

*...From the Diary of a Bridge Savant...*

I have been playing more bridge this month than has been my custom. I am playing this much, because I enjoy playing with fun and friendly partners. The only problem is that I am not having fun. The fault in this matter does not lie with my partners. The fault is that I am not defending hands well.

I sat tonight and thought. I thought, "What am I doing wrong?" I find that reviewing different defensive disciplines help me figure out where I can improve my actions. I started with my signal-carding--my signaling was OK. Next, I asked if I was counting well--i was counting OK. Then, I asked if I was leading the right card from my suit holdings--I was leading OK. Finally, I asked if I was making good plans on defense--I discovered that I was failing in this aspect. I had just found the flaw in my thinking.

Every bridge teacher underscores the need for declarer to make a plan. What they often forget to teach is that the defenders need to make a plan, too. Planning a defense is often easier than making a plan as declarer, because there are only five ways to defend a hand of bridge. The flaw I discovered was that I had forgotten one of the five ways to defend.

The four I remembered were the active defense, the passive defense, the defense that cuts down on declarer's ruffing power, and the defense of developing trump tricks for the defense. These are all very good defensive strategies, and each will get you many a great board. Yet, the one that I forgot is the greatest of all--the forcing defense.

The active defense is used when the defense needs tricks in a hurry. An example of a need for an active defense is when I am defending a suit slam. Modern theory states that if the defense is likely to have an ace, then I should lead from a king or queen hoping that partner has a supporting honor. When it works, the defense knocks out the stopper, gets in with the side ace, and takes the setting trick. Without the fragment lead, declarer often has the timing to make the slam.

The passive defense is often used against NT and grand slam contracts. Modern theory states that leading from a four-card suit with one honor or a four-card suit with broken honors is fraught with peril. I, therefore, will often make a lead from a lesser holding in the hopes of not giving declarer extra tricks. Furthermore, having listened to the auction, I will often lead passively in order to try to set up partner's hand. Fundamentally, the passive lead is the opposite of an active lead. If I believe our sides tricks are not going away, then I will make a passive lead in order to reduce the risk of giving the declarer extra tricks.

The defense that cuts down on declarer's ruffing power is mainly used when the short-trump hand is suspected to contain shortness in a suit the defense has strength in.

An example of this is when declarer has bid two suits, and they land in one of declarer's suits. I, having strength in declarer's other suit, will often lead a trump in order to reduce declarer's ability to ruff the side-suit's losers in dummy.

The defense of developing trump tricks is often used when partner has shown strength in a suit that I am short in. The short-suit is led with the hopes that partner has control of his suit or a quick outside entry. When partner has firm control of his suit, I am often able to make useful discards. When partner does not have firm control of his suit, I am often able to ruff the losers in partner's suit and rob declarer of easy tricks.

Now we come to the defense that I have forgotten--the forcing defense. Of the five defenses, the forcing defense is what the experts prefer. If the expert feels that the conditions are right for this defense, they will choose it over all the others. The forcing defense centers around stealing control of the hand away from declarer. The best times to try to steal control of the hand from declarer is when the declarer is known to be two-suited or when one member of the defense is suspected to have four or more trumps. When the expert suspects the conditions are right, the expert will lead from his strongest holding. This could very easily mean that the expert will lead from the AQT, AJT, or KJT. The expert leads the suit in order to try to make declarer use his trumps to prevent losers in that suit. The result is that declarer either runs out of trump or is unable to pull trump. The defense has effectively stolen control of the hand from declarer.

Alas, I had forgotten the most enjoyable way to defend a bridge hand. I cannot fathom how I could have forgotten how perversely delicious it is to wrest control of a hand from the declarer and watch his face sag in defeat. This is not to say that I gloat--for me, it is a private joy. I imagine it is the same sort of joy an opponent gets when they do good things against me.