

NO TRUMPS PARTNER?

Chapter 06: Basic Defence in No Trump Contracts

Now, by way of a diversion, let's turn our attention to defence. Since I have recommended that you try and penalise opponents' weak 1NT opening whenever possible, it's only fair that I help you with your defence when opponents are playing No Trump contracts. Not always will opponents be doubled, there are times when you will be defending ordinary, undoubled, No Trump contracts, and not always 1NT but also 2NT, 3NT and even 6NT. Is there a difference? Yes, a huge one, and that is something few people realise, even those considering themselves to be experts at the game. But let's start with the basics before we progress to the more esoteric. By learning the basic way to defend first, you'll be in much better shape to go on to the really killing defence that will make your opponents think about giving up opening No Trumps altogether! But when they do, you'll be prepared with your gun defence against trump contracts as well, won't you?

Let me reproduce some advice on basic defence from one of my earlier books.

I am reproducing one chapter (with some additions and deletions) from my book on basic defence, because the defence against TRUMP contracts is just as crucial, and because the concept of defending against No Trump contracts has to be appreciated in the full context of all your defence.

BASIC DEFENCE

The Opening Lead

Defence is one of the three core aspects of bridge, and in my view the hardest part of the game. I hope that by following the logic and principles of why you do certain things as a defender, your defence will improve considerably. It may be the hardest part of the game, but can also be the most enjoyable once you start improving.

The most important thing you need as a defender is the intelligence to THINK, not just follow rules blindly. Whether you are declarer, or defending, you need to do SOME thinking about your strategy. In fact you need to develop a strategy which will give you the required tricks, or limit the opponents to as few as possible. During this series we will be concentrating mainly on DEFENCE, though bidding and declarer play will of necessity be covered, because they are of great importance to the defenders as well.

There are two main parts to defending. Firstly, because the defenders get the first opportunity to play a card, the opening lead is VITAL. You have the first chance to strike a blow, and you may not get another opportunity, so you must make the most of your opening lead. It is quite amazing how many contracts COULD be defeated if you could see all four hands and THEN decide what to lead. Unfortunately, we don't have the benefit of X-ray vision, and many contracts make without as much as a second thought.

Because the opening lead can make so much difference to a contract's success or otherwise, it also follows that any player who is consistently able to make the most effective lead will also gain a large number of match points in a match point contest, or i.m.p.s in a teams game. But it is not only finding the BEST lead that gains at lower levels of play. Avoiding the AWFUL leads can also gain a great deal.

One of the worst habits of the beginner, and early learner, and even some playing in top grades, is to try and grab as many tricks as they can from the word go. THAT is nearly ALWAYS the WRONG strategy, because there are, after all, a total of thirteen tricks to be taken. The most important thing is to take as many as possible and not the order in which you take them. Your strategy must, therefore, be more encompassing than merely grabbing what tricks you can as soon as possible.

Cashing up all your tricks will leave opponents with the rest, and unless the cashing up results in defeating the contract, it is better to employ your high cards more productively. Let me give you an obvious example: If you CASH the ace from say AJ10 and dummy has K54 and declarer Q32, you have just set up a trick for BOTH the king AND queen. Your wonderful ace has taken a trick all right, but it has captured the two and four from declarer's combined assets. IF you WAIT, and play the TEN if declarer leads towards the king, your ace will later be able to capture declarer's queen, and your jack will also take a trick. HIGH cards are there to capture HIGH cards not be wasted on twos and threes.

There is of course far more to defence than that, and the best way to improve it is to start thinking about it from the moment the bidding starts. If the opponents win the auction and you are on lead, you should be a long way towards already having developed your strategy for the defence. It is NOT simply about learning rules for leading, like 'fourth highest from longest and strongest' or 'top of touching sequences'. Leading is about DEFENCE, and defence has to be PLANNED before you embark on it. A LOT of the time the rules for leading will certainly be useful, but to blindly follow them should be left to the parrots of this world and not the thinkers. So, let's see what you should be thinking about when you prepare yourself to make that 'killing' lead.

The first thing that you must learn is that you must decide which SUIT you will lead, based on your total holding in ALL the suits, and only THEN should you decide which CARD to lead based on your holding in the suit.

Secondly, you should know that leading against a TRUMP contract and leading against a NO TRUMP contract are two COMPLETELY different things, with different strategies required.

The MAJOR difference is that against NO TRUMP contracts, your long suit WILL come in handy IF you get a chance to use it properly. But, unless your suit is solid, or your partner contributes the missing card or cards, you must EXPECT to lose a trick or two early in order that you can enjoy the tricks that YOUR side has in the suit. With luck, this may be only ONE trick lost and three or four gained, but it may take longer than that.

Against a TRUMP contract, though, because opponents have chosen a suit as trumps, it is wishful thinking if you expect any of your LOW cards ever to become tricks. It is therefore important that you take, or develop, QUICK tricks whenever possible. You will, as in the earlier example, still NOT wave your unsupported aces in the air, but you will take an ace (if the bidding tells you to!) if you hold the king AS WELL. Or, you will lead your king if you have the queen as well, because at least when the king loses to the ace, your queen will be a trick, if you get a chance to take it.

So, while you would lead LOW from AKxxx against a NO TRUMP contract, hoping that once you LOSE the first trick you will then have four more later, you would NEVER lead low from that holding against a TRUMP contract. That is because declarer may make the queen, and your ace and king may run away because declarer has the TRUMP CONTROL.

There are other good holdings to lead from that are equally good against suit OR No Trump contracts, for instance from QJ109 the queen is a great lead because:

a) dummy might have the king and partner the ace; b) partner may have the king and thereby set up whatever tricks you have after losing to the ace; or c) if declarer has both the ace and king, then one more round may set up a trick or two for you.

Similarly, leading low from e.g. KJxx will set up tricks for your side, whether against suit contracts or No Trumps, whenever partner has the ace or queen, but could be costly when partner has neither.

THAT is why it is important to take note of the bidding, because THAT, in conjunction with your own hand, will give you a hint as to whether such a lead is a good one or not.

OK, let us quickly summarise the 'art of leading': Leading is not about following any set rules blindly, it is about taking notice of the BIDDING and then PLANNING a defence, and only then following the rules as to which CARD of the suit to lead. Even THESE rules sometimes need to be bent or broken, but they ARE there because they are the best rules for MOST circumstances.

So, how do you decide which SUIT to lead, much less which CARD to lead? If you try to imagine what declarer and dummy should hold if opponents' bidding is reasonably accurate, as well as how declarer might play the hand, you should get a pretty good idea of how you will defend. And you must also think about what partner might, or might not, have.

By and large, against NO TRUMP contracts, you can decide to ATTACK by leading your longest and strongest suit (hence the rule 'fourth highest of longest and strongest'), or you can make a SAFE lead which will give nothing away. You see, sometimes attack is the best form of defence, but other times defence is the best form of attack! The bidding should help you decide, but this will be more so when you start getting opponents who know how to bid properly!

Against a TRUMP contract, there are more things you can look for, and the bidding IS most important. You can look for extra tricks from your hand from RUFFS, by leading your SHORT suit, or look for ruffs in PARTNER'S hand by leading your LONG suit. Or, you can try to stop declarer making use of any ruffing power in dummy by starting, and persisting, with a trump. Or, you can try to attack declarer's trump holding by leading your own, or partner's, suit and forcing declarer to ruff at every opportunity until YOUR side has more trumps than declarer. This only works if dummy is short of trumps.

All of this is easier said than done, but let's look at some recent deals and see what we can learn from them about making the best lead, given the opportunity. Some of the deals you will see are reasonably straightforward, even at the basic level of learning that we are at right now. Others are more complicated and the reader will need to return to them at a later stage to get the full significance. Whatever the case, the main thing is that your THOUGHT PROCESSES start to get stimulated to the extent that you can begin to visualise more than just what is right in front of you.