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OPENING LEAD

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THEORY OF OPENING LEAD

Winning defence does not require exceptional skills or knowledge.

Mistakes in this element of bridge, usually very simple, can most often be attributed to laziness – negligence to count up to 40 HCP, thirteen cards or tricks. Another common cause of defensive disasters is failure to draw conclusions from the bidding, or partner's and declarer's actions.

Counting and drawing conclusions are basic components of defensive analysis.

This analysis is a constant exercise in logic. The longer the practice period, the better our mind will be equipped to work in the required area and the higher will be the level from which we start in each given hand.

Compared with bidding or declarer play, the defensive problems are less obvious, good technique less useful and routine sometimes even harmful.

The objective of the following study is to show the paths of such logical thinking. With every analysis conducted by a defender by himself, the number of obvious, effortlessly drawn conclusions should increase. This, in turn, will allow him to broaden the scope of the analysis. At the same time, the rising difficulty level of the considered examples will enable reader to make use of the hitherto gained skills.

As far as match or rubber bridge is concerned, and this is our main focus here, all deals fall into two categories:

- slams, games and doubled contracts – we have to devote all our energies to comprehensive, as careful as possible analysis;
- part scores, the question of overtricks, the "cold" games – here the analysis can be more superficial, because ensuing losses, if any, are less costly.

For obvious reasons vast majority of problems to be found in the book represent the first category. It is important, however, to draw reader's attention to one danger. The plays presented below are often spectacular, sometimes even brilliant. It might seem, on the face of it, that successful defence consists for the most part of such plays. In reality, **brilliancy for its own sake causes more harm than good.**

In the examples presented in the book all the attractive, spectacular plays were preceded by strenuous, detailed analysis.

Finally, there are hands where we cannot afford too long an analysis, since it would betray the intentions behind the resulting play. In such cases our mind should work extremely efficiently, so that conclusions and conceptions were ready before it's our turn to play. By studying the material in this book scrupulously, the reader is expected to attain this ability, too.

Our defensive activities in each hand begin with the opening lead – not an easy thing to do, as every player is well aware of. “You're letting the contract make”, the bridge jokers used to address the opening leader. And they had the point: the number of contracts fulfilled because of a wrong opening lead is estimated at 720 million per year in the world. No matter how high the stakes and what currency, this problem has a significant bearing on the redistribution of national product in many countries. It is thus reasonable to take steps in order to become the beneficiary of this redistribution.

In further defensive play additional information is available: dummy's cards, partner's signals, cards played by declarer and his conception of play. Considering the opening lead, by contrast, we have to rely merely on hypotheses constructed basing on bidding and our own hand – its strengths and weaknesses.

The whole auction must therefore be carefully and thoroughly analysed. All conclusions are important, including the negative ones, i.e. finding out what the auction denies. To be able to do that, one must get acquainted with opponents' bidding system and ask a number of additional questions. Partner's bidding is also useful. Or, for that matter, lack thereof. Surprisingly much can be inferred from partner's silence.

Here is a handful of examples.

S	W	N	E
1 ♣	pass	1 ♥	pass
1 NT	pass...		

We learn that South has 12-14 HCP and a balanced hand.

Conclusion 1 – opener has fewer than four diamonds.

Conclusion 2 – negative – opener hasn't got four spades (otherwise he would rebid 1♠), four hearts (he would raise to 2♥).

Conclusion 3 – final – opener has only four clubs, thus a 3-3-3-4 shape, or, less likely, 5-3-3-2 with five clubs.

S	W	N	E
1 ♦	pass	1 ♥	pass
2 ♣	pass	3 ♣	pass
3 ♦	pass	4 ♦	pass
5 ♦	pass...		

We are equipped with the following information. South has 5+ diamonds, 4+ clubs and 12-17 HCP. North has 4+ hearts and support in both minors. The conclusion is strikingly clear: opponents are vulnerable in spades since neither of them attempted to play in notrump.

S	W	N	E
—	—	1 ♥	pass
1 ♠	pass	3 ♠	pass
4 NT	pass	5 ♦	pass
5 ♠	pass...		

This time we are in a position to draw conclusions from partner's bidding despite the fact that he had passed throughout. His failure to double the conventional ace-showing 5♦ bid suggests – if we, as East, decide to lead a minor – his preference for the club rather than diamond lead.

Having gathered all the available data concerning the meaning of the auction we need to focus on two key question, the second of which is a logical consequence of the first. We should:

1. Imagine typical hands of declarer and dummy.

2. Come up with a hypothesis about how, in general terms, the play will proceed. Such hypothesis may be formulated in the following manner:

- declarer will seek to ruff his second suit in dummy; or
- declarer will intend to draw trumps and establish dummy's long suit; or
- lacking other options, declarer will be forced to look for honour tricks in all suits; or even
- unfortunately, due to insufficient information we are unable to predict declarer's plan of play.

If we are able to at least tentatively determine declarer's intentions, we will, needless to say, strive to counter them.

S	W	N	E
1 ♠	pass	1 NT	pass
3 ♥	pass	4 ♥	pass...

It is very likely that declarer will attempt to ruff spades in dummy. This suggests the trump lead.

S	W	N	E
1 ♠	pass	3 ♦	pass
3 ♥	pass	3 ♠	pass
4 ♠	pass...		

Declarer's intentions are equally easy to guess. After drawing trumps he will try to use dummy's long diamonds. The attacking club or even heart lead seems necessary, while the trump lead, apparently handy for declarer, would be a serious error.

S	W	N	E
1 ♣	pass	1 ♥	pass
1 ♠	pass	1 NT	pass
2 NT	pass	3 NT	pass...

Declarer will use all suits as sources of tricks, so we must lead passively.

A vitally important problem is the choice of passive or active defensive strategy.

Active defence consists of establishing and cashing one's tricks.

The objective of **passive** defence is not to let declarer take the declared number of tricks.

Both methods share the same purpose. Every time we are on lead we must consider whether declarer possesses the sufficient number of tricks. Acting on the hypothesis that he does, we would choose the active defence. It is imperative in such situation to cash our tricks immediately, even if, on the face of it, we are losing something.

Assuming, by contrast, that declarer is short of tricks, we would defend passively, to avoid supporting him with additional tricks.

The next step in our opening lead analysis is the **estimation of the chances of making the contract**. This must include:

- level of the contract;
- type of contract (suit or notrump);
- opponents' combined strength;
- characteristics of opponents' hands (balanced or unbalanced, possession of good long suits etc.);
- favourable or unfavourable – from declarer's point of view - breaks and location of honours.

The above analysis will allow us to divide all contracts into four groups:

light, where combined strength of the opponents is below the average strength required for the contract of the given level. Such contracts, unless totally hopeless, are based on some compensating features of opponents' hands.

- with **sufficient** strength;
- with combined strength **above** the average required;
- with **unspecified** combined strength.

S	W	N	E
pass	pass	2 ♥	dbl
4 ♥	pass	pass	dbl
pass...			

Clearly, this contract lacks sufficient HCP.

S	W	N	E
1 NT	pass	2 NT	pass
3 NT	pass...		

Here the combined strength more or less corresponds with the level and type of the contract.

S	W	N	E
1 ♣	pass	2 ♣*	pass
3 ♥**	pass	3 NT	pass...

* - inverted minor; ** - +18 HCP, +5♥

Plenty of extra strength, at least 29 HCP between the opponents.

S	W	N	E
1 NT	pass	3 NT	pass...

The combined strength is not specified, falling somewhere between 23 and 31 HCP.

Classifying the contract as belonging to one of the above categories has significant bearing on the strategy of the opening lead. This is because:

- light contracts are usually fulfilled only with favourable layouts;
- contracts with adequate strength require at least average layouts;
- contracts with extra strength can only be defeated if the layout is evidently unfavourable for declarer.

Finally, in considering the opening lead we must take into account our actual hand. Here we must first of all look at the HCP distribution to determine our partner's potential.

(40 HCP) - (opponents' combined strength, from-to) - (our strength, from-to) = (partner's strength, from-to).

Generally speaking, **the stronger our hand is and weaker partner's, the more advisable it is to lead safely, passively.** Conversely, being much weaker than partner, we can lead boldly, actively.

In selecting the suit of the opening lead it is necessary to take into consideration the probability of establishing or losing a trick (or tricks) in the suit. Importantly, it should also be assessed if possible loss of trick will affect the outcome of the hand. There are hands where the number of tricks that can be taken by both sides exceeds thirteen.

Before moving to specific examples, let us summarize factors involved in choosing the opening lead.

Bidding analysis, making use of all available clues (including negative ones).

Painting the picture of dummy's and declarer's hand.

Anticipating declarer's plan and, accordingly, defining our own objectives.

Assessment of the chances of making the contract in view of the favourable or unfavourable breaks and location of honours.

Determining the strength of all four hands and, as a consequence, our chances of establishing or losing a trick in the suit we are contemplating leading.

The conclusions drawn from all these considerations will be, as a matter of practice, utilized selectively - in some cases only some of them will be of real significance. For example, in a hand where opponents reach their contract after an extremely intricate auction, abounding in detailed information about their shape, distribution of honours etc., we will be more concerned with points 1, 2 and 3 above. If, by contrast, the bidding was short and not too revealing, we will pay more attention to points 4 and 5, acknowledging the first three with only a short statement, resulting more from our experience than from analysis.

1) W hand, none vul.
 ♠ K 10 6 4 2
 ♥ A 7 5
 ♦ 10 9
 ♣ J 4 3

S	W	N	E
1 ♦	pass	1 ♥	pass
3 ♣	pass	3 ♦	pass
4 ♦	pass	5 ♦	pass...

Bidding info: South is at least 5-4 in minors, +17 HCP. North has 4+ hearts and strength sufficient to accept the invitation.

Even moderately experienced player will infer from this auction that opponents' weak suit is spades. By-passing 3NT suggests inadequate stopper in the unbid suit or complete lack thereof. We should, therefore, play the king of spades to retain control over the hand, for it may be more obvious from our point of view how the defence should proceed.

	♠ J 7 5										
	♥ Q 10 4 2										
	♦ J 8 7 4										
	♣ K 2										
♠ K 10 6 4 2	<table> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td>N</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>W</td> <td></td> <td>E</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>S</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A 9 8 3
	N										
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♥ A 7 5		♥ K 9 8 3									
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♣ J 4 3		♣ 7 6 5									
	♠ Q										
	♥ J 6										
	♦ A K Q 5 2										
	♣ A Q 10 9 8										

We take the first trick with the king, partner signals even number of spades while declarer drops the queen. From our perspective the solution couldn't be easier – we must cash two heart tricks immediately, before declarer disposes of dummy's heart losers on clubs. If, instead, we started with a small spade to partner's ace, he would possibly find it awkward to underlead his heart king in view of dummy's ♥Q1042.