



# Adventures in Bridge, Inc.

*Leaders in Bridge Entertainment and Education*

PO Box 14915 ♠ Tallahassee, FL 32317

[info@advinbridge.com](mailto:info@advinbridge.com) ♠ 850 570 6459

[www.advinbridge.com](http://www.advinbridge.com)

## (65) Defensive Concepts - Middle of the Hand Defense

*Date: September 2013 © AiB*

*Robert S. Todd*

*Level: Intermediate / Advanced*

[robert@advinbridge.com](mailto:robert@advinbridge.com)

### General

When we are defending a hand we have many options available to us in order to attempt stop 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 the defenders' 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.

We are not trying to write 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 you are armed with the concepts (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 (core) 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). We will also learn a lot about the hand from what the declarer does (or does not do) in trumps - do they draw trump or do they try to make use of their trump in another way?

In addition to finding out additional 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 take a look at some of these options:

### Ruffs

The simplest and most valuable of all our defense 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 not longer a possibility – until all the trump are drawn.

### Uppercuts and Trump Promotions

We score tricks with our small trump by getting ruffs and we score our large trump in natural ways (winning tricks) but now we want to work on ways that we can score our middle size trumps. 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 these ways that we turn our middle size trump into a winner is by a *Trump Promotion*. A trump promotion is when we are ruffing behind the opponents. If they ruff low (or middle) then we can over-ruff and if they ruff high, then our trump becomes a natural winner. Some examples are:

- Singleton King behind the Ace. If Declarer ruffs low we over-ruff with our King. If Declarer ruffs high (with the Ace) then our King is now a natural winner.
- Qx (or Qxx). If Declarer ruffs with the Ace or King we will often score our Queen.
- J10x. 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 *Upper Cut*. If partner can ruff with a high enough trump to force the declarer to over-ruff 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 if 10x opposite Jxx. If partner can ruff with the Ten (from 10x) and force declarer to over-ruff 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 (difficult guesses about the layout of the trump suit.)

### Stopping Ruffs

Another aspect of suit contacts that we should focus on as defenders is stopping the declarer from making use of their trump they 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 misguided (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. As long as 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 different ways – Let's take a 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. That is, lead through the strength on the board. This will often force the Declarer to make a decision 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.

Another thing that leading through dummy's honors can accomplish is to take partner off a future endplay (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 the opponents 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 will frequently need to get partner to play a suit for us. In order to do that, we will need to get them on lead. We can do this by making a shift that finds their entry (Ex. Ace in another suit) or we can make a shift that develops an entry into their hand (lead our King, knocking out Declarer's Ace, allowing us to get to partner in with their Queen later in the hand.) If we can develop (find) an entry to partner's hand then they will be able to attack the suit we want to attack from the correct side (Ex. Lead through Declarer's King when we have the AQ behind them.)

### Responses to Declarer's Play

In addition to shifting to a new suit (attacking new suits) in order to win tricks on Defense we will 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" -- the honors that they are behind. (Ex. 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 -- our trick could go away. But more often, by holding up we cause the Declarer to struggle with their transportation - we 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 breakup the communication on a hand by attacking Declarer's entries to one of the hands before they can setup the source of tricks in that hand. (Ex. knocking out their side Ace before they establish a long suit.)

### **Ducking Plays**

One of our more advanced strategies for defending a hand is to confuse Declarer (cause 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 this is when the Declarer has AQJxx on the dummy and takes a finesse. If we duck our King (smoothly and in tempo) then Declarer will think that the King is in partner's hand. They will cross back to their hand and "repeat the finesse" - expecting it to work again. In doing to they will often open up other suits for us (set up other winners) or use up valuable transportation for themselves. When they repeat 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 (cutting communication to the long suit on the dummy.)

Though there is risk that our trick could go away when we make a ducking play (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 of 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 in order 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 is touching a card that we are holding 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. Specifically, we are going to 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 he is trying to accomplish early enough to do something about it.

Specifically, we are talking about combatting Endplays and Squeezes. The way that we do this is by making shifts that break up squeezes (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 the 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 – by end-playing either them or the dummy.

### **Conclusion**

As you can see there are many options (tools) that the Defenders have to combat the Declarer. We hope that this summary of some of these tools familiarizes you with or reminds you of what many of the options are that you have available to you. Choosing the right option on any given hand can be extremely difficult. But we cannot find the right option if we aren’t at least considering it!