some examples are:

- Singleton King behind the Ace. If declarer ruffs low, we overruff with our King. If declarer ruffs high (with the Ace), our King is now a natural winner.
- Qx (or Qxx). If declarer ruffs with the Ace or King, we will often score our Queen.
- JTx. If declarer ruffs with a top honor (A, K, or Q), we will usually score a trump trick (or an extra trump trick.)

Another way that we can score our mid-sized trump is in conjunction with partner's mid-sized trump – called an *uppercut*. If partner can ruff with a high enough trump to force the declarer to overruff with a high card, then our mid-sized card can become a winner. This tends to happen most often when partner can find a way to ruff from the short side. A classic example is when we hold Tx opposite Jxx. If partner can ruff with the T (from Tx) and force declarer to overruff with a high honor, then our Jxx could become a natural winner (or a winner if declarer does not guess to finesse us for the Jxx.) By ruffing high from the short side, we will often give declarer complex play problems and difficult guesses about the layout of the trump suit.

Stopping Ruffs

Another aspect of suit contracts that we should focus on as defenders is stopping the declarer from making use of their trump the way they want. This is done in many ways but one of the most important ways is to stop the declarer from ruffing by simply leading trump. If we are lucky we might get off to this defense from the start on opening lead, but more often we will need to recover from our blind opening lead and shift to a trump in the middle of the defense to cut down on dummy's or declarer's ruffing values. If we have trump in our hand when we are on lead, we should consider whether it is right for us to play it.



Shifts

Another way we defend a hand is by putting maximum pressure on the declarer. Putting maximum pressure means forcing the declarer into as many difficult decisions as possible. We can do this in many ways – let's look at a few of them.

Leading Through Honors (Putting Declarer to the Guess)

When we see a tenace on the dummy (like AQx), it is often effective to lead this suit, especially before declarer has had a chance to gather much information on the hand. That is, lead through the strength on the board. This will often force the declarer to decide about whether to take this finesse or to choose another line of play, putting declarer to the guess. But there is also a downside to this kind of play: if we are leading away from an honor of our own, we may give declarer an extra trick that they would not have been able to win if they were to play on this suit themselves. This is the risk vs. reward that must be considered when choosing to make this kind of play -- leading from no honor has less risk than leading from an honor.

Example

	AQ5	
K84		T973
	J62	

Leading away from the King allows declarer to take the finesse around to their Jack, and not lose a trick in this suit.

Another thing that leading through dummy's honors can accomplish is to take partner off a future endplay or prevent it from happening. Many times, partner will need us to lead through a holding on the dummy (like Kxx) and it will be important that we shift to this suit each time we are in (in case partner has something like AQJ behind the dummy.) If we do not lead this suit for partner, then late in the hand declarer may be able to put partner on lead and force them to lead into dummy's Kxx holding, allowing declarer to win a trick they do not deserve with dummy's King.

Getting Partner on Lead

Another way that shifting to a new suit can be effective on defense is by allowing us to attack a suit from the correct side. Transportation is just as important for the defenders (oftentimes more so) as it is for the declarer. We frequently need to get partner to play a suit for us. To do that, we need to get partner on lead. We can do this by making a shift that finds their entry, like an Ace in another suit, or we can make a shift that develops an entry into their hand (e.g., leading our King, knocking out declarer's Ace, allowing us to get to partner in with the Queen later in the hand.) If we can develop or find an entry to partner's hand, they will be able to attack the suit we want to attack from the correct side (e.g., leading through declarer's King when we have the AQ behind them.)



Responses to Declarer's Play

In addition to attacking new suits to win tricks on defense, we need to respond to the plays that the declarer makes attempting to develop tricks for their side. Let's discuss some of the ways that we can respond to declarer's actions.

Capturing Honors vs. Holdup Plays

The traditional way that we defend a suit that declarer has led is to capture their honors with our honors. Specifically, our honors are entitled to capture the honors that they are "sitting over", or the honors that they are behind (e.g., if we have an Ace, it is entitled to capture a King or Queen on our right.) But sometimes we need to not capture an honor because we are trying to make life difficult on the declarer. Choosing not to win a trick is called a *holdup play*. Holdup plays do have some risk as our trick could go away, but more often by holding up we cause the declarer to struggle with their transportation and we may prevent them from reaching winners (often a long suit) that is stranded in the other hand.

Breaking Up Communication

Holdup plays can cut communication between declarer's hand and the dummy, but these are not the only ways that we can make the declarer struggle with their transportation. We also can break up the communication on a hand by attacking declarer's entries to one of the hands before they can set up the source of tricks in that hand (e.g., knocking out their side Ace before they establish a long suit.)

Ducking Plays

Some advanced strategies for defending a hand concentrate on confusing declarer and possibly causing declarer to misplay the hand by making them think something is true that is not. One of the most common ways to accomplish this kind of deception is by making a ducking play. The classic example of a ducking play when the declarer has AQJxx on the dummy and takes a finesse. If we (behind this suit) duck our King smoothly and in tempo, then declarer may think that the King is in partner's hand. Declarer will cross back to their hand and "repeat the finesse" – expecting it to work again. In doing so, they will often open up other suits for us or use up valuable transportation for themselves. When declarer repeats the finesse, we now win our King, much to the declarer's surprise, and then attack the suits where we have other winners. This ducking play can often serve as a variation on a holdup play as well by cutting communication to the long suit on the dummy.

Although there is risk that our trick could go away when we make a ducking play because declarer might not repeat the finesse, we should always keep an eye out for ways in which we can fool the declarer.



More Shifts

There are other complex ways that we want to consider for creating difficulty for the declarer. We cannot master these relatively complex situations without a vast knowledge of card combinations – and we will not attempt to go into those details here. But our goal will be to give the declarer a “losing option.” If we can consistently give the declarer choices of lines of play that do not work, then we will be successful when the declarer chooses a bad one.

As we attack new suits to set up our winners and as we try to create new and difficult situations for the declarer, we must also attempt to not give the declarer tricks to which they are not entitled. This means we need to be careful to understand that when we break a suit it may cost us a trick. Specifically, if we can see a card in the dummy that touches a card that we hold, then this is a dangerous situation – one that contains high risk. It may contain high reward (and it may be the right play to lead this suit) but we must consider that we are taking risk in attacking this suit.

Turnabout Is Fair Play

As we are considering these active vs. passive defensive options (attacking vs. playing safely), we will want to change gears when it is time to do so. We want to use some of declarer’s more complex play techniques against them. We will do this by “getting up out of our chairs and sitting in declarer’s seat” (figuratively, not literally, of course.) This will allow us to see the hand as the declarer does – and often allow us to see what they are trying to accomplish early enough to do something about it.

We are talking about combatting endplays and squeezes. The way that we do this is by making shifts that break up squeezes and prevent the declarer from being able to execute them, or by making it so the declarer cannot endplay either partner or us. Seeing these shifts early enough in the hand to do something about is a difficult part of defense. One play that many defenders miss is using the endplay against declarer. Late in the hand (when transportation is gone) it is often the case that we can score an extra trick by putting the declarer in the hand that they do not want to be in by endplaying either them or the dummy.

Conclusion

As you can see, the defenders have many options and tools to combat the declarer. We hope that this summary of some of these tools familiarizes you with or reminds you of what options may be available to you. Choosing the right option on any given hand can be extremely difficult, but you cannot find the right option if you aren’t at least considering it!