

## The Art of the Discard

How do you feel when declarer starts running a long suit? Do you find it hard to breathe? Do you panic? Or do you confidently discard knowing exactly which cards to save?

### *Discard with a plan*

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 starts running a long suit. Formulate this plan *before* you play your first discard.

### **Determine how many discards you must make.**

Consider this example.

Dummy:	♠K7	
	♥KT72	
	♦AT72	
Partner:	♣Q93	You:
		♠83
		♥J983
♦3		♦J94
		♣7642

Auction: South – Partner – North – You  
1S – P – 2D – P  
2NT – P – 3NT – P

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?

### **Identify the cards you must keep.**

Step two in this thinking process: ***What cards must I keep?*** You begin this process when you pick up your hand and identify its values. The bidding, dummy, and partner's opening lead will help you refine your evaluation. In order of importance, these are the points you must consider when identifying the cards you must keep.

- 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. Sorry. By the time your ♣7 takes a trick, the hand will be long over.

- If partner's hand holds a source of tricks, you must keep one entry to those tricks for every entry in your own hand.

In our example hand, it looks like you have only one possible entry, the ♥J. Partner's source of tricks appears to be the diamond suit, and declarer has left you with one diamond. You want to keep that

diamond card as long as possible. What if declarer had taken the third diamond trick, rather than the second? We'll discuss that problem later.

- Try to keep at least one card in every suit, if possible. The exception to this rule is partner's suit, but only if your hand will take no tricks.

There is nothing more irritating when guarding a key honor, than watching partner discard all their cards in that suit, pinpointing its location for declarer. If we follow this rule, we must keep at least one club, in addition to the cards we've already identified.

- Keep enough cards to guard your key honor(s).

We don't have any problem guarding key honors in this hand! Other than the already identified heart suit, we don't hold any key honors.

Once you've identified all the cards you must keep, any spare cards remaining can be safely discarded. Do you have enough spares? In this hand, we must keep all four hearts, one diamond, and one club. We can safely discard three clubs. Since we only need three discards, we have no problem.

### **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 defense.

- Your first discard in a suit is an attitude signal and shows partner how you feel about that suit. A high card encourages; a low card discourages. ***When using standard signaling methods, there is no way to show suit preference at the same time.***
  - If a high card in a suit will not cost your side a trick, play an *encouraging signal* in that suit to let partner know where your strength lies as soon as possible.
  - 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*. They are less likely to cost your side a trick.
  - Discarding an honor card always guarantees the honor immediately below. Be careful not to waste a trick just to get partner's attention.
  - Don't play false cards unless you know that partner will never win a trick – and you'd better be right!
- Your second discard in a suit is a “present count” signal, and tells partner how many cards you hold in that suit. A high card indicates an even number of cards; a low card indicates an odd number of cards.

In our example hand, we plan to discard three clubs from our ♣7642 holding. In what order should we play them?

- Our first discard is the ♣2. We see no source of tricks if partner attacks this suit, and we have no strength in this suit.
- When we make our second discard, our club holding is ♣764, an odd number. Therefore, we play the ♣4, a low card. Partner will know we held one, three, or five clubs at that time.
- By the time we make our third discard, partner will know how many clubs we started with, and therefore, how many clubs declarer started with. It's likely that partner will now know exactly how the defense should be carried out.

## Practice Your Discarding Skill

Dummy:	♠Q63	
	♥Q2	
	♦AJ96	
Partner:	♣KQ32	You:
♠J		♠54
		♥9864
		♦KT52
		♣A94

Auction: North – You – South – Partner  
 1D – P – 1H – P  
 2C – P – 3NT – P

Partner's opening lead is the ♠J.  
 Declarer plays low from dummy, you play the ♠4 (Why?), and declarer wins the ♠A.

Declarer next wins the ♥Q in dummy, and leads to his ♥J, won by partner's ♥A.

The play continues with partner leading his ♥T. Declarer *discards* the ♣2 from dummy, and wins this trick with his ♥K. He plays a low spade to the ♠Q, and then leads a low spade from dummy.

The score is four tricks for the bad guy and one trick for you and partner.

Dummy:	♠6	
	♥--	
	♦AJ96	
Partner:	♣KQ3	You:
♠J		♠--
		♥9
		♦KT52
		♣A94

Declarer leads the ♠6 from dummy, and you must discard. What is your discard plan?

- Step one: How many discards must you make? Declarer's play suggests a four-card spade suit as well as the known four-card heart suit. If that hypothesis is correct, you will need to find two discards on the spade suit. Do you have two discards?
- Step two: Identify the cards you must keep.
  - The ♥9 is a winning trick. You *must* keep this card.
  - Dummy's four-card diamond suit is a threat. If possible, you *must* match dummy's diamond length. You may need to discard a diamond eventually, but it shouldn't be your first choice.
  - It would be nice to keep a "get out" card in the club suit.

That leaves us with only one easy discard – a club. Our second discard, if necessary, may depend on declarer's line of play. Remember, declarer will need to discard from dummy. If he discards a diamond, we can safely discard a diamond, too.

- Step three: We know the first discard suit. What card should we play? Remember that the first discard in each suit is an attitude signal. If partner wins a trick, what suit do we want them to play?

- We can play the ♣A ourselves. What we need partner to lead, if partner wins a trick, is the diamond suit. Discard the ♣4 – and hope that partner is not one of those players that assume all discards are positive signals!

### Watching Partner's Discards

Good defense 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.

Dummy:	♠K7	
	♥KT72	
	♦AT72	
You:	♣Q93	Partner:
	♠T962	
	♥Q5	
	♦KQ53	♦J9
	♣AKT	

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1S – P – 2D – P
2NT – P – 3NT – P

You lead the ♦3.  
 Declarer plays low from dummy, and partner wins the ♦9.  
 Partner returns the ♦J, and declarer wins in dummy with the ♦A.

It sounds like you have the best hand at the table, and you have no way to enter the auction! It also sounds like partner will be no help at all. Wonder of wonders, partner's diamond cards have set up four tricks in your hand, if declarer doesn't take nine tricks before you get in.

- How many discards must partner make on declarer's five spades? You only need to make one, but partner must make three discards. Those discards will tell you partner's distribution and where partner's strength, if any, lies.
  - Partner's first discard is the ♣2. We already knew partner couldn't hold much in clubs.
  - Partner's second discard is the ♣4. That's the lowest outstanding club, so it's likely that partner held an odd number of clubs when he made this discard, probably three. In that case, partner started with four clubs, so declarer started with three clubs.
  - Partner's third discard is another club. We now know that partner's strength lies in the heart suit. How do we know this? Values are something you keep, and partner hasn't discarded a single heart card. **Don't watch discards alone.** Cards that are kept tell a story, too.
- What card will you throw away? The ♣T is your only extra card. Just in case you need a second discard, partner's discards told you that the ♥5 would be safe.

### Summary

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

- Determine how many discards you must make.
- Identify the cards you need to keep.
- Discard the remainder in the order that communicates most effectively to your partner.

## A Brief Exercise

Dummy:	♠84	
	♥AK53	
	♦AQJT72	
You:	♣9	Partner:
♠K962		
♥64		♥J
♦53		
♣Q8642		♣7

Auction: South – You – North – Partner  
1NT – P – 2C – P  
2S – P – 6NT – P

6D is a great contract, but where's the fun in that? You lead the ♥6, hoping for a miracle.

Declarer plays low from dummy, and partner wins the ♥J, declarer following with the ♥8.

Partner returns the ♣7, and declarer wins in hand with the ♣A.

Things don't look good for your side. The stress will be high as declarer plays that six-card diamond suit! Think about how declarer will play this hand. If you and partner discard well, declarer cannot make this contract.

- **Determine how many discards you must make.**<sup>1</sup>
- **Identify the cards you must keep.**<sup>2</sup>
- **Determine the order in which you will play your discards.**<sup>3</sup>

If partner guards the heart suit and carefully preserves at least one card in the spade suit, you can calmly set this contract by discarding with a plan, not squirming in your seat each time a discard is necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> You need four discards when declarer runs his six-card diamond suit and one discard when declarer plays the ♥AK – five discards in all. Four are easy, two spades and two clubs, but the fifth will depend on declarer's discards.

<sup>2</sup> Your spade suit guards declarer's known four-card suit. You must keep one card to guard your club queen. That takes care of the cards you must keep.

<sup>3</sup> Communicating to your partner is irrelevant. If either one of you wins another trick, the contract is set. Your discards should encourage declarer to make a mistake. *Declarer cannot take the club finesse.* Guarding your club queen is more important than matching declarer's spade length. Although unnecessary in this hand, it may be necessary in future hands to encourage declarer to make a losing play. Declarer *can* take the spade finesse. Discard two small spades, then two small clubs. This implies that you hold the club honor, but don't care about spades. Like you, declarer will need to discard on the diamonds. He has discarded two small spades, one small heart, and one small club. Declarer follows suit to the second heart, but must discard on the third. If declarer pitches a club, you pitch a club. If declarer pitches a spade, you pitch a spade.

## ***The ABCs of Defensive Signals: Answers***

### **Signals at trick one**

1a. The ♥T.

1b. Probably three hearts. Holding only the ♥QJ, partner's best play would have been to win trick one with the ♥Q, then return the ♥J, thus reversing the usual play of these honor cards.

2a. Partner's first heart was an attitude signal. His second heart shows present count. Since it's the lowest heart outstanding, partner's present count is an odd number of hearts. Partner started with two or four hearts, giving declarer four or two. Declarer's play suggests an original four-card heart holding.

2b. Partner will discard on the third heart trick. That discard will indicate whether diamonds or clubs are the "obvious switch." Win the third heart with your ace.

3. When declarer plays a winning spot card from dummy and partner cannot cover that card, partner's attitude is obvious. His card indicates count. Partner started with an even number of hearts, and those hearts do not include the ♥QJT. Therefore, partner started with two hearts, and declarer holds four hearts: ♥QJT(4 or 2).

1. Partner's play of an honor card when your card is currently winning the trick promises the honor immediately below or a singleton. If partner has a singleton ♥J, declarer started with four hearts and chose to bid clubs, instead of his four-card heart suit, in response to the forcing 1NT bid. It's most likely that partner holds the ♥T.

2. Partner's ♥3 is an attitude signal. He has nothing in hearts, so a heart continuation will only help declarer. Make the obvious switch. Lead a diamond.

1. With a singleton heart in dummy, an attitude signal from partner isn't required. Partner should be giving a suit preference signal. The ♥3 is the lowest outstanding heart, so switch to the lower of the outside suits: clubs.

2. Partner's ♥7 should be a suit preference signal. The ♥QT are the only outstanding hearts higher than the ♥7, so switch to the higher of the outside suits: diamonds.

### **Signals when you are leading a short suit against a trump contract**

1a. Trump with the ♥7 to start a trump echo showing three trumps. The only missing trump your holdings can beat is the ♥3, so you're not wasting anything. Partner's ♠A denies the ♠K, so place that card in declarer's hand. The remaining missing cards are the ♠Q842. Partner's ♠T is a high card, so return a diamond, the jack.

1b. Trump with the ♥7 to start a trump echo showing three trumps. The missing cards are the ♠KJT86. Partner's ♠4 is the lowest card out, so return a club. I return my fourth best club, the 3.

1c. Trump with the ♥7 to start a trump echo showing three trumps. The missing cards are the ♠QJT82. Partner's ♠4 is ambiguous, since he could hold the ♠2, but I would still read it as a low card and return a club. In this auction, it's likely that partner holds at least five spades, so he should be able to lead a less ambiguous card if he wanted a diamond return.