

Ultimate Defence 06

Now it's time to return to where we were at before we got sidetracked by our diversion. As you saw last time, the opening lead can be absolutely crucial, so let us learn a bit more about that part of defence.

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.

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 were able to 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 three 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 other 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 total 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.