

Strategy and Tactics – The Opening Gambit

Tactics – The means employed to carry out a strategy that was formulated to achieve an end result.

You've studied opening leads. You know when to give an attitude signal and when to give a count signal. You can quote the books on hold-up plays and unblocking plays. Still, you and your partner never seem to get your defense right. Reluctantly, you have reached the conclusion that maybe it's not always your partner's fault. What are you doing wrong?

- ♠ The goal when defending a bridge hand is easy – set the contract. There are many hands for which this is not a realistic goal, however. The better goal can be stated in one of two ways. 1) Take all your defensive tricks; or 2) don't let declarer have any tricks to which he is not entitled.
- ♠ Your defensive plan, or strategy, will probably be determined by your choice of goal statement. If you choose the first goal statement, you will be planning an *active* defense; i.e., taking your tricks before declarer takes his. The second statement choice implies a *passive* defense.
- ♠ The more techniques, or tactics, you have in your defensive toolbox, the better your defensive play is likely to be. Some tactics are used in active defenses; others in passive defenses. It doesn't matter how many techniques you know, though, if you don't know when to use them. You must determine your strategy *before* you choose your tactic.

The only way to determine your strategy is to visualize your partner's hand and declarer's hand – and the best way to visualize hands is to really think about the bidding and partner's leads and signals. In these two classes, you're not going to practice leading and signalling; you're going to be the partner – and you're going to visualize the hands and determine the best strategy before choosing your defensive tactic. The first session will examine the opening gambit. The second session will explore end game strategy and tactics.

To Duck Or Not To Duck

Partner leads, dummy is tabled, and you see that you could win this trick. Should you win it, or should you duck? Ducking a trick you could win is a frequent tactic employed early in the play of a hand. Whether to use it or not depends on your chosen strategy, a strategy that needs to be formulated before you play to that first trick. The bidding, partner's lead, and the dummy may be all you need to visualize the entire deal. In each of these hands, take a moment to think before choosing your tactic.

HAND 1.

	♠T85	
	♥Q6	
	♦Q83	
	♣AKJT2	
♠		♠742
♥		♥AK74
♦J		♦A642
♣		♣53

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2C – Pass

2NT – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass //

Partner leads the ♦J and declarer plays low from dummy. What are your thoughts?

Partner's lead should suggest the top of an honor sequence, *not* a singleton or doubleton. Honor sequence leads are both attacking leads and protective leads. This lead might set up tricks for your side and it doesn't give up tricks to declarer. The choice of defensive strategy is up to you, and the bidding and partner's lead give you all the additional information you need to make that choice. Answering these questions may help you visualize all four hands more clearly.

1. Who has the ♦K? Who has the ♦T? If you win trick one, how many diamond tricks will declarer win? If you duck trick one, how many diamond tricks will declarer win?
2. What is declarer's shape? How many diamonds is partner most likely to hold?
3. How many trumps does partner hold? How many high card points (HCPs) is partner likely to hold?
4. Who has the ♣Q?
5. If you duck this trick, how many *tricks* is declarer likely to take?

Write down what you think the two remaining hands look like. Can you set this contract? What is your plan? When you've decided whether to duck trick one or win it, go to the end of this paper and check your reasoning.

HAND 2:

	♠T85	
	♥K6	
	♦Q83	
	♣AKJT2	
♠		♠74
♥		♥Q742
♦J		♦A762
♣		♣Q53

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2C – Pass

2NT – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass //

Partner leads the ♦J and declarer plays low from dummy. What are your thoughts?

Again, partner's lead suggests the top of an honor sequence, *not* a singleton or doubleton. What defensive strategy will you choose? Answering these questions may help you visualize all four hands more clearly.

1. Who has the ♦K? Who has the ♦T? If you win trick one, how many diamond tricks will declarer win? If you duck trick one, how many diamond tricks will declarer win?
2. What is declarer's shape? How many diamonds is partner most likely to hold?
3. How many trumps does partner hold? How many high card points is partner likely to hold?
4. What are the key differences between this hand and Hand 1?
5. If you duck this trick, how many *tricks* is declarer likely to take?

In both these hands, you needed to decide at trick one whether to rely on an active strategy and take your side's tricks or whether to play passively and keep declarer from taking any tricks to which he was not entitled. Did you make the right decision?

HAND 3:

	♠KT85	
	♥K6	
	♦QJ43	
	♣JT2	
♠		♠74
♥		♥T742
♦8		♦A962
♣		♣Q53

Auction (South dealer):

1NT – Pass – 2C – Pass

2H – Pass – 3NT – Pass

4S – Pass //

Partner leads the ♦8 and declarer plays low from dummy. What are your thoughts?

Partner has led a high spot card from an unbid suit against a suit contract. This usually indicates shortness in that suit. Short suit leads suggest a ruffing defense, an active defensive strategy. For a ruffing defense to be successful, partner must have *extra trumps* and transportation is essential. If partner is leading a doubleton, partner should also have a quick trump trick. Is partner leading a singleton or a doubleton? Does it matter? Do you plan to win this trick, and if so, what will you do next?

1. What is declarer's shape? How many diamonds does partner hold?
2. How many trumps does partner hold? How many high card points is partner likely to hold?
3. If you win this trick, what card will you return? How will the hand play out?
4. If you duck this trick, what card will you play? How will the hand play out?

HAND 4:

	♠KT5	
	♥Q6	
	♦QJ43	
	♣Q972	
♠		♠74
♥		♥T72
♦8		♦AT72
♣		♣A653

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 1NT! – Pass

2H – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass //

Partner leads the ♦8 and declarer plays low from dummy. What are your thoughts?

Again, partner leads a high spot card from an unbid suit against a suit contract. Is partner leading a singleton or a doubleton? Does it matter? Do you plan to win this trick, and if so, what will you do next?

1. Imagine declarer's likely hand shapes. How many diamonds does partner hold in each one?
2. How many trumps does partner hold? How many high card points is partner likely to hold?
3. Imagine partner's hand with a singleton diamond. If you win this trick, what card will you return? How will the hand play out? If you duck this trick, what card will you play and how will the hand play out?
4. Now, imagine partner's hand with a doubleton diamond. If you win this trick, what card will you return? How will the hand play out? If you duck this trick, what card will you play and how will the hand play out?
5. What are the key differences between this hand and Hand 3?

HAND 5:

	♠KT	
	♥AK653	
	♦KJ43	
	♣75	
♠		♠742
♥		♥T742
♦8		♦A95
♣		♣QT3

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2H – Pass

2NT – Pass – 3NT – Pass

Pass – Pass

Partner leads the ♦8 and declarer plays low from dummy. What are your thoughts?

Partner is leading a high spot card against a no trump contract. What is going on? Against a suit contract, this lead usually indicates shortness and suggests that partner is looking for a ruff. What does it mean when the contract is no trump?

1. What is declarer's likely shape?
2. How many diamonds is partner likely to hold? How many HCPs is partner likely to hold?
3. Did partner lead from his longest suit? If not, what *is* his long suit, and why didn't he lead it?
4. If you win this trick, how many diamond tricks will declarer take? If you duck this trick, how many diamond tricks will declarer take?

HAND 6:

	♠KJT2	
	♥J54	
	♦KQ	
	♣9654	
♠		♠654
♥K		♥AT72
♦		♦543
♣		♣JT7

Auction (South dealer):

1D – 1H – X – 2H

3S – Pass – 4S – Pass

Pass – Pass

Partner leads the ♥K and declarer plays low from dummy. What are your thoughts?

Are you getting tired of these questions? Do you sense a theme?

1. How many hearts does declarer have? What is declarer's likely shape?
2. You can win this trick, or you can let partner hold the trick. If you duck this trick, what do you want partner to do?
3. If you win this trick, what are you going to play next?

One of a defender's most important skills is the ability to make things easy on partner. If you know what to do, then do it. Don't put too much pressure on your partner.

HAND 7:

	♠QJT	
	♥632	
	♦AQJ87	
	♣J7	
♠943		♠
♥AK984		♥Q
♦T4		♦
♣AQ9		♣

Auction (South dealer):

1S – 2H – 3D – Pass

3H – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass //

You're on lead and you play the ♥A. Partner follows with the ♥Q. What are your thoughts?

Trick one is over and you're still on lead. When this happens, you need to decide whether you want to keep going in the same direction or change tack. Your partner's signal at trick one is your best guide. What does partner's ♥Q tell you about his hand?

1. How many HCPs does partner have? How many hearts is partner likely to have?
2. Declarer's second bid was the cue bid of 3H. What does that mean? What is declarer's likely shape?
3. How do you want this hand to play out? What are you going to do at trick two?

Summary

If your trick one decision is whether or not to duck the trick, decide on your defensive strategy *before* you play that card.

- ♠ Although passive defenses are frequently the best, if declarer has a good source of tricks in a side suit, it may be necessary to take your side's tricks as soon as possible.
- ♠ Short suit leads are not always the best tactic against a suit contract. In fact, a doubleton lead is very likely to pick up the suit for declarer. If partner's lead suggests that ruffing tricks will be your side's best defense, however, transportation is your number one consideration.
- ♠ Do you need to be on lead, or do you need partner on lead? This may determine your play at trick one or trick two.

To identify the best tactic to use, one must first visualize the entire deal, not just one suit, and formulate a defensive strategy. This requires *thought*, not rote action. In the game of bridge, there is only one "always": "Always think."

Addenda

This paper assumes standard leads and signals. If you and your partner use a different system, your signal cards may differ from the illustrations.

If you want to brush up on leading and signaling, please refer to my earlier handouts, "Firing the First Shot: The Opening Lead" and "The ABCs of Defensive Signals. Both are available on the Unit's website page, "Lecture Series Archive" (<http://www.paloaltobridge.com/education/lectureseries/lectureseriesarchive.html>).

Answers:

HAND 1.

	♠T85	
	♥Q6	
	♦Q83	
	♣AKJT2	
♠J6		♠742
♥J832		♥AK74
♦JT9		♦A642
♣9874		♣53
	♠AKQ93	
	♥T95	
	♦K75	
	♣Q6	

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2C – Pass

2NT – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass //

Declarer chose to rebid 2NT, rather than rebid his spades or show a second suit; therefore, he is likely to hold 5 spades and some 3-3-2 distribution in the remaining suits.

Partner's lead pinpoints the ♦K (declarer) and ♦T (partner). If you duck this trick, declarer will win only one diamond. If you win this trick, declarer will take two diamonds. *However*, dummy will provide declarer with

five club tricks, even if partner holds the ♣Q. Unless partner can take a trump trick, declarer is ready to win five spades and five clubs when he wins the lead. Ducking this diamond trick will give declarer eleven tricks.

Can partner win a trick? Since you're holding almost all your side's HCPs, that's unlikely. The best your side may be able to do is take your three defensive tricks immediately. Most players on defense play each suit "in a vacuum," so holding declarer to ten tricks will give your side an excellent match point score. At \$1 per point, you just saved your side \$30 by taking the ♦A and cashing your two heart tricks.

HAND 2:

	♠T85	
	♥K6	
	♦Q83	
	♣AKJT2	
♠J63		♠74
♥A853		♥Q742
♦JT9		♦A762
♣974		♣Q53
	♠AKQ92	
	♥JT9	
	♦K54	
	♣86	

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2C – Pass

2NT – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass //

What are the differences between this hand and Hand 1? Because you hold the ♣Q, dummy's club suit will provide only four tricks. You're no longer holding all your side's HCPs, so partner may be able to win a trick and lead through dummy's diamonds once again. This time, your side might have a chance to take four defensive tricks before declarer can take all his winning tricks. Setting this contract depends on which side suit

doubleton declarer holds – and of course, how good that declarer might be.

HAND 3:

Auction (South dealer):

1NT – Pass – 2C – Pass

2H – Pass – 3NT – Pass

4S – Pass //

Partner's lead suggests a singleton or doubleton. Unfortunately, you have a pretty bad hand with no outside entry. If partner is leading from a doubleton, you won't be able to give partner a ruff if you take this trick, so you should duck the trick. If partner is leading a singleton, you must take this trick

	♠KT85	
	♥K6	
	♦QJ43	
	♣JT2	
♠A63		♠74
♥J93		♥T742
♦85		♦A962
♣K9764		♣Q53
	♠QJ92	
	♥AQ85	
	♦KT7	
	♣A8	

and give partner an immediate ruff. Can you tell if partner has a singleton or a doubleton diamond?

The bidding tells you what you need to know. Declarer is known to hold four spades and four hearts. If partner's ♦8 is a singleton, then declarer also holds four diamonds. That would give declarer a singleton club, *but he opened the bidding 1NT*, so he must hold at least two clubs.

Partner is leading the top card from a doubleton holding. Play the ♦9, an encouraging attitude signal, and plan to give partner a diamond ruff the next time diamonds are led. Your side will take two aces and a diamond ruff – and you might get a club trick from a

careless declarer. If you take the first diamond trick, your side will take only your two aces. Try it!

HAND 4:

	♠KT5	
	♥Q6	
	♦QJ43	
	♣Q972	
♠A62		♠74
♥J954		♥T72
♦86		♦AT72
♣KJT4		♣A653
	♠QJ983	
	♥AK83	
	♦K95	
	♣8	

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 1NT! – Pass

2H – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass //

What's the main difference between this hand and Hand 3? You have an outside entry. You can't determine partner's diamond holding from the bidding, but if partner has a singleton and an immediate trump entry, you should set this contract two tricks: two aces, two ruffs, and partner's trump trick. If partner has a doubleton diamond, you will still set the contract if you take this trick and lead diamonds back immediately: two

aces, *one* ruff, and partner's trump trick.

HAND 5:

	♠KT	
	♥AK653	
	♦KJ43	
	♣75	
♠J85		♠742
♥J9		♥T742
♦862		♦A95
♣AJ942		♣QT3
	♠AQ963	
	♥Q8	
	♦QT7	
	♣K86	

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2H – Pass

2NT – Pass – 3NT – Pass

Pass – Pass

What is partner thinking? The ♦8 says that diamonds are definitely not partner's longest and strongest suit. The auction suggests that partner has about 6-8 HCPs, and those points are not in diamonds and are probably not in hearts or spades. Partner must have some club values. He also holds three spades, probably two hearts (since declarer did not raise hearts), and probably five clubs (since declarer rebid 2NT rather than showing a

four-card club suit). Why didn't he lead his club suit? Probably because he's missing one of the key honors, either the ♣A or ♣K.

Declarer is entitled to three diamond tricks, regardless of when you take your ace, but how many *tricks* is he likely to take if you duck trick one? That gives declarer five probable spade tricks, one

diamond, and it looks like there may be a good possibility of three heart tricks. If you're going to set this contract, it needs to be done quickly.

You plan to take the ♦A and switch to the club suit. What card do you plan to play at trick two? If declarer holds the ♣A, you can't set the contract. If declarer holds ♣Kx, you need to play the ♣Q or ♣T at trick two to begin your unblock. If declarer holds ♣Kxx or ♣Kxxx, you want to hold the lead or force out declarer's ♣K. Take your ♦A and lead back the ♣Q, just to relieve partner's mind.

HAND 6:

	♠KJT2	
	♥J54	
	♦KQ	
	♣9654	
♠83		♠654
♥KQ986		♥AT72
♦876		♦543
♣AQ3		♣JT7
	♠AQ97	
	♥3	
	♦AJT92	
	♣K82	

Auction (South dealer):

1D – 1H – X – 2H
 3S – Pass – 4S – Pass
 Pass – Pass

Partner leads the ♥K. If you overtake with your ♥A, you could be setting up the ♥J in dummy. *How many heart tricks do you expect your side to take?* If you don't overtake partner's ♥K, partner will continue the suit, which will be ruffed by declarer, or make a disastrous switch. Win trick one and switch to the ♣J. It's your side's best chance to set the contract. On this hand, you will take one heart and three clubs. If you don't win trick

one, declarer will take five diamonds, four spades, and one or two heart ruffs. The latter might be a match point zero for your side.

HAND 7:

	♠QJT	
	♥632	
	♦AQJ87	
	♣J7	
♠943		♠72
♥AK984		♥QJ5
♦T4		♦963
♣AQ9		♣86542
	♠AK865	
	♥T7	
	♦K52	
	♣KT3	

Auction (South dealer):

1S – 2H – 3D – Pass
 3H – Pass – 3S – Pass
 4S – Pass //

What does partner's ♥Q promise at trick one? It shows the ♥J or a singleton heart. It promises that partner can win trick two – *if that's what is needed for best defense*. Do you want to be on lead at trick two, or do you want partner to win that trick?

Underlead your heart honors. Partner will either win with the ♥J (probable) or trump (possible). Now, it's up to partner to make the correct switch. Looking at that

dummy, your partner will definitely switch to a club. That's two heart tricks and two club tricks for the good guys.

When you choose to put partner on lead at trick two, you are suggesting that a lead in a new suit by partner will be your side's best chance to set the contract. Don't put partner on lead just because you know you can.

1

♠ AKQ96
 ♥ J10853
 ♦ K
 ♣ Q6

 ♠ 742
 ♥ AK74
 ♦ A642
 ♣ 53

 ♠ J3
 ♥ 92
 ♦ J10975
 ♣ 9874

 ♠ 1085
 ♥ Q6
 ♦ Q83
 ♣ AKJ102

Dealer: North
 Neither Vulnerable

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

 Opening Lead: J ♦

Seeing the great club suit in dummy, West can't afford to duck trick one. It's time for the defense to cash out. Surprise! Partner ruffs the third heart for the setting trick.

2

♠ 72
 ♥ QJ
 ♦ 9632
 ♣ A10963

 ♠ QJ10
 ♥ 632
 ♦ AQJ87
 ♣ J7

 ♠ AK865
 ♥ 1075
 ♦ K5
 ♣ K52

 ♠ 943
 ♥ AK984
 ♦ 104
 ♣ Q84

Dealer: East
 N-S Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
		1 ♠	Pass
2 ♦	Pass	2 NT	Pass
3 ♠	Pass	4 ♠	Pass
Pass	Pass		

 Opening Lead: A ♥

Partner plays the HQ under your Ace, showing the HJ or a singleton. It's your decision. Continue with the HK, or underlead to partner's HJ (or ruff). Do you have any reason to put partner on lead?

3

♠ K1085
 ♥ KJ
 ♦ QJ3
 ♣ J1032

 ♠ A42
 ♥ AQ973
 ♦ 8
 ♣ Q964

 ♠ 76
 ♥ 106542
 ♦ A962
 ♣ 75

 ♠ QJ93
 ♥ 8
 ♦ K10754
 ♣ AK8

Dealer: South
 E-W Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
			1 ♦
1 ♥	Dbl	2 ♥	3 ♠
Pass	4 ♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			

 Opening Lead: 8 ♦

The DA will be your only trick, and partner's lead is obviously shortness. If it's a singleton, you need to win trick one. If it's a doubleton, you need to duck. When partner doesn't lead a suit he's bid and you've raised, but leads a short suit instead, the odds favor a singleton - but there's no guarantee. Win trick one.

4

♠ 943
 ♥ AKJ9765
 ♦
 ♣ 754

 ♠ AK876
 ♥ 3
 ♦ AK4
 ♣ KQJ2

 ♠ QJ102
 ♥ 108
 ♦ Q973
 ♣ A83

 ♠ 5
 ♥ Q42
 ♦ J108652
 ♣ 1096

Dealer: West
 Both Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
1 ♠	3 ♥	3 ♠	4 ♥
4 NT	Pass	5 ♣	Pass
6 ♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

 Opening Lead: 7 ♥

It's a team game and partner's lead is a huge gamble. When you win the HQ, what do you do? If partner makes the standard lead, what is the end result?

! 5C shows 1 or 4 keycards. Yes, West might open 2C, but then the auction might yield a different declarer.