Improve your bridge with me

By Migry Zur Campanile

The basketball fans among us know all too well the rousing chant of "Defense! Defense!" sung by the home crowd when the visiting team is on the attack. Such enthusiasm is not uncommon: in most sports defending is a vital and therefore well planned phase of the game and can turn out some very exciting plays. It seems that bridge constitutes an odd exception in this field; even more so if one reflects on the fact that each bridge player will spend on average most of his time in defense, so it is quite surprising to note how often that part of the game goes un-discussed or at best dispensed with a few generic agreements.

The truth is that your defensive skills will be the tell-tale mark on which an expert can very quickly rate your game: you may know and understand all the latest bidding gadgets, you may be a good enough declarer but if your defense lets you down time and time again, then your game is just not good enough.

Defense is a game in itself, where one has precious few clues to rely on and where a true partnership has its best chance to shine.

As soon as the opening lead has been made, the defenders come into possession of much meaningful knowledge when the dummy is put down. First, the proper interpretation of partner's opening lead conveys significant information to the leader's partner about the leader's holding in that suit (the top of a sequence lead, the fourth highest, etc.). Second, dummy's strong points and weak points become visible. Third, declarer's bidding, reappraised in terms of the dummy, presents clues about which are his strong suits and which are presumably his vulnerable spots. All of these data and their correct evaluation are vital in order to elaborate a defensive plan with the best chances of success.

It is also at this point, after dummy comes down, that the defenders can really start coordinating their attack and resolving the problems that are confronting them.

You hold:

♠ KJ64
♥ K84
♦ 732
♣ 953

After a short 1NT-3NT auction, partner leads the ♦J, which denies a higher honor and promises the ♦10, and this is what you see:

♠ Q75 ♥ A63 ♦ 864 ♣ KQJ10	
N W E S	♠ KJ64 ♥ K84 ♦ 732 ♣ 953

What are you going to do?

Well, if you answered "Play low of course!" you have already made your first mistake.

Now is the time to draw whatever conclusions we can: the ♦J lead, according to our agreements, means that we can already place ♦AKQ with declarer. This is an important piece of information especially when we try and sum up the points we already see: 12 in dummy and 7 in our hand together with the 1 point from the ♦J mean that there are 20 points unaccounted for. If we place with declarer a rough average of 16 points for his 1NT opening, we can reasonably expect partner to have at most another four points.

After having gathered all these precious data, we are now ready to play low, declarer takes the trick with his ♦K (sneaky, sneaky, but he doesn't fool us does he?) and plays the ♥Q, which runs to our ♥K.

What are you going to play now?

Should we return a diamond, because that is what partner led? Is that the way to beat the contract? Is there any way to beat it on the basis of the information we have?

These are all very good questions that we should try to answer. First of all we can place with declarer at least the ♦AKQ and the ♥QJ, for a total of 12 points; as we have yet to place the two black aces and since both partner and declarer have around four points unaccounted for, we may deduce that they must hold one each.

Which black ace does declarer hold?

We cannot be 100% certain but it is logical to assume that if declarer did not have the ♣A he would have probably tried to knock that out in order to set up the clubs before attempting the heart finesse. Besides, since 3NT is cold if partner has the ♣A, the only thing left for us is to table a small spade in the full knowledge that partner will take his ♠A and play back another spade across the ♠Q in dummy enabling us to take at least three tricks in the suit and hopefully four if declarer has no more than three spades.

Here is the complete hand:

	♠ Q75 ♥ A63 ♦ 864 ♣ KQJ10	
♠ A93 ♥ 1072 ♦ J1095 ♣ 762	N W E S	♠ KJ64 ♥ K84 ♦ 732 ♣ 953
	♠ 1082 ♥ QJ95 ♦ AKQ ♣ A84	

The hand may not be at all difficult, which is true of most hands whenever we manage to play them correctly, but I am quite sure that many players at the table would automatically take their ♥K and return a diamond at the speed of light.

"Automatic" is a behavior, however, which befits very well an electric appliance but most definitely not a bridge player, well at least not a good one!