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This Week in Bridge

(277) Defensive Discards Late in the Hand

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Level: 3

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

When defending a hand and given the chance (or forced to, depending on how we look at it) make a discard, we must choose carefully. Early in the hand we discard to give partner valuable information that we hope can help them determine what to do if they gain the lead, but as it gets later in the hand our discards have less to do with signaling partner and more to do with keeping the right cards and preventing declarer from setting up an extra trick. Let's look at these late in the defense discard situations in more detail.

Discards - Guarding a Suit

When declarer is cashing their winners late in a hand, we are often forced to make difficult discarding choices. Sometimes a count signal from partner earlier in the hand lets us know the layout of a suit and helps us decide if we need to keep guarding that suit. Other times, partner can help us count the hand and determine what declarer's last cards are by discarding all of their cards in a suit, allowing us to "see" all 13 of the cards in a particular suit. Other times we will need to guess which suit to keep or which cards to discard without much help from partner. In these situations, we sometimes must completely guess, but our goal is to work together with partner to make a better determination of what to do. If there are two danger suits (say ♥ and ♠) and partner is keeping ♥, then we should usually keep ♠. This does not seem difficult, but it is amazing how often the defenders get this relatively simple concept wrong and both keep the same suit. Another important concept is not letting yourself fall for the "pseudo-squeeze".

Example 1

♠ AKQ6
♥ 9
♦ --
♣ --
♠ JT93
♥ A
♦ --
♣ --

In this situation, if declarer has the ♥K, then we are legitimately squeezed and there is nothing we can do to guard the suits. If we discard a ♠, dummy's 4-card ♠ suit is good and if we discard our ♥A, declarer's ♥K will be good. In this type of situation, we need to be an optimist. We play partner to have the card that we need them to hold. They are very unlikely to have a 4-card ♠ suit since we have 4-cards and so does dummy, so we must keep our ♠ and hope that partner can guard the ♥ suit (that partner has the ♥K). The way to define this type of hand is to "play partner for the card we need them to hold" in order to defeat the contract.

Making It Difficult on the Opponents

One of our jobs, when discarding on defense, is to keep the right cards that allow us to guard a suit. Another important part of discarding is to do so in a way that does not help the declarer.

Example 2

AKJxx
xxxx Qx
xx

If the ♠ suit is laid out like this then we do not want to discard too many ♠ because it may help declarer guess how to play the hand late in the play - play for the drop, not take the losing finesse.

Here is another example of keeping the right cards, not to guard a suit, but so that we do not tip declarer off to how to play the hand.

Example 3

AJx
xxxx Qxx
KTx

If we (West) discard all our cards (or too many of these) in this suit, then we may help declarer guess which way to take the two-way finesse on the missing Queen.



Conclusion

Choosing which card to keep and which to discard at the end of a hand can be a challenging part of defense. A signal from partner (either attitude or count) may help us determine what to keep, but most importantly we must think logically and strive to guard or protect the suits that only we can protect. If you think about how the declarer is trying to produce extra tricks and do what you need to do to guard the suits you can, and count on partner to guard the other suits, you will dramatically improve your end of the play defense.