

**PATHWAYS
TO BETTER
BRIDGE
DEFENSE**

Danny Roth



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A black and white illustration of a sign on a post. The sign is rectangular with rounded corners and a thick black border. It is tilted upwards and to the right. The text "GETTING STARTED" is written in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the sign. The sign is mounted on a post that has a series of small circles along its length, suggesting a perforated metal post. The background is a simple gradient of light to dark gray.

**GETTING
STARTED**

So you tend to get dealt very bad hands. I know exactly how you feel!

But, facing the facts of life and recognizing that it is not your fault, you are going to have to accommodate this failing and improve your defense. Many books have been written on the subject but, even in international competitions, the standard of defensive play is, to put it kindly, modest. Yes, you will get plenty of reports of brilliancies involving spectacular switches, deceptions, unblocks and discards of honors. But for every one of those, there are countless others in which the display would disgrace any beginners' class.

I am going to assume that you are a regular club and tournament player who knows the basics of defense but who continually comes unstuck when it comes to situations where you have to work the hand out in detail. In this book, I hope to help you to improve dramatically in this area.

Adopting the customary practice of making South declarer, we will be defending from two positions, West and East. If there is one seat at the bridge table which is unique – at least from the point of view of the play of the hand – it is West. This defender is entrusted with the most difficult part of the game, the selection of the opening lead. This is the one card in the game which is played with only twelve others on view and yet, all too often, it is the one that matters above all the rest. For that reason, whole books have been written on the subject of the opening lead alone and no book discussing defense would be complete without its share of opening lead problems. For what comfort it gives, the problems facing West in this respect have tended to become easier over the years. Modern bidding styles favor long and highly informative auctions, accepting the sacrifice of secrecy for improved accuracy. The debate of the value of this approach continues; many, including a number of top names, still prefer to 'bash' in sequences like

North	South
1 ♥	3 ♥
6 ♥	

rather than indulge in a lengthy exchange of controls and other relevant information which often amounts to giving the defenders a long lecture on recommended tactics. This is not the place to expound the pros and cons of each argument. However, as a matter of interest, I prefer to be an 'accurist' rather than a 'basher', taking the view that, even if it means

facing a higher standard of opening lead and defense, the pair who regularly reaches the technically 'right' contract will seldom be beaten at any level of bridge. The theoretically best approach surely lies somewhere between the two extremes; there is a time to be accurate and a time to bash. It is a question of being able to recognise the appropriate situations.

However, this is not a book on bidding but one on leads and defense. Beginners are taught a long list of rules about leading fourth-highest, top of a sequence, through strength, round to weakness and so on. In all my books, I have stressed one rule only: 'Do your seven roll-calls and work the hand out. Then play as though you can 'see' all four hands. It is so much easier, double-dummy.' This book will concentrate on how to develop x-ray eyes and use them to effect.

The bidding – and always remember to take careful note of what the opponents did *not* call as well as what they did call – should give you a rough idea of what they have: distribution of the four suits and point count. Another thing it will tell you is whether the final contract was reached confidently; if was, desperate measures are often justified. However, if it seems to you that the opponents have stretched, the emphasis should probably be on safe, passive defense, trying to avoid giving away anything rather than trying to set up defensive tricks by force.

Thus the seven roll-calls are:

- 1-4) the number of cards held by each player in each of the four suits;
- 5) the distribution round the table of the forty high-card points in the deck;
- 6) the number of tricks available on top or easily establishable for declarer;
- 7) the same for the defenders.

From there, you should try to build up a picture of the unseen hands and play accordingly. If you want to play at a reasonable standard, you must be prepared to do this for every hand throughout the session. It is hard work but, if you want success in any field of life, you have to work for it and bridge, particularly in the area of defense, is no exception. The kind of rules mentioned earlier, which are taught to beginners, may well work a fair percentage of the time but, to be a winner, you need your percentage of right decisions to be well up in the nineties rather than something nearer the sixty mark.

Very often, you will be not able to place the unseen cards with very great accuracy. You then need to visualize possible layouts that are consistent with the bidding and early play. On some of those layouts you will see that declarer will get home, come what may; on others, the defenders will clearly prevail in all circumstances. Your job is to consider positions where your chosen line of defense is critical.

I am writing this book following my return from a successful lecture tour of bridge clubs in Canada. After my talk, players usually settled down to their regular duplicate and encouraged me to watch. One time, I sat behind a middle-aged lady as, with both sides not vulnerable, she picked up this hand as West:

♠ A Q 6 4 ♥ 7 ♦ 10 8 6 4 2 ♣ J 5 2

South dealt, opened 4♥ and all passed. She had to find a lead. On this kind of auction, it is usually good practice to attack, as the long-heart hand may be able to enjoy early discards if dummy produces top cards in the side suits. It was my opinion, therefore, that she did very well to choose the ♠A. This gave her a good probability of holding the lead and conducting her subsequent defense with far more knowledge. Also it was unlikely that the lead would cost; the chances that South held a protected ♠K on this auction were minimal. North tabled his cards and this is what she could see:

♠ A Q 6 4	♥ 7	♦ 10 8 6 4 2	♣ J 5 2	♠ J 9 8 7 5	♥ K 6 5	♦ K 9	♣ A K 9
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W	N	E				
	S					

The ♠A held, East playing the ♠2 and South dropping the ♠K. I waited with bated breath for the next card as the lady pondered and pondered. It seemed to my simple mind that the diamond holding on dummy simply cried out to be led through but incredibly, she produced a low spade! This was the full deal:

	♠ J 9 8 7 5							
	♥ K 6 5							
	♦ K 9							
	♣ A K 9							
♠ A Q 6 4 ♥ 7 ♦ 10 8 6 4 2 ♣ J 5 2	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px;">W</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">N</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">E</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="padding: 2px;">S</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	W	N	E		S		♠ 10 3 2 ♥ 10 ♦ A Q J 3 ♣ 10 8 7 6 3
W	N	E						
	S							
	♠ K							
	♥ A Q J 9 8 4 3 2							
	♦ 7 5							
	♣ Q 4							

South had no hesitation in rising with the ♠J and soon claimed the rest, drawing trumps and later discarding his other diamond loser on the ♣A. I have to admit that, had I been declarer, at Trick 2, I would have gone wrong on the low spade, but it would not have mattered; there are enough entries to set up a long spade and still discard the second diamond loser.

Conceding twelve tricks was a very poor score for East-West when they could have held declarer to ten. But why not a diamond at Trick 2? What on earth was going through her mind? That last question is the crucial point of this book, and we shall be working on it in some detail.

So much for West for the moment. Once the opening lead has been made and dummy is tabled, all is revealed! While his partner was faced with the most difficult decision in the game of bridge, the selection of the opening lead in the comparative darkness of his own thirteen cards, the defender in the East position is allowed to see the hand on the table and the card chosen by declarer from it on Trick 1, before deciding how the defense should be conducted.

Of course, with twenty-seven cards visible, a much higher standard of accuracy should be expected and East also has the responsibility of giving a signal where that is appropriate. I dealt with the subject of defensive signaling in detail in an earlier book and there is no need to repeat that material here. However, since my book on signaling was written, one idea seems to have become very popular among tournament players and it needs to be discussed now. Over many years, there has been much controversy as to whether to lead the ace or king from a holding of ace, king and one or more small cards.

Those in favour of the ace argued that, if you agree on that, you can lead a king and automatically deny the ace. Furthermore, they point out that, if you do lead the king from this holding it is ambiguous, since now it could come from either ace-king or king-queen. Those in favour of leading the king countered that it enables you to lead an unsupported ace (as indeed, is often necessary) and automatically tell partner that you do *not* have the king – particularly important in quick cash-out positions.

The popular method nowadays is to vary the choice of card according to what signal is likely to be required. The mnemonic is Ace for Attitude; King for Count. Respectfully, I must most strongly advise against using this method as it shows an alarming lack of understanding of defensive theory. Playing this system amounts to saying that West has decided what information is appropriate, looking at just thirteen cards. With my recommended method – ace from ace-king; king from king-queen, denying the ace – East chooses the required signal, looking at twenty-seven cards and knowing about twenty-eight or more. Apart from everything else, it may well be that it is appropriate to signal neither attitude nor count, but suit preference.

To return to sanity, it will suffice to remind readers that signals fall into four main categories:

- 1) **Attitude** – encouragement or discouragement of the suit led;
- 2) **Count** – distribution (in principle odd or even) of the suit led;
- 3) **Suit preference** – primarily in respect of shifting, ignoring the trump suit or declarer's obvious long suit at notrump;
- 4) **Other important information** like desire to ruff, honor combinations, etc.

We shall be studying the use of signals at some length in the first section of this book.

Furthermore, once dummy is on view, a good player sitting East acquires the habit of assessing North's bidding, considering active or passive defense as indicated above. Notwithstanding the above example, in the remainder of this book, I should like you to imagine that you are playing rubber bridge or teams of four with IMP scoring. Different tactics are applicable to matchpoint pairs' scoring where overtricks are very important, and I am not concerned with that scenario here. Your objective is to set the contract, even at the expense

of giving away an overtrick or two. Imagine that you are playing in top-class company but never forget that both your opponents and your partner are fallible human beings.

Those who have not read my books before also need to familiarise themselves with one aspect in which I differ from other authors – the way my questions are phrased. As illustration, I should like you to try the following warm-up examples.

Covering conundrum

Both vul.

♠ J 5 4	♠ Q 9 6 2
♥ J 8 6	♥ 2
♦ Q J 10 9 4	♦ 7 5 2
♣ Q 8	♣ K 10 9 6 2

<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100px; height: 100px; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="border: none; padding: 5px;">W</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 5px;">N</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 5px;">E</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none; padding: 5px;"></td> <td style="border: none; padding: 5px;">S</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 5px;"></td> </tr> </table>	W	N	E		S	
W	N	E				
	S					

W	N	E	S
	pass	1♥	2♣
2♥	dbl	4♥	5♣
all pass			

North's double was negative, suggesting four cards in the unbid major. You lead the ♦Q to dummy's ♦2, partner's ♦A and South's ♦K. Partner shifts to the ♥K. Declarer wins the ace and draws two rounds of trumps, partner discarding the ♥4 and ♥3. South now plays the ♥10. How do you defend from here?

'To cover or not to cover?', that is the question. A whole book could be written on that subject alone; perhaps, one day, I shall write one. Partner clearly has the ♥Q and may or may not have the ♥9. If you cover, you could be leaving partner in sole charge of the suit which could be important if a squeeze position develops. So it may be advisable to play low. What have you decided?

If you have worked the hand out properly, you will realise that it does not matter two hoots whether you cover or not. South clearly started with a singleton diamond and probably three hearts and he can crossruff all his red-suit losers. The contract will then depend on what

happens in the spade suit. I am, therefore, not interested in which card you play now at Trick 5. I am concerned about which card you have planned for Trick 9!

	♠ Q 9 6 2 ♥ 2 ♦ 7 5 2 ♣ K 10 9 6 2				
♠ J 5 4 ♥ J 8 6 ♦ Q J 10 9 4 ♣ Q 8	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ K 10 3 ♥ K Q 9 7 4 3 ♦ A 8 6 3 ♣ —
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ A 8 7 ♥ A 10 5 ♦ K ♣ A J 7 5 4 3				

You should have appreciated what was in the offing. South is going to eliminate the red suits, ending in hand in this position:

	♠ Q 9 6 2 ♥ — ♦ — ♣ 10				
♠ J 5 4 ♥ — ♦ J 10 ♣ —	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ K 10 3 ♥ Q ♦ 8 ♣ —
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ A 8 7 ♥ — ♦ — ♣ J 7				

From the bidding, it will be clear to declarer that partner has the ♠K and thus the only hope of avoiding two spade losers (barring the unlikely event of that king being singleton or doubleton) will be an endplay. He will play a low spade from hand, passing it to East's ♠10, after which your partner will be endplayed, forced to lead away from his ♠K or concede a ruff-sluff. Your job is to give declarer a chance to go wrong by going up with the ♠J, giving the impression of 'splitting your honors' from J-10. If he believes you, declarer will think that he can only make his contract by playing low from dummy, letting

your jack win the trick and hoping to endplay you. When you continue with a low spade, the contract will be set when partner produces the ten. Declarer can, of course, still get it right, notably if he is an adherent of the principle of restricted choice. In that case, he could decide that the ♠10 is more likely to be in partner's hand and thus he should cover your ♠J with the ♠Q to endplay East. However, he will certainly not go wrong unless you give him the chance.

You now see my point about the phrasing of questions. Suppose I had set the original problem by saying: '... declarer wins partner's heart shift, draws trumps in two rounds and crossruffs four rounds of the red suits to finish in hand. He then leads the ♠8; which card do you play?' You certainly would then have realised that this was the climax of the proceedings and might well have come up with the correct answer. But did you appreciate the point the first time? Unless you have joined my fan club over the last few years, I should be surprised if you did.

This is the kind of situation which highlights the difference between problems in books and newspaper or magazine articles and those which crop up at the table. In the latter case, you do not have the know-all kibitzer to tap you on the shoulder to tell you to do something unusual like 'second hand high'. Furthermore, you will very often give away vital information by hesitating at important moments. Your thinking should be done well in advance so that you can make 'difficult' plays *in tempo*. In most books, the reader is taken to the critical point and asked to take over. I prefer to deviate from this practice, at least periodically, to achieve a closer proximity to reality. Thus, in the problems which follow, you should not take full credit unless you have clearly spelled out the whole play with watertight reasons and with possible variations where appropriate.

Having been warned, try this one:

Become a better defender!

So you tend to get dealt very bad hands. I know exactly how you feel!

But, facing the facts of life and recognizing that it is not your fault, you are going to have to accommodate this failing and improve your defense. It's a hard part of the game; even in international competitions, the standard of defensive play is, to put it kindly, modest. Yes, you will get plenty of reports of brilliancies involving spectacular switches, deceptions, unblocks and discards of honors. But for every one of those, there are countless others in which the display would disgrace any beginners' class.

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DANNY ROTH is a bridge teacher, and also a regular contributor to several well-known bridge magazines. His previous books include *Focus on Defence*, *Focus on Declarer Play*, *Focus on Bidding*, and *Challenge Your Declarer Play*. He lives near London, England.

