

BRIDGE – INTERMEDIATE LESSONS II – 06

Planning The Play of the Hand Avoiding Common Defender Playing Mistakes

Many common errors come from ingrained bad habits. Some come from remembering a previous success when using a low percentage strategy, which, when tried again, oft times, fails. Others are learned by listening to poor advice from Players who share unsound, unproven and, occasionally, erroneous advice. Many times you even hear experienced Players offering advice that will be taken up by a less-experienced Player who assumes that this advice is always pertinent. You may have heard some of these offerings: “*Always lead top of Partner’s suit,*” or “*Never lead away from a King or an Ace,*” or “*Always lead through strength.*” While there may be specific situations where these bits of advice are worth utilizing, they are not always applicable, and they often can cause a compromised result during the play when certain extenuating circumstances are present. Card-playing mistakes are more difficult to recover from than bidding mistakes. One poor card-playing error may prove to be crucial in maximizing or minimizing the results for either the Declarer or the Defenders.

Mistakes in Defense: Defense is the hardest part of the game of Bridge, as each Defender can see only one-half of his/her teams 26 cards, and therefore, needs to picture his/her Partner’s honor strength and length. Once the Dummy has been faced on the table the Defenders need to plan where and how to plan their attack. Communication between the Defenders is essential in order to be effective in a meaningful way. One slip by the Defense can cause the Declarer to make an otherwise un-makeable contract, or cause the Defenders one or more fewer tricks to which they would otherwise be entitled. The visualization of Dummy’s hand just tabled, the consideration of the bidding that has just ended, and the communication between the Defenders by their carding that is about to occur, all need be collectively employed so as to maximize the Defense that is about to take place. Card-playing mistakes are more difficult to recover from than bidding mistakes. One poor card-playing error may prove to be crucial in maximizing or minimizing the results for either the Declarer or the Defenders. Defending playing mistakes, as follow, need to be avoided, if possible!

a. The Opening Lead in Partner’s Suit Shows Length and Possible Strength, and if Wrongly Selected, Can be Misinterpreted and Devastating to the

Defense: An opening lead in the suit Partner has bid should give your Partner information about your length and strength in his/her suit. *Do not just lead the top card in Partner’s suit indiscriminately.* In a No-Trump contract, Partner will need to know how many cards you have in his/her suit so that he/she can judge if the Defense will win the 4th-round trick in the suit. In a Suit contract Partner needs to know which Player, you or the Declarer, will trump the 3rd-round of the suit, if it is played.

- From a doubleton lead the top card.
- From three cards or more, headed by an honor (Ace, King, or Queen), lead the lowest card.
- From three cards or more, without an honor, lead the 2nd highest.
- From a sequence (*Two* in sequence against a Suit contract and *Three* in sequence against a No-Trump contract), lead top of the sequence.
- If in No-trump, when holding four or more pieces, lead 4th best (Some Partnerships prefer 3rd or 5th best). Establish Partnership agreement on this issue.

b. Leading Away From an Ace Against a Suit Contract: If you lead a low card away from an Ace, against a Suit contract, in a suit without holding the King, as well, you will often give a trick to an Opponent's King, and if the Opponent's King were to have been a singleton, you will make no tricks in that suit, at all. If you do have the Ace without the King in a suit, you should usually wait to play that suit until you have some idea which of the other three Players holds the King. Your Ace may be used to take the King later during the play of the hand, if it is held by one of the Opponents. If the King were to be, hypothetically, held by your right-hand Opponent (RHO), the Declarer, your Partner may be able to lead that suit so that you can trap Declarer's King.

c. Continuing to Lead a Suit that the Declarer Has Previously Led: The Declarer has the advantage over the Defenders of being able to see all 26 cards held by the declaring Partnership. If the Declarer chooses to lead a particular suit you should be wary of returning that suit. The Declarer's plan of play must involve that suit and playing it must inure to Declarer's benefit, otherwise he/she would not likely have chosen to have led it. **The Defenders should not help the Declarer by continuing with a suit the Declarer finds beneficial to play.** That which is helpful to one of the teams is usually detrimental to the other.

d. Breaking New Suits: In general, against either Suit or No-Trump contracts, it is usually detrimental for the Defense to keep breaking new suits. Alternatively, it is usually best to continue with ones that have already been played. Statistically speaking, every time you, on Defense, break a new suit, you are giving an additional one-half trick to the Opponent.

e. Leading Trumps Against a Suit Contract When Holding:

JX, QX, JXX, QXX, or X in the Trump Suit: Leading a Trump card from a **JX** (if Partner happens to hold the **QXX**), from **QX** (if Partner happens to hold the **JXX**), from **JXX** (if Partner happens to hold **QX**), and from **QXX** (if Partner happens to hold **JX**) will likely cost the defense one trick. Under these circumstances if Declarer breaks the Trump suit, the defense will always take one trick, but if the defense breaks the Trump suit, they will take none. Leading a singleton (**X**) Trump is likely to be equally bad in that, assuming an 8-card or 9-card Golden fit held by the Declarer, the lead of the singleton Trump by the Defense is likely to finesse Partner out of a potential trick if he/she were to hold **QXX** or **JXXX**. Let the Declarer attempt to find the missing honor. Other than the aforementioned trump holdings, the lead of a Trump card against a Suit contract is often an excellent one. Sometimes it is the only one that will either defeat the contract, or possibly limit the number of over-tricks taken by the Declarer. It accomplishes this by reducing the number of Trumps in the hand which has fewer Trumps (usually the Dummy) by limiting the number of times the hand with short Trump cards can ruff.

f. Establishing Tricks For the Declarer: There are many circumstances about which Defenders must be wary so as not to give a trick or tricks to the Declarer, tricks to which the Declarer would otherwise not be entitled. They are, but not limited, to the following:

(1) One of the worst leads for the Defense is that of the lead of an unsupported Ace. If you lead the Ace you may well establish the King as a trick for your Opponents. It is usually best to lead another suit and wait to try and take the Opponents' King with your Ace.

(2) If you have both the Ace and the King in a suit you may choose to lead the Ace. Having done so, however, Defenders must be wary of continuing to lead out the King, for if they do, they may set up the Queen for the Declarer. Prefer to establish tricks in suits where they don't have immediate winners *before* playing your King.

(3) Avoid leading the Declarer's long suit or setting up a 4th-round trick for the Declarer against No-Trump contracts.

(4) In Trump contracts do not lead the Declarer's side suit (usually the Dummy's long suit). While the Declarer is drawing Trumps, Defenders should be careful not to discard in the Declarer's side suit. After drawing Trumps the Declarer will often look to make length tricks from this side suit. The Defenders, whenever possible, should try to maintain length in the side suit to prevent the Declarer from establishing length tricks. **Keep equal length in any 4-card or longer suit either revealed in the Dummy or shown by the Declarer in the auction.** When defending, maintain parity with the Dummy, whenever possible.

(5) In Suit contracts, avoid leading a suit that the Dummy can trump. A better scenario is to lead any suit where the Dummy has exactly three cards. Without length, this is unlikely to be Declarer's side suit, and without shortage, you will not be assisting the Declarer by establishing a void in the Dummy allowing Declarer to make additional tricks by trumping.

(6) When in Suit contracts, avoid giving the Declarer a ruff and a sluff.

g. Not Covering an Honor with an Honor: If an Opponent leads an honor you should usually cover that honor with a higher honor in order to promote lower cards in either your hand or Partner's hand (Example 1). If two or three honors are played on one trick then the ten and nine may take tricks later. If there is a sequence of honors shown, cover the honor on the second trick, not the first, as Partner may hold a singleton honor (Example 2).

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h. Giving Declarer a Ruff and a Sluff: If a Defender leads a suit which both Declarer and Dummy can trump, simultaneously, you are said to have given a "*ruff and sluff.*" This usually gives away one trick because Declarer can trump (*ruff*) your lead with a Trump from one hand while discarding (*sluffing*) a loser from the other hand.

i. Failing to Lead Correctly From This Special Sequence: Do not treat leading from all sequences the same; i.e., lead "Top-of-a-Sequence". Against a No-Trump contract, the lead from KQTX(X) requires special consideration. Holding the aforementioned combination, the correct lead is the Queen. It asks Partner to dump either the Jack or the Ace, if either is held. Absent Partner doing so, the holder of this combination abandons the play of this suit further until Partner leads it. Doing this stops a savvy Declarer from getting two tricks if he/she had held the below-referenced holding. A savvy Declarer would refuse to take the Queen, encouraging West to lead the suit once again which then gives Declarer a second trick in the suit, one more than Declarer was originally entitled.

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