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(68) Defense: Opening Leads – Listen to the Auction

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General

When we are defending a hand there is a lot to think about – there are many problems to solve and many things to figure out. As defenders we need many different skills. In order to effectively defend a hand:

- We need to be able to recognize where our tricks might come from and where declarer's tricks might come from;
- We need to be able to see the future – what could happen to our potential tricks. This will help us determine when to attack (be active) vs. when to sit back (be passive);
- We need to know how to attack and how to be passive. This makes use of our technical still in specific leads and card combinations.

To accomplish the above and make good decisions we must be able to collect information about the hand and combine it with our other skills. In order to do this:

- We will need to work together with partner. We will need to communicate well with partner – be able to signal them and be able to make use of their signals.
- We need to be able to understand the auction and *visualize* what is going on. This will be our focus for this discussion!

Listen to the Auction First

Our starting point for all defense is listening to the auction. This is even before and/or more important than focusing on our own hand. There is no rush to focus on our own hand – it is not going anywhere. We listen to the auction to determine the shape of both declarer and dummy (both their long and short suits.) The auction can help us try to answer many important questions:

- Do they have a fit?
- How big is their fit?
- Do they have shortness?

- Is the shortness a “ruffing value” – ruffing in the short trump side?

Think About Our Hand Next – Start to Defend

After we have thought about the information available to us from the auction we combine it with information from our hand. Once we have a vision of the hands around the table then we can try to play the hand – predict how the play might go.

- We think about the distribution of the suits (are they breaking well or poorly for the declarer?)
- We think about finesses – are they likely to work?
- We try to predict what the Declarer will try to do.

More Visualization and Action

Once we collect all the information available to us:

- From the auction,
- From our hand,
- From the declarer’s plays, and
- From partner’s signals,

Then we can try to “predict the future” and make use of this information to stop Declarer from accomplishing their goals.

To foil Declarer,

- We try to force Declarer into lines of play that we know are not going to work.
- If we cannot force the Declarer into losing lines of play and least give the Declarer as many losing options as possible.
- The rest of our defensive actions are sculpted by this information:
    - Attack when needed – if we think things are going to go well for the declarer.
    - Be passive when needed – if we think things are not going to go well for the declarer.
    - Lead trump to attack ruffing values.

Unfortunately we can’t always see the future completely. This will make defeating the declarer more difficult. It is important for us to have default actions when the information available to us leaves us unsure of how the play is likely to progress. This default defense is to *Attack*! If we are passive declarer will often conjure ways to develop extra tricks, so we must attack. We are armed with the weapons of how to best attack the Declarer from the above and our recent discussions.

Some Useful Examples

Example

If dummy has a source of tricks (especially if it is splitting well for the Declarer – like we have 3 cards in that suit) then we want to be aggressive and lead away from our honors. We have to go get our tricks. This is because if we do not attack then our tricks are going away. Thus, we have nothing to lose and we must go take lots of risk.

1♣ - 1♥

2♣ - 3♥

4♥

If our ♣ holding is Kxx under the ♣ bidder, then we suspect that the ♣ finesse is working and the ♣ suit is setting up, either by high cards or by being ruffed out.

Example

Declarer has shown two suits and dummy has chosen one (especially the second one). The dummy will frequently be short in Declarer's other suit. Thus, dummy will have ruffing values. This is the kind of auction where leading trump will reduce the value of dummy – take away their ability to trump.

1♠ - 1N

2♦ - Pass

The classic opening lead in this auction is a ♦ because we expect the dummy to have short ♠ and the Declarer to play the hand by ruffing losing ♠ in the dummy. Leading trump will cut down on their ability to do that.

Conclusion

Excellent defense is extremely difficult (the hardest part of the game) because it requires so much from the defenders. We must have lots of core knowledge, be able to interpret the auction, visualize the hand, predict the future line of play, and execute a plan to make it difficult for declarer to accomplish their goals. Given this complexity it is not surprising that we will frequently fail to accomplish our goal of good defense, but we must keep working to develop each of these parts of our game and blend them together with partner to make good defense.