

Active or Passive? (Part I)



Partner's lead was more costly on this layout, allowing declarer two tricks instead of one. Again, however, the damage has already been done. Unless declarer is desperately short of entries, a spade return is safe. On average, opening up a new suit costs a trick about 40% of the time. The more new suits you lead, the higher the chance that you will blow a trick and the greater the risk that you will blow more than one trick.

Study the dummy

How, then, do you know whether to defend actively or passively? A good tip is to study the dummy and see if it contains a long, strong suit that declarer can run or establish.

One of the most important things you need to do as a defender is to decide whether to defend actively or passively. By an active defence, I mean that you try to set up or cash winners, or that you attack an entry, or in some other way try to thwart declarer. An active defence often involves breaking new suits, hoping partner has the right cards (in that suit and perhaps elsewhere) to make your defence successful.

Declarer lets the lead run round to dummy and scores a cheap (and undeserved) trick. What is more, with just the bare ace left in hand, declarer may avoid a loser in the suit by ruffing the third round.

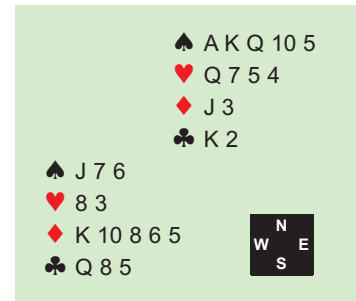
With a passive defence, however, you avoid breaking new suits. Instead you might play back one partner led or even return one declarer has played.



Suppose you are East and have the lead. If you want to make three quick spade tricks, you should lead your low spade. You hope that partner holds the ace and no more than four spades in all. You hope that the layout is something like this:



Suppose partner leads the two of spades and you put up the ace on dummy's six. In a no-trump contract, a spade return might set up a long card but, for most practical purposes, a spade return is a passive defence. You are unlikely to get rich in the suit. Whilst it is true that partner's initial lead may have cost a trick, it is most unlikely that returning the suit will do so. Suppose this is the layout:



West	North	East	South
Pass	1♠	Pass	2♥
Pass	4♥	End	

You lead the six of diamonds. Partner wins with the ace, both dummy and declarer following low, and returns the four, on which South plays the queen. You win impeccably with the king. What do you do now?

Reading partner's four as an original fourth highest and assuming declarer has not voluntarily crashed the queen and jack of diamonds together, you know declarer has no more diamonds. Continuing diamonds would not, on this occasion, represent a passive defence. A third round of diamonds would allow declarer to ruff in one hand and discard a loser from the other.

Nevertheless, there are ways of defending passively if you want them. A spade switch will certainly give nothing away. Also, if you think about it, a trump switch is safe as well. If partner has K-x, declarer can finesse whether you lead the suit or not. If partner has K-J or A-J, declarer is going to lose only one trump trick in any event.

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Partner wins the first round with the ace and returns the two (original fourth best). You then make two more tricks by finessing the jack or capturing the queen. A switch to the suit involves significant risk. Suppose this is really the layout:



Yes, partner's lead has saved declarer a two-way finesse against the jack, but the damage has already been done. A spade return is quite harmless.



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Dummy's length and strength in spades, together with your own spade holding, should tell you to be active. If you do nothing, declarer can surely draw trumps and discard losers on dummy's spades. The right thing to do is to try a low club. This has two chances to gain. The first is that partner has the ace and jack of clubs. If declarer puts up dummy's king, partner wins with the ace and your queen is high. If not, then partner, reading your low club (the five) as suggesting an honour, finesse the jack. The other chance is that partner has the ace of clubs but declarer mis-guesses. With J-9-x-x or J-10-x-x, declarer has to guess whether you have underled the ace of clubs or the queen. Given that you did not lead a club initially and that your partner has already turned up with one ace, there is quite a good chance that declarer would put up dummy's king, playing you for the ace. This is the full deal:

	♠ A K Q 10 5	
	♥ Q 7 5 4	
	♦ J 3	
	♣ K 2	
♠ J 7 6	♠ 9 3 2	
♥ 8 3	♥ 10 2	
♦ K 10 8 6 5	♦ A 9 4 2	
♣ Q 8 5	♣ A J 6 4	
	♠ 8 4	
	♥ A K J 9 6	
	♦ Q 7	
	♣ 10 9 7 3	

Declarer has no winning guess available and loses the first four tricks after your club switch. The contract would make, however, if you switched to one of the majors. Declarer has ten top tricks: five hearts and five spades. Before we move on, it may be instructive to study the layouts on which the club switch might (on a different deal) cost a trick:

	♣ K 2	
♣ Q 8 5	♠ N W E S	♣ 10 9 6 4 3
	♣ A J 7	

Now the club switch gives declarer three club tricks instead of two. You are

not concerned about this in the setting above. The jack of clubs was never going to be a loser. Declarer could either ruff it in dummy or throw it on the long spades.

	♣ K 2	
♣ Q 8 5	♠ N W E S	♣ A 10 9 6 4
	♣ J 7 3	

If declarer has to play this suit, the defenders are bound to score two tricks (I say "two", assuming that dummy can ruff the third round). By contrast, if West leads a club and declarer guesses to play low from dummy, it is possible to restrict the defenders to one trick. On the deal above you did not need to worry about this possibility. Dummy's spades would take care of declarer's slow club losers. The only way the defenders could score two club tricks was by making them early.

Let us make a few changes to the above deal and consider West's options now.

	♠ A K 6 5 2	
	♥ Q 10 7 4	
	♦ J 3	
	♣ K 2	
♠ Q J 9 7	♠ N W E S	
♥ 8		
♦ K 10 8 6 5		
♣ Q 8 5		

The bidding is the same, the contract is still 4♥, and again the defenders take the first two tricks with the ace and king of diamonds. Should West switch to the five of clubs as before?

Before answering that question, we need to consider whether passive or active defence is the order of the day. As we discussed earlier, a club switch is great if the best hope is to score two fast club tricks, but far more risky if two slow tricks will do. Can you see the enormous difference in the spade position? Earlier declarer had five spade tricks readily available and you needed fast tricks. Here dummy has only two easy spade winners and it will take two ruffs to set up a long card. You are no

longer afraid of the spade suit and can afford to wait for your tricks. This means you want a passive defence.

We established earlier that a third round of diamonds would not be a good idea. Moreover, now that you have a singleton trump, it would be unsafe to lead trumps. Partner might hold K-J-x, or A-J-x, and have hopes of two tricks. Your safest exit is with the queen of spades. This leaves declarer without recourse when the full deal turns out to be as follows:

	♠ A K 6 5 2	
	♥ Q 10 7 4	
	♦ J 3	
	♣ K 2	
♠ Q J 9 7	♠ N W E S	♠ 10 3
♥ 8		♥ 5 3 2
♦ K 10 8 6 5		♦ A 9 4 2
♣ Q 8 5		♣ A 10 6 4
	♠ 8 4	
	♥ A K J 9 6	
	♦ Q 7	
	♣ J 9 7 3	

If you led a busy five of clubs, declarer might guess to play low from dummy and make the contract.

Count your tricks

Your holding in dummy's long suit need not be the only consideration. Take this example:

	♠ Q 7 5 2	
	♥ K J	
	♦ A 8	
	♣ A J 7 3 2	
	♠ K J	
	♥ A Q 7 5 4	
	♦ K 9 4	
	♣ K 10 4	

West	North	East	South
	1♣	1♥	1♠ ¹
Pass	3♠	Pass	4♠
	End		

¹Promises a five-card suit

Partner leads the six of hearts and you win the jack with the queen as South plays the two. You cash the ace of hearts, which collects the three, eight and king. How do you continue?

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You do not have a particularly strong holding in dummy's suit but it should be good enough. Why is that? You have made two tricks already and are bound to make a trump trick. You need only one trick in the minors to defeat the contract. So it is counting your tricks as much as dummy's long suit that tells you to defend passively. How do you go about defending passively? Partner would not lead the six of hearts from 10-9-8-6. You can therefore be sure that declarer has a third heart and hence that playing a third round of hearts is safe. The danger of a busy switch to a diamond is that the cards lie something like this:

♠ 8 ♥ 10 8 6 ♦ J 10 7 6 3 2 ♣ 8 6 5	N W E S	♠ Q 7 5 2 ♥ K J ♦ A 8 ♣ A J 7 3 2
♠ A 10 9 6 4 3 ♥ 9 3 2 ♦ Q 5 ♣ Q 9		♠ K J ♥ A Q 7 5 4 ♦ K 9 4 ♣ K 10 4

Declarer puts in the queen of diamonds, cashes the ace of trumps, ruffs a heart in dummy, cashes the ace of diamonds and puts you in with your trump trick. You will then be on lead in this very unhappy position:

♠ — ♥ — ♦ 10 7 3 ♣ 8 6 5	N W E S	♠ 7 ♥ — ♦ — ♣ A J 7 3 2
♠ 10 9 6 4 ♥ — ♦ — ♣ Q 9		♠ — ♥ 7 4 ♦ K ♣ K 10 4

If you lead a red card, declarer ruffs in dummy, discarding a club from hand. Best is for you to lead a club instead, in the hope that West has the queen. Alas, your luck is out on that score.

The tricky thing about bridge is that I need make only a slight adjustment to the hands to put an altogether different complexion on things:

♠ K 7 ♥ A Q 7 5 4 ♦ K 9 4 ♣ K J 4	N W E S	♠ Q J 5 2 ♥ K J ♦ A 8 ♣ A 10 7 3 2
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The bidding and play to the first two tricks are as before. Can you see why it

would not be such a good idea to play a third round of hearts this time?

Your clubs are slightly stronger than they were before. The key difference is in the trump suit. You no longer have a trump trick. This means that passive defence is unlikely to work. Two heart tricks and one club will not be enough. You might think that, with the king of diamonds behind dummy's ace, you will score a diamond as well. Think again. If declarer has a doubleton club (even without the queen), a single ruff will set up the suit. This gives declarer five trump tricks (at least), three club tricks, a heart ruff and the ace of diamonds. Dummy's long clubs will take care of declarer's slow diamond losers. Of course, if declarer has a singleton club, then the suit will not be so easy to set up but, in that case, you are not going to make a club trick. It is also possible that declarer has three losing clubs (i.e. Q-x with West). In this case, it does not matter if you blow a diamond trick. Two club tricks will allow you to beat the contract. The time when the active defence of a diamond switch is essential is when the cards lie something like this:

♠ 8 ♥ 10 8 6 ♦ Q 10 7 6 3 2 ♣ 8 6 5	N W E S	♠ Q J 5 2 ♥ K J ♦ A 8 ♣ A 10 7 3 2
♠ A 10 9 6 4 3 ♥ 9 3 2 ♦ J 5 ♣ Q 9		♠ K 7 ♥ A Q 7 5 4 ♦ K 9 4 ♣ K J 4

After the diamond switch, declarer cannot avoid losing a trick in each minor. On an erroneous heart continuation, by contrast, declarer has more than one way of getting home. The natural line is to ruff in dummy and run the queen of spades, which you do best not to cover. Best now is to lead a low club off dummy to set up the queen. As the cards lie (the clubs being 3-3), declarer can also succeed by drawing a second round of trumps and attacking clubs from hand. A single ruff sets up the suit.

The concept of an active defence and a passive defence applies equally in a no-trump contract. We will consider that next time. ■

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