

Defensive Hold-Up Plays

When you are the declarer, you can see the entirety of the assets your side has to work with. When you are on defense, you have to envision partner's assets. You will often have to say to yourself, "We aren't going to beat this unless partner has the ace of declarer's long suit."

OK, so what does that have to do with me, the guy always sitting here with a Yarborough waiting for the next hand to be dealt? Well, partner is over there thinking, "I need to know when I should win my ace; I sure hope partner is paying attention and giving me accurate count!"

You see, it isn't enough for partner to simply hold off his ace for as long as he can. If we give declarer two tricks, when they are only entitled to one, that extra trick might be all declarer needs to scramble home with the contract. We have to help partner by giving count in the suit that declarer wants to establish. Otherwise, partner is just guessing as to win they should win their ace.

- If we have an even number of cards in the suit, play the highest
- If we have an odd number of cards in the suit, play the lowest

Partner might need to win the second round of declarer's suit after having seen only your first card, so make that signal crystal clear.

The hold-up play doesn't just apply when we are trying to stop declarer from running their own suit; sometimes, we have to hold up on defense so we can set up our own suit!

Again, we have to help partner by giving accurate count. When partner leads their suit in a no-trump contract, the card we return in that suit tells partner how many we have left.


- When we started with 4 or more, we return our original 4th best.
- When we started with 3 or fewer, we return the highest remaining card.

If we have played the correct card on the second round of the suit, partner will know whether or not to win immediately (because the suit is running), or to hold-up (because the suit is not running and we need to leave partner with one more to play when they regain the lead).

These count giving plays, either when following suit to declarer's leads or when returning partner's originally led suit, are one of the secrets to taking all of your tricks on defense. Ask yourself which card will tell partner how many you started with, or, what is partner telling me about their own count with the spot card they have played? From such simple questions the finest plays are made.

Board 1

North Deals
None Vul

<p>♠ 9 2 ♥ 9 8 4 ♦ A 8 7 5 4 ♣ A 8 4</p>	<p>♠ J 7 ♥ A K J 6 ♦ K Q 6 2 ♣ Q 10 6</p>	<p>♠ K 10 8 5 3 ♥ 7 5 3 ♦ — ♣ K 9 7 5 3</p>	
			
<p>♠ A Q 6 4 ♥ Q 10 2 ♦ J 10 9 3 ♣ J 2</p>			
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 NT	Pass	2 ♣
Pass	2 ♥	Pass	3 NT
All pass			

Auction Commentary: South should jump to 3 NT after North shows 4 hearts. North will know that South has 4 spades. (If they didn't, they wouldn't have used Stayman.)

Opening Lead: Should East lead the unbid major? This is a trick question; North bid hearts, but South "bid" spades by using Stayman and jumping to 3 NT. Since partner could have a maximum of 2 spades, it is unlikely that leading that suit can help. It is more likely that leading a spade will hurt, as is true here. On the other hand, we have no idea what's going on in clubs, so we should lead those, picking the 4th best ♣ 5.

Play Commentary: Declarer needs to set up the diamonds to make their contract, but this club lead could be a big problem. If they are 4-4, we can relax, as the defense will take only 3 clubs and 1 diamond before we can get to our 9. What if they are 5-3? That would be very bad, but, perhaps we can sever the communications between the defenders? We would like to "provoke" the defenders into using their ♣ A and ♣ K immediately and then hope that the long hand does not have the ♦ A. When West wins the ♣ A and returns a club, we should play the ♣ Q from our hand. East may do the wrong thing and gobble the ♣ Q, allowing you to scamper home.

Defensive Commentary: Well, East, are you going to do the wrong thing? Do you know for sure what the right thing is? You will if West returns the correct card at trick 2, the ♣ 8. When we return partner's suit at trick 2, we play our original 4th best if we started with at least 4, or the higher of our two (or one) remaining. If West returns the ♣ 4, East may well (rightly) believe that East started with ♣ AT84 and win the king and return another to take the first five tricks. If West returns the ♣ 8, East can work out that West either started with ♣ A8 or ♣ A8x. If it is the former, there is little to be done, but if it is the latter, we must duck, keeping communications alive with our partner. When partner gets in with the ♦ A we can pop the cork on the champagne.

Takeaway: Hold-up plays aren't just for declarer; they work for the defense as well. We just have to pay attention to the spot cards to get all of the tricks that are coming to us.

Board 3

South Deals
None Vul

	♠ A 6		
	♥ 9 7 6		
	♦ 7 5 4		
	♣ K Q 10 8 3		
♠ J 9 8 2		♠ K 10 5 3	
♥ J 4 3		♥ Q 10 2	
♦ A 9 2		♦ 8 6 3	
♣ 7 5 2		♣ A 9 6	
	♠ Q 7 4		
	♥ A K 8 5		
	♦ K Q J 10		
	♣ J 4		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 NT
Pass	3 NT	All pass	

Auction Commentary: With a good five-card suit, North should just jump to game, rather than inviting. If it doesn't make, just congratulate the opponents on their defense and move on, even if it was partner's fault.

Opening Lead: West leads a 4th best ♠ 2. East, who has been reading everything she can on hold-up plays, can already taste the declarer's defeat when she wins the king and returns another spade, setting up dummy to be killed.

Play Commentary: Declarer can see the writing on the wall as well, but they have a small hope. If the opponents can be convinced to hold up the ♣ A twice, declarer will have 2 ♠, 2 ♥, 3 ♦ and 2 ♣ and run to the bank. Try the effect of leading the ♣ K from the dummy, rather than small to ♣ J. After the first club wins, continue with ♣ Q. If East hasn't been playing close enough attention.....

Defensive Commentary: We don't want to give declarer more tricks than we have to, and we certainly don't want to give them their ninth one. When we follow suit to declarer's and dummy's leads, we should be giving count when we aren't trying to win the trick. We shouldn't just woodenly play our lowest card, especially in cases like this where it is vital to win our side's ace on the trick where declarer runs out of the suit in one hand. In this case, West's ♣ 2, either played with care or carelessly played, should tell East that West started with an odd number, in this case 3, and they should win the ♣ A on the second round no matter how declarer tries to fool them.

Takeaway:

Defense is a partnership exercise. When both partners are paying attention to the cards played and what the implications of those plays are, contracts go down. The player with the small cards has a job that is equally important as the job the player with the ace has.

Remember that giving partner count on tricks declarer or dummy lead means:

- when your first card in a suit is a small one, you are playing from an ODD number of cards -- (or that small one is the only one you have!)
- when your first card in a suit is a larger one, and you "echo" with a smaller one next, you are showing partner an even number of pieces in the suit.

Board 8

West Deals
None Vul

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

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1 NT	Pass	2 ♣	Pass
2 ♦	Pass	3 NT	All pass

Auction Commentary: I'm not sure why I bothered bidding Stayman, partner never seems to have a fit. Maybe next week.

Defensive Commentary: North leads the ♦ 4 and South wins the ♦ K and carefully returns the ♦ 8. North should now know that ♦ QJ9 is in the Declarer's hand, and be ready to execute the deadly hold-up play.

Play Commentary: West reflexively begins to pull the ♦ J out of their hand. Will they see the danger in time? Think about what West should know from the play to the first two tricks. If South originally had 4 diamonds, they would normally return their original 4th best, which would be a lot lower than the ♦ 8. So, the diamonds are splitting 5-3 (probably). Who has the ♦ A? If South had it they would have played it to this trick. Who has the ♦ T? Same answer, so North has them both. What will happen if West plays the ♦ J here at trick two? North will DUCK, the infamous hold-up play. When South gets in with the ♥ K, they will return their last diamond... And it is too much to bear, this vision. What if we play the ♦ 9 at trick 2? Sure, North can win cheaply with the ♦ T and continue the suit, but South will have no diamonds left when they win the ♥ K. Declarer has countered the potential hold-up play with a hold-up play of their own. These guys are good.

Takeaway: Imagine switching the ♥ A and ♥ Q between the East and West hands. Now, the heart finesse goes into the North hand. This changes everything. We must split our ♦ QJ at trick in this scenario, because later, it is the North hand which might win the heart finesse. This game is really interesting.