



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(479) Partnership Defense Philosophy

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

Our number one objective as a defender is to work together with partner to take as many tricks as possible and maybe defeat the opponents' contract. This may seem obvious or simple, but defense is complicated, and it is important for us to stay focused on the goal of each hand. In working together with partner against the declarer, it may seem that we have an advantage -- 2 vs. 1. But having two people, who need to communicate and not get confused or get in each other's way, work together is actually a disadvantage. The declarer has the advantage of seeing all of their side's assets, both in their hand and the dummy. This makes playing the hand far easier than defending it. To overcome these disadvantages as defenders, we need to develop good concepts and philosophies to help us best defend the hand.

Defensive Goals – IMPs vs. MP

When we focus more on the details of our goals as defenders, we need to vary our approach based on different situations. As defenders, when we are playing IMPs (teams), our goal is usually just to beat the contract. We don't care much about overtricks or down one vs. down two. Our primary focus is to set the opponents and get a positive score. In contrast, if we are playing Matchpoints (pairs) then our goal becomes to take all of our tricks. Setting the opponents down one can still be a very bad board if we could have beaten them two or more or made something of our own. Going plus on a board at Matchpoints is not a guarantee of a decent result and thus we need to be more focused on getting everything we deserve. This means that we will take some risks that might allow the opponents to make their contract (like not cashing the setting trick when we are on lead in the middle of the hand) if we think that we can do better by being patient and waiting to take even more tricks. It is important that we are on the same page as partner about how we approach the defense to each of these very different situations.



What We Do as Defenders

Both defenders also need to practice the same general concepts on defense. One of the most important concepts that all defenders should be following is:

Think about what declarer is trying to accomplish and then try to figure out how to stop it.

This is sometimes referred to as “get up out of our chair and sit down in declarer’s chair” in order to figure out what is going on. If we can figure out what is going on, we want to try to let partner know by signaling them. This is important because partner may be the only one that can stop declarer, or we may need their cooperation to defeat the declarer. The sooner we can do this, the better chance we have of defeating the declarer.

Teamwork – Communicating with Partner (Signaling)

The way that we work together with partner (in addition to having the same defensive goals) is to have good agreements and priorities about our signals with/to partner. Not every partnership has to do this the same way, but it is important to have good understandings with partner about our priorities with our signals, and in what specific situations would we do something different.

When partner leads a suit the most common approach is to have the following list of priorities for the meaning of the card we play:

1. Attitude
2. Count
3. Suit Preference

The main idea is that we give attitude first. When our attitude is known or irrelevant, we switch to giving partner a count signal. Only when both attitude and count are known or irrelevant do we give partner a suit preference signal.

This is the most common set of agreements. Some players prefer to give more suit preference and give it ahead of count – 132 instead of 123.



Signaling Philosophy (Style)

When we are signaling to partner through signals or discards, it is important that we are on the same page with partner about what our signals mean. There are two general philosophies that we take in our signaling:

- Cards show what we have.
- Cards tell partner what to do.

These ideas will frequently be the same thing, but it is important for us to have an understanding with partner about our approach to signaling. A simple way to play is just to tell partner what to do. But this assumes that we actually know what to do! That is a big problem, because many times we will not know what to do, so we will not be able to effectively tell partner what to do. It is better to have the general approach that we tell partner what we have, and we expect partner to “think” and “play bridge” in order to figure out what to do – they often have more information than we do – between our signal and their hand.

Thus, generally we guide the defense by telling partner what we have. But this does not always work either. The best defense combines both of these ideas at the appropriate times.

- The way that we make the decision depends on the situation.
- The most important rule is that we expect partner to think. Partner does not just blindly follow what we are saying.
- We want a mix of being the boss when we know it is right to make the decision and being helpful and giving information when we are not sure what to do.

The key is to guide partner into making good decisions and be helpful, not to be another opponent (don't become the “center opponent!”)

Sometimes we will “lie” to keep partner from doing something stupid.

Example 1

If partner leads a suit, we need to think about more than just that suit - we need to think about the entire hand. Before we decide to encourage or discourage the lead, we should think about what will happen if we discourage. Sometimes it will be obvious, other times not. If we discourage partner's lead, then partner will likely shift (usually to dummy's weakest suit -- say three small cards.) If we cannot stand for partner to shift to this suit (meaning we do not have an honor in the suit) then we need to consider encouraging partner's opening lead. This concept, known as obvious shift, can be applied with many different levels of complexity. The most important thing is to think about what decisions partner is facing and try to keep partner from making poor defensive plays. *Keep in mind that sometimes we encourage with nothing to stop partner from doing something even more costly.*



Conclusion

We can see that the general philosophy with which we defend a hand is vital. It is important that we find a way to work together with partner to accomplish our defensive goals. If we are on a different page from partner, we will end up working against one another – and defense is already too hard for that to be successful. How we work together with partner will vary on almost every hand, but having partner be on the same wavelength as us and having the same general approach will go a long way to making us better defenders.