§1. Principles of defensive card play – passive defence.

1. The idea of position.

One of the most important ideas of card play concerns position at the table. Suppose, towards the end of the hand there are only two cards left in each hand and the layout is as below:

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 3</td>
<td>9 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K J</td>
<td></td>
<td>A Q</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, if any player other than West is on lead, then West will make a trick with his ♠K. If, however, West is on lead then South, being in fourth seat, is assured of two tricks. The point to make here is that it is generally advantageous to be the last player to play to any trick. The worst positions are often first and second seat. If you are the second player to play then we say that the lead is coming through you. If you the last player to play then you are in the best position and we say that the lead is coming round to you.

The idea of cards being well placed or badly placed is crucial to the understanding of card play and depends on the fact that the game is played clockwise. A card is said to be “over” you if it is in the hand of the player to your left, the player who plays immediately after you do. In Hand 2 below, for example, it is possible to talk about certain cards being “over” or “under” other cards.

![Hand 2 Diagram]

Regardless of the contract we can say that the ♠K lies over the ♠A Q, the ♥A Q lie over the ♥K and the ♦K J lie over the ♦Q. However, the ♦A lies over the ♦K. It is possible to reverse this and retain the identical meaning; for example, to say that “The ♥K lies under ♥A Q” is the same thing as saying that “The ♥A Q lie over the ♥K”. If you are North-South you would say that the ♠K is badly placed because it is due to make a trick for the opponents. East-West, naturally enough, would have an opposite perspective and say that the ♠K is well placed. Bridge players have their own jargon, too, and many players (speaking for North-South) would say that the ♠K is offside, whereas East-West would regard, say, the ♥K as being onside.

Generally speaking, if we have cards that we know are well-placed, we can sit and wait for our tricks to come to us. Someone has to lead the suit eventually and, as long as we don’t lead away from a well-placed card, we will make our trick(s) in good time. The simplest example of this is a deal such as this:
Hand 3.
South plays in 6♤.
West leads the ♣A

North-South reach 6♤ by South and West leads his ♣A. Once that has stood up and not been ruffed West, by virtue of holding a well-placed ♦K, is certain to take a second trick in the fullness of time. West can lead, quite literally, any card in his hand bar a Spade at trick two and the slam is certain to fail. Leading a Spade, on the other hand, is suicide.

All West has to do is sit there and wait patiently for his trump trick; it will come to him in due course. Having cashed his ♣A at trick one West's winning strategy is simply to get off lead (“play an exit card”) and let declarer get on with it. Sit back and watch the show…

‘Ah, all things come to those who wait,’
(Violet Fane [1843 – 1905], Translated from Tout vient à temps qui sait attendre).

Getting off lead and waiting patiently to get what’s rightfully yours is a powerful idea in this game and is also the subject of the next section. Many players are desperate both to get on lead and then to do something dynamic when they have it – these are frequently mistaken strategies.

2. Frozen suits.

We say suits are frozen when no player can lead the suit without causing some damage to their own side. The motto for the SAS may well be “Who dares wins” but sound advice for bridge players is often “Who dares loses”.

Here, late on in the game, no player would want to be on lead. Whoever has to play Clubs first will effectively concede a trick for their side. If either East or West is on lead then North-South can win two tricks. If either North or South is on lead then East-West will win a trick. This is a classic “frozen suit”. Who dares, loses. That is, whichever side broaches Clubs first in the layout above loses out by doing so.

This is another frozen suit, before either side has led it. Left to their own devices, North-South can make three tricks (and no more) in Clubs – and then only if declarer guesses how the cards lie. If South were to lead a low card to North’s ♣Q then each side would make two tricks in the suit. On the other hand, if East or West were to lead the suit then North-South would have four tricks available. The success or failure of a contract may depend on which side is obliged to open up this sort of suit first.

In Hand 6 below (played in 1NT) three suits (Spades, Hearts and Clubs) are “frozen”; that is whichever player leads one of those suits will damage their own interests by doing so. Both North and South can lead Diamonds without conceding a trick (but would not gain from doing so). For East-West the Diamonds are “semi-frozen” in that East can lead them safely but West cannot.
It is frequently an advantage to have the lead but equally often it is an embarrassment. In Hand 6, with South declarer in No-trumps, all the suits are frozen for West. He cannot lead any card without conceding something to declarer.

It is worth studying the Spade and Club layouts as they are common positions, frequently opened up by inexperienced players. Anyway, as a result of the frozen nature of the suits West will concede a trick with his opening lead. We say that no lead is "safe" and, obscurely, that West has been "end-played". If West leads, say, the ♣K (which is normal enough) South will have two Diamond tricks instead of just the one (the ♣A). East-West's subsequent strategy will be to carry on with Diamonds and avoid opening up another suit with dire consequences for their side.

Hands based on this idea are commonplace – when each side is playing to avoid leading a particular suit each side is continually trying to play "exit cards" in other suits to get off lead and avoid opening up the frozen suit.

In the hand below (Hand 7) the contract is 4♣. Firstly, ask yourself what you would lead against 4♣ from that West hand and why.

The best opening lead on this layout is to start off with a passive trump lead. This gives North-South nothing that they did not have already. True, a Diamond lead gives away nothing at all on this lie of the cards but it is generally poor play to lead an Ace just because you have one and even worse to "underlead" an Ace in a suit contract. A Heart lead concedes a trick immediately by sacrificing West's King and a Club lead allows South to make two Club tricks, simply by playing a low card from the dummy and bashing East's ♣Q with the ♣A.

As it happens, the only truly frozen suit on this deal is Clubs; the side that leads the suit first is doomed to failure. This is very much a deal where declarer should be left to his own devices. With passive defence (a trump lead) and subsequent passive exit cards declarer will lose a Heart, a Diamond and, crucially, two Clubs. If, on the other hand, West (or East, should he ever be able to) leads a Club declarer can make two tricks in the suit and, therefore, lose only one trick there.

The Club layout is an instructive (and common) position that deserves further study as it is fatal to open up the suit.
It is worth playing this suit through yourself, putting all four players on lead in turn, and satisfying yourself that North-South can make no more than one trick in the suit if either North or South leads the suit but two tricks if either East or West does. This involves best defence, of course, but that defence is for East-West to follow suit with low cards on low cards and put pictures on pictures.

Defenders, as a general rule, are often too eager to switch suits every time they are on lead, usually to the benefit of their opponents. Hand 7 shows why that practice is misguided.

It must be said, however, that passivity in defence is not always the right answer, as some deals in the next chapter illustrate.