

# Defensive Strategies

Once again you and your partner are defending. Intellectually, you know you are supposed to defend half of the time, but lately it seems you are defending more and more. Then, everyone looks at you and says, “It’s your lead.” What should you be thinking about?

Hopefully, you aren’t thinking about the previous board or three boards ago. What should you be thinking about?

Today, I’m going to talk about Defensive Strategies. A strategy is a plan of action to achieve a certain aim. I won’t be talking about leads or carding. And, while I won’t be talking about defensive plays, such as uppercuts, holdups, and coups, I remind you that the same plays that you can make defensively are the same ones you make as declarer, and the better defender you are, the better declarer you will be. I’m only going to talk about defensive strategies.

However, I believe that if you know “why”, if you know “why”, you can figure out the “how”, “what”, “where”, and “when”. Let me ask again. It’s your lead. What should you be thinking about?

When I first started learning Bridge, defensive strategy was simple. Just pick the best suit, then select the card that best describes your holding in that suit. Why should you select a specific suit? There are many reasons, but you must first ask a few questions:

- What is the distribution of high cards around the table? If you have no possible entry ( if you have no possible trick) is it better to lead your longest suit or the suit your partner likely has?
- What is the likely distribution of suits? If you have a doubleton major and both opponents have denied holding the suit? Who has the major?
- In reviewing the auction, has partner bid? What should you expect?
- What’s the scoring method? Should you lead differently in IMP Scoring than in Matchpoints?
- Do we lead differently for notrump contracts than we lead against suit contracts? In general, we want to lead the longest and strongest suit held by our side. Against suit contracts, the only thing we can say, in general, is that we avoid underleading aces. We don’t generally lead a small card from a suit headed by an ace or lead unsupported aces.
- What is dummy’s potential for tricks? 1S – 1NT; 2H – pass. You hold four spades. How do you expect declarer to get rid of spade losers? What should you lead?
- What defensive strategy does the bidding call for? Let me explain. There are three types of defense: active, passive, and forcing.

What is active defense? Active defense involves trying to take your tricks quickly before declarer can discard losers.

- Declarer had a two-suited hand and might be able to discard losers on a long suit.
- Declarer’s side suit is breaking favorably.
- Opponents have shown slam interest through vigorous bidding
- You’re defending against a contract with long, running suits (1S – 2C; 2NT - 3NT).
- Opponents have a double fit (1S – 2D; 3D, 3S – 4S).

What is a passive defense? The Passive Defense involves sitting back and waiting for your tricks, while avoiding breaking new suits.

- Both dummy and declarer's hands are balanced.
- Declarer's hand appears strong, but dummy is weak.
- There's evidence of a misfit or bad split in key suits.
- You're defending 6NT or grand slams.

What is the Forcing Defense? The Forcing Defense aims to make declarer lose control of the hand by forcing the long trump hand to ruff.

- You (or you partner) have Ax(x) or Kxx of trumps.
- You (or your partner) have Qtxx or Jxxx of trumps.
- Dummy comes down with a long and a short suit, but you have the long suit blocked.
- You're defending a 4/3 trump fit.
- The bidding suggests dummy has shortness in a suit.

What should you lead for a forcing defense? Leader should lead the suit that defense hold longest fit.

Can the defensive strategy change? Yes. The opening leader has not had a chance to see the dummy, so the opening lead can only suggest a defensive strategy.

So, we've reviewed the auction and reviewed the distribution of high cards and suits. We've considered the type of contract. We've considered the scoring method. We've considered dummy's potential for tricks. We've decided on a defensive strategy. What are the three defensive strategies? active, passive, or forcing. Now what?

I've mentioned that I wasn't going to talk about leads, but I do want to interject one situation. Let's say the auction calls for a heart lead and you hold Jxxxx. How many honors must partner have for the lead to be correct?

While I'm on the topic of leads, if you must choose between leading dummy's suit or declarer's suit, which do you lead? Unless you are leading a singleton against a suit contract, leading dummy's suit loses tempo and helps declarer set up dummy's suit to discard losers. There is a situation where you want to put declarer to an early guess, but it's rare to want to lead dummy's suit. On the other hand, if you lead declarer's suit, you probably aren't giving up much because that is the way declarer would generally take the finesse.

So far, we've looked at defense from the perspective of the opening leader. Let's move to the third seat, the partner of the opening leader. What should third seat be thinking about, now that the dummy has come down?

- What is the distribution of high cards and suits around the table?
- In reviewing the auction, has partner bid?
- What type of defense does partner suggest?
- How many tricks can you count for declarer?
- How many defensive tricks are there?
- If you've had a competitive auction, should your defense depend on what you could make offensively?

Now, let's talk about implications. After all, Bridge is a game of logic.

Let's begin with notrump. Partner leads the seven of hearts against a notrump contact. What do you know?

- Opener denies a solid sequence.
- Opener denies AKQJxxx.
- Is the heart lead what the auction called for?
- Is the seven fourth best? We verify by looking for the 2,3,4,5, and 6.
- What is partner leading from?
- If the seven of hearts comes from shortness, could partner hold a tenace?
- Are there any other implications?

Now, let's talk about suit contacts. Partner leads the seven of hearts. What do you know?

- Opener denies a solid sequence.
- Opener denies AKxxx.
- Is the heart lead what the auction called for?
- Is the seven fourth best? We verify by looking for the 2,3,4,5, and 6.
- If the seven of hearts comes from shortness, could partner have a trump control with the hope of getting a ruff?
- Could partner have natural trump tricks and wants to forgo ruffs?
- If the seven is from length, partner denies a useful singleton.

Does the new information tell us anything else about declarer's high cards or tricks?

In the short amount of time that I've had, I've hoped to cover defensive strategies – that plan to take all of your defensive tricks. I've thrown out a bunch of questions in the hope that if you know “why”, you'll be able to figure out the “how”, “what”, “where” and “when”.

The plan to ask these questions should become a regular part of your approach to defense. No one expects that you should be able to incorporate this process immediately. It takes a while and part of that is to unlearn many bad habits.

However, I do contend that knowledge of these defensive strategies will improve your defensive game, but this approach will also improve your declarer play.

Any questions?