

DEFEND LIKE A DEMON

Make The Best Lead.

There is no fool-proof leading system. Every rule is there to be broken occasionally. Those two truisms being uttered we are still left with what might be described as best practice.

Do listen to their bidding, try to work out their holdings and your own countering strategy. For example, if they have each bid a different suit but then settled on a third suit as trumps, then they probably intend to make some of their tricks by cross-ruffing. Thwart those ambitions by leading trumps. Or, perhaps they have a trump fit in one suit, but the bidding tells you that dummy will also have a long strong side suit. In a case like this, unless you make your tricks quickly, you won't make them at all. Time to break a rule and lead an unsupported Ace in one of the other suits, or break another rule and lead away from an unsupported King or Queen. Perhaps they have found a trump fit, but you know that it is breaking badly because you have at least 4 cards in their trump suit and a singleton. Do NOT lead that singleton! You are due to make one or two trump tricks anyway. You won't make more by leading your singleton. Lead from your own long suit. You want to make declarer ruff. If you can make him ruff twice, you sometimes finish up with more trumps than he has and his hand falls to pieces.

Unless you have one of the special cases mentioned above, your style of leads should be parsimonious. Do not lead an unsupported Ace – that will set up their King. Never lead away from a tenace, give nothing away, not even to an op-shop. Don't lead trumps for them – your partner might have the Queen. Don't open any doors, especially not to Jehovah's Witnesses. Think mean, miserable and grudging. Follow the surgeon's golden rule, above all do no harm.

Of course if you have a suit headed by the AK, you can make an aggressive lead, but normally it pays to be a passive defender. Your leads shouldn't give anything away. For example, if you lead the Queen away from QJ85, Declarer would know to finesse you for the Jack. Don't lead rags that give the count on that suit. Declarer might make much more use of that than your partner.

This is how passive leads go. You look at every suit in turn and you consider which card in any of the suits would make a good lead. For example, this might be your hand and they are in 1NT.

♠K7 ♥AQ64 ♦974 ♣Q863

Before I go any further, I have to stress again, that there is no correct lead. Any lead you choose and any lead I choose could turn out to be the worst possible lead. We just hope that our choices will come out better than average.

So I look at the spade suit. If I lead the King, I might be giving declarer an undeserved trick and if I lead small, declarer might win the first trick cheaply and then drop my King with his Ace. On the other hand, nobody has bid spades, transferred to spades or even used Stayman. Declarer can't have more than 4, so perhaps partner has 5 or 6 spades and would be thrilled with a spade lead. If I'm going to lead a spade, I have to get out of his way, so I must lead the King.

I look at the heart suit and like what I see. If I don't lead a heart, Declarer might not get to make any hearts. If I do lead hearts, I might give a trick away. If I lead a small heart, partner might have the Jack or even the King and I will make at least three tricks in the suit, but only 3 and that won't take 1NT light.

I look at the diamond suit. Not much prospect there. I certainly won't set up any diamond tricks for me. But I have a partner. If I lead a diamond, anything partner has will be under declarer, so I'm simply making it easier for declarer to finesse my partner. However, partner could easily have top diamonds and like the lead. What I like most about a diamond lead is that it does not give declarer anything that he does not already have. If partner's diamond honours are finessible, then they were always finessible. My lead will clarify that for declarer, but it won't create extra tricks for him.

Finally I look at the club suit. If declarer and dummy have the Ace and King of clubs then they will have to find the queen to set up the suit. My lead of a club would make that easy for them. If they were in 3NT then the lead of a club would be even more of a no-no because people play in 3NT because they can't find a major trick. It is generally better to prefer a major to a minor suit lead against no-trumps.

So what is my final decision? It's not going to be a club and it's not going to be a heart. I am tossing up between the King of spades and the Nine of diamonds. I am severely tempted by the King of spades, but I decide on the Nine of diamonds. What finally clinches it for me is that I have the 974 and not the 542 of diamonds. That 9 is a clear big rag.

When you are playing a passive defence, then it is wise to play reverse attitude with your spot card leads. That 9 says, look at me, I am an obvious big spot card. This is not giving count, not saying I have an even number of diamonds, nor saying that I have an odd number of diamonds. It is not giving suit preference either. It is not saying that because it is a big rag, look for the higher ranked unbid suit. The Nine of Diamonds is simply saying, "Partner, I do not have any interest in diamonds. If you get in, do not come back diamonds. Look elsewhere. Look at dummy and try to work out which suit I might be interested in." I would prefer him to switch to hearts, but he doesn't know that and might switch to clubs which does no harm or to spades. The card that partner returns will also be giving reverse attitude (low=like; high=no interest). If he returns a low spade and my King wins, I shall return a spade. If he plays a highish spade spot card and my King wins, I shall return another diamond.

Let Dummy Be Your Friend.

Dummy is not there to help declarer. It is on display to help the defenders. You have listened to the bidding. Now look at dummy. They have bid up to 3NT and en route, dummy has bid spades and clubs. When partner leads the Nine of diamonds, this dummy goes down. You Have the AQ of diamonds. What are your thoughts?

♠9876 ♥A4 ♦J7 ♣KQJT6

Dummy has bid spades, on the strength of which declarer bid 3NT, but his spade suit is rather thin. Perhaps partner has spade tricks we should be setting up. You aren't likely to make your Queen of diamonds, but it will at least prevent declarer getting to dummy with the Jack. You rise with your Ace.

♠T432 ♥765 ♦AQ8 ♣A83

Partner can't have much, maybe 6 or 7 HCP and you know that whatever he has is in the majors. What card do you hope that he has which will enable us to defeat the contract? That's right, the King of hearts. If declarer has the King of hearts then we can't stop him reaching dummy to enjoy four club tricks. So dummy is helping us plan our defence. I return a heart. Declarer plays the Queen, partner covers with his King and declarer ducks. Partner must be on the ball and play another heart. Now declarer starts the club suit from dummy. Do you put your Ace up? If not, when do you put your ace up? I normally don't give a rat's turd for count signals, but in this situation they are an absolute must. It is partner's bounden duty to tell you how many clubs he has. The standard method is to play his

highest card to tell you he has an even number and his lowest card to tell you he has an odd number. You are going to try and work out how many clubs partner has and hence how many clubs declarer has and you are going to hold up your Ace until declarer plays his last club. Sometimes your masterplan is foiled. Partner could have had a singleton rendering his signal meaningless or declarer could have more clubs than you do, but you have to try. When eventually you take your Ace you could switch to spades. In all this dummy has been your guide.

Sometimes dummy contains a surprisingly long solid suit or one that you know is working because you don't hold any missing honour. If you can win the opening lead, do so and then don't muck around. Cash any winners that you can and then lead to any potential winners partner might have. If you don't, your winners are likely to disappear on the "danger suit". Some partners don't see the danger. They freeze like a deer in the headlights or a gopher in front of a rattlesnake. Danger suit = cash out!

Render Unto Caesar That Which is Caesar's.

Declarer will be entitled to certain tricks and there is nothing you can do about it. His top honours will make; his established trump suit will make; if the finesses are on for him, then they are on for him. Don't sweat it. Your aim was never to take him light. Your aim was always with every contract to prevent him from making any undeserved tricks. If you take him light in the process, well and good. Those tricks that declarer has are a blessing because you can always get off lead by giving him a trick he already has, thus avoiding leading away from a tenace or opening up a new suit.

Learners are often loathe to let declarer ruff a suit, but there is nothing inherently wrong with that, in fact it can be a good thing. Use up his trumps so that the contract is reduced to a no-trump game. What you must not do of course is give him the dreaded ruff and slough, so just check that that he is not void in both hands when you lead a suit for him to ruff. Similarly, if he could have drawn your last trump, but didn't, you can work out that he doesn't mind you ruffing one trick as long as he is able to ruff with both his remaining trumps, one in each hand. He is trying to swap one trick for two. Foil his evil plans by returning your trump.

When you play hard to get by not leading away from your tenaces and not opening up new suits, declarer will be annoyed and might resort to a cunning plan called the strip and throw in. He wants to strip or exhaust you off cards in two suits, throw you in with the last card in the third suit and therefore make you open up the fourth suit. Sometimes you can't escape the trap, but sometimes you can throw say your winning queen in the hope that partner has the jack where you don't mind him being on lead.

Sometimes when dummy goes down, you will see that dummy holds a side suit headed by the Ace and nothing else and oddly declarer does not seem to be playing that suit. Learners are often mesmerized by that Ace in dummy. They think, "oh dear declarer has control of that suit, so I shan't lead it." Sure, he's got control, so your job is to knock that control out. Give him his Ace and thereby set up you and your partner's King and Queen.

When To Twitch and When Not To Twitch.

There is nothing much in one of dummy's suits and you hold just the Ace. What do you do when a small card is called for from dummy?

- Method One: You play the Ace quickly and smoothly.
- Method Two: You play a small card at normal tempo.
- Method Three: You twitch and hesitate if you don't have the Ace and play a small card quickly and smoothly if you do.

- Method Four: You twitch and hesitate internally as soon as dummy goes down and you have looked at your hand. This way you will not be urged to do so when that suit is played. You have foreseen the event and will play a small card in tempo.

Method One is ethical, but not wise. The situation you are envisioning is that declarer has KJ and your partner has the Queen. You would like to make 2 cards from the suit rather than 1. Your correct action is Method Two. Declarer has to guess and will get it wrong some of the time and your partner will make his Queen. Method Three, although it seems cute, is in fact unethical and a form of cheating. Method Four is in fact just the same as Method Two, just emphasizing the need to plan ahead. The same thinking has to take place when you have the Queen in a suit and dummy has the Jack. Do you cover or not cover. I think the choice is closer here. Ducking could be right or covering could be right, but twitching and ducking is most definitely wrong.

Kamikaze Attitude.

When defending, get yourself the reputation of the Japanese defenders of Iwo Jima. You don't expect to defeat every contract, but you are determined never to concede a single trick or an inch of beach. Make declarer work for his result. Occasionally you can be aggressive and lead a hopeful singleton, but mostly success is achieved by going passive. Defence is a grim business. The oriflamme is flying; no prisoners will be taken. Don't give free finesses, don't give ruff and sloughs, don't open up new suits, don't lead aces. You know what to do, so render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, but keep something back for the good guys. When you come to the table, your opponents should think, "Oh no! Not these guys! Here comes a bottom board!"