

FINDING THE WINNING DEFENSE

You encounter the following defensive problem while playing in Betty Kaplan teams on February 20, 2007. The Betty Kaplan teams is a marvelous event. It is held annually in New York, in honor of Betty Kaplan, the wife of Edgar Kaplan who did so much for bridge. Only teams of 4 are allowed to enter, and each player on the team needs to play two 9-board Swiss matches as partner of every other member of his team. It creates a special harmony, and I have never heard of any other similar event anywhere else.

You pick up ♠KQ ♥1085 ♦A875 ♣J1054. You pass as dealer, all vulnerable. You are playing against very competent opponents. Your RHO opens 1♥ and rebids 2♣. Your LHO, after initially passing, bids 1♠ and gives a preference to 2♥, ending the auction. What is your opening lead?

These are the types of hands where almost anything could be right. Leading spades could be right, but you might be setting up dummy's spades. Diamonds is the unbid suit, and could be the winner. Leading trumps will help keep declarer from ruffing clubs in dummy.

It is certainly best to try to judge what the opponent's cards are, before you decide what to lead. Declarer probably has 1 or 2 spades, 5 hearts, about 2 diamonds, and 4 or 5 clubs. Dummy rates to have 4 or 5 spades, 2 hearts, 3 or 4 diamonds, and 1-to-3 clubs.

Leading trumps might compromise partner's trump holding, and declarer might have someplace to discard his club losers, if he can't trump them in dummy.

It may be hard for the defense to get more than one trump trick, as partner's heart honors will probably be in front of declarer's holding. Perhaps you can get a trump promotion with your ♥10, if you can void yourself in spades.

So, for better or worse, you elect to lead the ♠K. This is the problem:

	<u>Dummy</u>			
	♠A10853			
	♥76			
	♦QJ104			
<u>You</u>	♣86			
♠KQ				
♥1085		<u>You</u>	<u>Dummy</u>	<u>Partner</u>
♦A875		Pass	Pass	Pass
♣J1054		Pass	1♠	Pass
		Pass	2♥	All Pass

Dummy wins the spade ace and leads a heart, partner winning the heart jack. Partner continues with a small spade, and you win the spade queen. Now what?

What is going on? Apparently partner has the KQJ of hearts, otherwise declarer would not have let partner win the first round of hearts. It looks like declarer's most likely distributions are either 2-5-2-4 or 2-5-1-5. Why isn't declarer trying to ruff some clubs in dummy? Does declarer have some place to discard them, or does he believe that it is too dangerous or unnecessary to ruff them? And, if declarer has the diamond king, would he be attacking diamonds to set up dummy's diamonds -- even though he might not have an entry to get to use the good diamonds?

You can judge that declarer almost certainly does not have a singleton king of diamonds. If declarer held that, he would have had two different ways of playing the diamond suit - 1) lead a small diamond from dummy at trick 2, hoping that my partner held the ace and made the normal duck, or 2) lead the king from his hand later in the hand, hoping that I haven't gotten a diamond count yet, and that I would make the normal duck. Of these two possible lines of play, leading the small diamond from dummy is the standout play. This is because: 1) I have already shown up with 5HCP in spades, and therefore it is more likely that my partner has more strength in the other suits, 2) He has a guarantee that partner will not have a diamond count at trick 2, while there is no guarantee that I would not have a diamond count when he eventually led a diamond from his hand, and 3) declarers prefer to put the opponent's to guesses early in the hand, when they have less information. So, declarer should not have a singleton king of diamonds. Therefore, he has either a doubleton diamond or a small singleton in diamonds.

Which of the following hands is declarer most likely to hold?

1) ♠xx ♥Axxxx ♦x ♣AKQxx,

2) ♠xx ♥Axxxx ♦Kx ♣AKxx, or

3) ♠xxx ♥Axxxx ♦x ♣AKQx?

Hand #1 is very consistent with his bidding and play. With hand #2 he would have been setting up dummy's diamonds and then trumping a club in dummy. With hand #3 he still probably would have trumped a club in dummy.

So, if declarer has a hand like #1, what is your best defense? Leading a diamond to partner's king is best. What diamond should you lead?

My often-preferred lead in this situation is 3rd best, to let partner gain an idea of my count in the suit. In count situations, even in notrump contracts, I like to lead 3rd and 5th best. But in non-count situations I lead attitude. And, my partner prefers attitude in this situation, so it is clear that I am underleading my honor. In this situation, partner does not need to know my diamond count, and I don't want her to misread my diamond spot and not play her king. So, after winning the spade queen, I lead my smallest diamond to partner's king. She didn't know if I began with 3 or 4 diamonds, as from her perspective, declarer could have held only 4 clubs (the AKQJ). So, she led the spade jack, which still guaranteed the trump promotion even if declarer discarded a

small diamond because she would have continued with her last spade. When declarer ruffed the spade jack, I overruffed and I got out my last trump. The defense scored 3 heart tricks, 1 spade trick, 1 diamond trick, and 1 club trick, beating the contract 1 trick.

It can be hard to be confident enough to underlead the diamond ace against bad declarers, who be more random in their lines of play. But I had the advantage that this declarer is very competent, and it was almost a certainty that he didn't have a singleton king of diamonds. It was fun to find the winning defense.

This was the entire hand:

	<u>Dummy</u>	
	♠ A10853	
	♥ 76	
	♦ QJ104	
<u>You</u>	♣ 86	<u>Partner</u>
♠ KQ		♠ J962
♥ 1085		♥ KQJ
♦ A875		♦ K962
♣ J1054	<u>Declarer</u>	♣ 93
	♠ 74	
	♥ A9432	
	♦ 3	
	♣ AKQ72	

Note, this hand was featured in the NY Times bridge column on February 20, 2007. A copy of the column will appear at this website in the section "about Jeff".