

ACTIVE VERSUS PASSIVE DEFENSE

By Maritha Pottenger

Playing IMPs, rubber bridge, or many team events, you can take big risks to set a contract. At matchpoints, you must be more circumspect. Setting a contract is good, but many times you will get a good score for merely preventing the opponents from making an overtrick. So, part of matchpoint strategy is to decide whether to follow an active or a passive defense. And, you may switch from active to passive (or vice versa) within the same hand. According to the prolific bridge writer H.W. Kelsey, most defenders are much too active (kicking away tricks they don't have to).

Passive defense is often best when:

- 1) Declarer is strong and Dummy is weak. For example, it goes 2NT-P-P-P. Dummy is broke. Make the safest lead possible. Do NOT break new suits for Declarer.
- 2) Opponents have struggled to a contract and have no extras, e.g. 1N-2N3N.
- 3) Opponents have indicated fairly balanced hands.
- 4) Opponents have bid a grand slam.
- 5) You have strength behind one of Declarer's suits and do not want finesse yourself.

Active defense is often best when:

- 1) Opponents have shown extras.
- 2) One or more of the opponents has indicated a long suit on which losers can be discarded.
- 3) Opponents have bid a small slam.
- 4) You know honors are sitting well and suits are breaking well for opponents.

Many times, you will have an "obvious" opening lead (e.g., Ace from AKxx or King from KQxxx or leading the suit partner has bid). However, after dummy comes down, you have to decide whether to go active or passive. **If dummy has a fairly balanced hand** (and Declarer has NOT indicated a two-suited hand), **and dummy has scattered honors and some threatening intermediate cards, passive defense is usually best.** Suppose, for example, you overcall a spade and partner raises you to 2♠, but the opponents continue to 3♥. You lead the Ace of spades and partner signals high (attitude—to show possession of the queen). Dummy has only two spades and is: ♠ xx ♥ Qxx ♦ J98x ♣ AJ108 while you have ♠ AKJxx ♥ xx ♦ Kx ♣ xxxx. The thought of leading either minor suit should send chills of horror up your spine! Exit with a trump (passive defense) and let Declarer do his/her own dirty work. [If your partner has four spades, partner's second spade should be suit preference—lowest spade definitely wants a club shift; highest spade definitely wants a diamond shift; middle spade doesn't know or doesn't care. If your partner has only three spades, suit preference is more dicey. In this hand, if partner played the queen of spades under your King, that should guarantee the Ace of diamonds and you could safely play King of diamonds, diamond to partner's Ace and hope for a diamond ruff.]

If dummy has two suits of 4 cards or longer and you feel you must attack one of them to develop tricks, it is usually best to attack the one that is weakest, particularly if you have an honor in both. If, for example, dummy has AQJx in clubs and A982 in diamonds and you have Kxxx in clubs and Qxxx in diamonds and you feel you must attack, lead a diamond—never a club. Even if you did NOT have the King of clubs (so partner *might* have it), you should try a diamond first. Playing a club helps Declarer to set up the club suit and discard other losers).

It is almost never right to attack strong tenaces in dummy (e.g., AQJx; AJ10x; KQ109; etc.). You are usually helping Declarer—not yourself and your partner. The exceptions would be when partner has signaled a very clear request (perhaps for the setting trick or because partner can get a ruff in a suit contract).