

The Art of the Discard

How do you feel when declarer starts running a long suit? Do you panic or do you confidently discard knowing exactly which cards to save?

As the declarer, we always plan our play at trick one. It's equally important when defending that we discard with a plan when declarer—or partner—starts running a long suit. Formulate this plan before you play your first discard

♠K7

♥KT72

♦AT72

♣Q93

♠

♠ 83

♥

♥ J983

♦3

♦ J94

♣

♣7642

Auction (South dealer):

1S Pass 2D Pass

2NT Pass 3NT Pass

Partner's opening lead is the ♦3.

Declarer plays low from dummy, and you win the ♦9. You return the ♦J, and declarer wins in dummy with the ♦A.

Declarer now starts to run his presumed five-card spade suit. Before discarding on the third spade, you must think about all your discards. Step one in this thinking process: How many discards must you make? What if declarer surprises you with six spades? How many discards must you make now? The bidding tells you that declarer has at least five spades; his first rebid suggests he holds only five spades. You have only two spades, so you will need to identify three discards. If declarer holds six spades, you'll need to identify four discards

You must keep enough cards in your long suit to match declarer's or dummy's known length. In our example hand, the known length is obvious, dummy's four-card heart suit. You must keep as many hearts as dummy. This is your first priority. You cannot discard a heart unless declarer first pitches one of dummy's hearts.

What about your four-card club suit? Is it possible that it might be matching a four-card club suit in declarer's hand? From the bidding, it's likely that declarer's shape is 5-3-2-3, but there is a possibility that it's 5-2-2-4. You can't guard both hearts and clubs, so guard the known threat

Determine the order in which you will play your discards.

Every card played by the defenders has a purpose. It can take a trick, it can set up a trick, or it can communicate information to partner. A discard, by definition, is a card that is thrown away. It cannot take a trick and it cannot set up a trick. It can communicate information to partner, however. The order in which you play your discards will help guide the defence, depending on your system, signal for attitude or to give count to partner... discarding an honour card signals the honour below for example.

Although partners are more likely to notice high cards, sometimes you need to keep all your cards in the suit you want partner to play. Both you and your partner should get into the habit of watching for discouraging signals.

Good defence demands good partnership communication. You do need to plan your discards, but at the same time, you need to study partner's discards. Note the use of the plural word. Every card partner discards is important! Don't stop thinking after partner's first discard.

♠ AK4

♥ Q1073

♦ A10

♣ 9754

♠ 753

♥ 952

♦ Q742

♣ Q106

♠ Q1098

♥

♦ J983

♣ AKJ83

♠ J62

♥ AKJ864

♦ K65

♣ 2

One of the hardest things in bridge is knowing what to discard when defending.

South was in 6H, after showing a singleton club in the bidding. As you can see, South is in trouble. There is an inescapable club loser, and also a spade loser unless the SQ falls in 2 rounds or the defence do something silly.

West led a trump – often a good idea when the opposition have shown shortage somewhere. South drew 3 rounds of trumps and East had 3 discards to make. He incautiously let go 2 clubs.

South then led a club. East won and returned a club which South ruffed. South went to dummy with the SA and ruffed a third club. With all the defenders' clubs gone, the C9 was now good and the losing small spade was thrown away on it.

What went wrong? There are 2 very good principles to keep in mind when defending. The first is a good bridge maxim:

WHEN DEFENDING, KEEP LENGTH WITH DUMMY

This means keeping the same number of cards as dummy in suits. It prevents dummy creating a length winner. In the above example, East should have kept 4 matching clubs with dummy.

IF YOU KNOW YOU ARE THE ONLY DEFENDER WHO CAN GUARD A SUIT, YOU MUST KEEP THAT SUIT. IF YOU HAVE TO THROW SOMETHING, THROW A SUIT WHERE YOU ARE NOT SURE IF YOU ARE THE ONLY GUARD AND HOPE PARTNER CAN GUARD IT

On this hand, East should have realised that with South having a singleton club, partner clubs, and East is the only defender who can guard the 4th round of clubs. He MUST keep 4 clubs.

What about spades? East can't be completely certain he's guarding spades (partner might have the jack) but in the absence of West signaling the jack, I'd assume you're in charge of this suit too.

Thus, East's 3 discards are clear:

1. He can afford to let go of one club but MUST keep 4 clubs
2. He can let go one spade but probably should keep the spades covered, and
3. The third discard must be a diamond – just hope partner can guard this suit or declarer can't set anything up in it. The fact declarer is drawing trumps and not trying to ruff diamonds is a clue that there are no losers there and you can safely throw a diamond.

SUMMARY

Discarding is much less stressful if you remember to discard with a plan.

1. Determine how many discards you must make.
2. Identify the cards you need to keep.
3. Discard the remainder in the order that communicates most effectively to your partner—but does not cost your side a trick. Good bridge always takes precedence over signaling!