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This Week in Bridge

(446) Types of Defense – Active vs. Passive

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

When we defend a hand, there are many things to try to do and even more things to think about. We must count our hand, partner's hand, and declarer's hand. We must watch our partner's signals and make sure that we give good, clear signals ourselves. It is easy to get bogged down in these details and "Miss the forest for the trees!" Here we take a step back from these details and look at the big picture of how to defend the hand. Only after we understand the macro (big picture) issues related to defense can we effectively make use of the micro (specific) information that we obtain from counting and signaling to defend our best.

Type of Defense – Active vs. Passive

As we try to focus on the big picture of defending a hand, we need to ask ourselves an important question: *Do we need to go get our tricks by setting them up as fast as possible or do we need to be careful not to help the declarer or set up any tricks for them?* The answer to this question will determine our general approach to defending a hand. If we feel that the hand is a race, that we need to go win our tricks before the declarer sets up their tricks or discards their losers, then we need to make aggressive, attacking plays. This is called *Active Defense*. On the other hand, if we think that declarer is likely to have a hard time making the contract without help from us, then we try our best to not give the declarer any help and we lead suits that we think are safe. This is called *Passive Defense*.

Active and passive defense are not binary concepts, but they form the ends of a spectrum of ways to defend a hand. These concepts are fundamentally determined by the balance of *Risk and Reward*. Any time we choose to make an active play we must consider what is the risk and what is the reward of the situation. The reward is stopping declarer from making more tricks (if they have tricks to be developed) and the risk is how much we will help declarer if the defense does not go the way we are hoping.

The question of how active vs. passive to be on a hand is not easy and one that a good defender continues to ask themselves all throughout the play. Our level of aggression will change as we receive more information from the dummy, declarer, and partner. How much we attack will change all throughout the hand: before opening lead, in the middle of the play, and in the endgame.



Attack!!

Declarers are often adept at making tricks “out of thin air.” It is amazing how many ways the declarer can find to try to make extra tricks if left to their own devices. Thus, we cannot leave the declarer alone to do as they please. We must put pressure on them and cut down on the number of “bites at the apple” that they get at scoring extra tricks. The way we do this is to attack! Our general approach to defense will be attacking – trying our best to set up winners for our side.

Example 1

Let’s look at some basic ways we make an attacking or active defense.

- *Lead away from an honor* – try to set up later winners for our side.
- *Lead a singleton* (shortness) – try to get a ruff.

There are some other defensive plays that straddle active vs. passive defense. These plays can serve to both set up tricks for our side while being careful not to give up tricks to the declarer.

- *Lead touching honors* – these set up tricks for us while being less likely to cost a trick than leading away from a single honor.
- *Lead trump* – this can be an attacking action if it is done to cut down on dummy’s ruffing values OR it can be a passive action if it is trying not to lead any new suits for the declarer.

There are times when it is correct to do something that seems *crazily aggressive*. We do this when we think our tricks will disappear or out of a sense of desperation. Some examples of these are:

- *Lead an unsupported Ace* – making sure to take our trick before it goes away.
- *Lead from Kx* – desperately trying to set up a trick or get a ruff!

Understanding our options and how much risk-reward is related to each kind of play takes experience and paying attention to when a play has gained you a trick and when it has cost you one.

Danger Suits (Danger Cards)

An important skill in helping us determine if we need to get active or stay passive is to recognize *Danger Suits*. Danger suits (or *danger cards*) are potential winners for the declarer. These are cards that we recognize as potentially turning into an extra trick – even if it seems unlikely, we still need to recognize what are the danger cards. These cards are generally cards in long suits that the declarer can set up, or they can be high cards that declarer can make use of. One important thing to keep in mind is that these danger cards can be in the dummy or in declarer’s hand. As you might imagine, it is much easier to spot these danger suits when we see them on the dummy. We must make use of information from the auction, from partner, and from the actions taken by the declarer to help us recognize when the danger suit is in declarer’s hand.



Card Combinations

Another very important part of understanding how the play of the hand will proceed is to have some basic knowledge of card combinations. The way we should learn these is not necessarily by studying them in a book - it is more by paying attention to the spot cards when we are either the declarer or a defender and focusing on when we win (or give up) extra tricks because of a particular play. One of the ways we make use of card combinations as a defender is knowing when not to break a suit – when it is too risky to attack a suit and so we need to sit back and force the declarer to do so themselves. (This concept of waiting for the other side to break a suit is also useful as declarer.)

Example 2

Qxx Jxx

If the opponents lead this suit, we will always have a trick (by playing second hand low); but if we lead this suit ourselves then we could easily have 3 losers and no winners (by allowing the opponents to play second hand low).

Conclusion

Many bridge players learn to count and discard and communicate with their partner. But after they have done these things, they still don't know what to do with the information. A good defender needs to figure out where the declarer is trying to develop tricks. One of the best ways of doing this is to think like the declarer – “get up out of your chair and sit in the declarer's seat” (mentally, that is.) By seeing the hand from declarer's perspective, we will more easily recognize where danger lies and what are the danger suits and cards. Only then can we plan for how to stop declarer. This stage of recognizing danger is a difficult one, but it is only the first step. We then must determine how aggressive we need to be to thwart the declarer's plans (active vs. passive.) Putting these two skills together in an effective way is what makes a truly great defender.