Errors in defence – giving gifts
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Far too many doubtful contracts are allowed to make and far too many undeserved overtricks are taken because defenders give declarers gifts.

After RHO opens 1H, you overcall 2C and LHO jumps to 4H, what will you lead from this hand?

♠ 104

♥ 6

♦ A87

♣ AJ109832

It's unwise to lead the ♣A because LHO is obviously distributional and may be able to ruff, which could also set up declarer's king. Leading the diamond ace may solve a guess for declarer. Leading the singleton heart may also eliminate declarer's problem about a missing honour.

A sensible lead, unlikely to do much harm and potentially able to do a great deal of good, is the ♠10. On this hand it makes things quite difficult for declarer, who now has to guess what to do in both diamonds and hearts, while trying to dispose of his club losers. He will almost certainly go down.

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              ♠A7          Dlr: N
              ♥AJT43   Vul: E-W
              ♦93
              ♣K765
  ♠KQJ953              ♠T4
  ♥K95                 ♥6
  ♦QT                  ♦A87
  ♣Q4                  ♣AJT9832
              ♠862
              ♥Q872
              ♦KJ6542
              ♣
```

Cashing unsupported aces is the most common error made in defence. It is rarely a good idea on the opening lead. Although it may be necessary later in the hand to prevent overtricks, be careful in case you are giving declarer a gift.

Playing high cards unnecessarily is another common gift – notably, although "third hand high" is an old rule, don't play automatically. Think through the hand first!

Suppose the bidding has been 1S by LHO, 2S by RHO and 4S by LHO. Partner leads the ♣4 and you see this dummy on your right.

♠ J872

♥ K96

♦ 875

♣ Q72

    ♠ 54

    ♥ QJ83

    ♦ K102

    ♣ K1096

Declarer plays low. Do you play the ♣K?

You shouldn't. Play the ♣9. After all, what has partner led from? The ♣4 is either low from the jack (partner should not be underleading the ace against a suit contract) or else it could be from a short-suit holding such as a singleton or 4-3 doubleton. In any case, declarer has the ace and if she also holds the jack, by playing ♣K you just gave a large gift.

North-South shouldn't make 4S on this if defended correctly, but if East plays ♣K at trick one, it's all over.

Here are some other types of gifts – slightly less common, but all avoidable:

- Giving a ruff and discard – not always a crime, but it usually is.
- Opening suits for declarer – quite often, passive defence is best.
- Taking tricks prematurely – don't help declarer with timing and entries.
- Failing to count declarer's tricks in a cashout situation – get what's yours.

This hand is a good illustration. The bidding was 1D by RHO, 2C by LHO, 2D by RHO, 2S by LHO (game forcing reverse by responder – see last week's notes) and 3NT by LHO. You lead fourth highest from your 5-card heart suit and this is what you see:

♠ AKQJ

♥ J3

♦ 103

♣ Q7632

♠ 862

♥ A8762

♦ 765

♣ J4

Declarer calls for the ♥3 from dummy, partner plays ♥10 and declarer wins with the queen. He now plays a diamond to the 10, won by partner with the ace. Partner returns ♥5, declarer plays low and you take you ♥A. What now?

It's time to count tricks. Declarer certainly has ♥K because otherwise partner would have played this at trick 1. He also appears to have 4 diamond tricks, plus there are 4 spade tricks in dummy. That's a total of 10 tricks …

Unless partner has good clubs! It's your last chance to switch and you must do so. It may not work … but this time you are rewarded because the full hand proves to be:

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BD: 23   ♠AKQJ       Dlr: S
         ♥J3     Vul: Both
         ♦T3
         ♣Q7632
♠862            ♠975
♥A8762          ♥T5
♦765            ♦A98
♣J4             ♣AKT95
         ♠T43
         ♥KQ94
         ♦KQJ42
         ♣8
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Note that partner made a significant error in taking the first diamond with ♦A. It's a very good idea to try to mess up declarer's communications by taking the second diamond instead. On this hand, that would have meant that even if you didn't find the club switch but instead exited passively with a spade, partner could beat the contract by playing ♣A, K and 10, locking declarer in dummy to concede another club trick.