

THINKING on DEFENSE

The art of visualization at bridge



Jim Priebe

Foreword by Eric Kokish

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FOREWORD

Zia, in his modern classic, *Bridge My Way*, verbalized something that every good player knows instinctively — when he's in his best form (Zia's Heat One), everything comes easily to him. He “knows everything” without having to delve too deeply into the clues. He plays crisply and confidently and invariably does the right thing.

The problem, of course, is that Heat One never lasts. For even the best players in the world, the game is usually work. Hard work. In no facet of the game is this more apparent than in defense, which requires taking into consideration not only your personal a priori analysis of the layout but also an evaluation of the cards that both your partner and declarer have played or might have played with particular holdings. Add to this exercise an assessment of the abilities and current intensity of those players and an appreciation of the form of scoring and perhaps even the state of the match and it becomes clear that mastering the art of defense is probably impossible. The best we can do is to teach ourselves to think clearly, to eliminate extraneous information and dead ends, and to stay focused on the true objective of each deal.

When it comes to objectives, IMPs and Rubber Bridge are much easier games than Matchpoints. The defenders go all out to defeat the contract. The complexities and nuances of Matchpoint defense make this form of scoring a completely different game. Normal versus abnormal contracts, sacrifices, the extra 10 or 20 points for choosing one strain over another, determining whether the defense should protect its result or go all out to try to improve it — each of these subjects could fill a few chapters of a complete book on defense, a tome that should properly run to a thousand pages.

Jim Priebe's book on defense will not explore all of these avenues. Instead, it will focus on clarity of thought, in particular on the concept of visualization, the process of picturing several possible hands for declarer consistent with all the information available to the defender at the critical juncture in the play (there may be several). The art — and it is an art — lies in choosing the play that caters to the most likely or several of the most likely layouts consistent with the objectives of the defenders in each case.

Why the special interest in defense? In analyzing his own defensive lapses, Jim felt that at the bottom of most of them was a failure to sift through alternatives, to jump too quickly to a conclusion, and to base his

defensive play on the first reasonable hand to come to mind. Although his passion for the game was always strong, Jim never had the time he would have liked to devote to the game until he retired from business a few years ago.

Borrowing an idea from his business training, Jim concluded that “visualizing” alternatives and analyzing them before committing to a course of action would inevitably improve his own play immeasurably. He soon found that adopting this approach and sticking to it made a significant difference and led him to write this book with the hope that he can help others willing to invest in a little hard work.

First books by unknown authors are often unappreciated by the bridge community, but it would be a mistake to pass this one up. Invest some time and effort and read what Jim has to say. Doing so will improve not only your defense and your partner’s but will also elevate your appreciation and respect for the game to a level you may have forgotten or might not yet have considered.

Erik Kokish
Toronto, August, 2001

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To my wife Joan
a wonderful help in preparing this manuscript
and a great partner in every way.



INTRODUCTION

Most players are aware that they throw away noticeably more tricks per relevant deal on defense than they do on offense.

Jeff Rubens, **The Bridge World**

This book is intended for players who have achieved some success at their current level of bridge competition, whatever that may be, and are keen to play and win at a higher level. Thus, its purpose is to help ambitious players become strong defenders.

The objective of the defending side, in general, is to take as many tricks as possible. More specifically, a defender's objectives are:

- To defeat the opponents' voluntarily bid contracts, whether they are in a partscore, game or slam.
- To extract the maximum penalty when the opponents are overboard, whether you have doubled them or not.
- To allow as few overtricks as possible.

The first two are of overwhelming importance in IMP games. All three apply at matchpoints, and that is what makes defense at matchpoints so delightfully complex. This book will mainly focus on the first objective, that is, on setting the contract. This is where bushels of IMPs and matchpoints are squandered and where a little extra work on the part of the defenders will show its biggest payoff. Overtricks and maximum undertricks will be treated, then, as important but secondary issues.

I am going to introduce you to the idea of *visualization*, which involves forming a mental picture of a small number of possible hands for declarer. This concept is a unifying thread which weaves its way through the book and strengthens your application of other defensive fundamentals. If you can master even a part of the visualization process, you will see an immediate improvement in your results.

Chapter 1 discusses why defense is so important in terms of the matchpoint percentage or IMPs at stake. In it, I shall attempt to persuade you that undertaking the work involved in the rest of this book will have some very real payback for you in terms of your own scores.

Chapter 2 introduces the subject of visualization, explains what it is, and shows how to go about it. The process described in Chapter 2 works its way through all of the other chapters.

Chapters 3,4 and 5 detail the fundamental skills which a good defender needs at his fingertips at all times:

- agreements with partner on opening leads and signals
- counting
- understanding defensive tactics
- recognizing and combating what declarer is doing.

Finally, Chapter 6 contains forty problems which will provide you with opportunities to practice the concepts. These problems are real-life examples, many of them from World Championship competition, where you will find that applying the visualization process will enable you to improve on the original result at the table. Once you've reached this stage, you'll find that your own results as a defender will get better too.

Why Bother?

*A good defensive player is always
a winner over the long haul.*

Eddie Kantar, **Defensive Bridge Play**

Defense is an insidious part of the game of bridge. On some days, you may find that you encounter no special challenge in the hands you defend. Perhaps your partner had all the critical decisions, or maybe on these occasions your routine defensive methods (leads and signals) covered all the problem hands nicely. Other times, you find that you have doubled a partscore on Board 1, with four percent of a matchpoint session's work resting on your shoulders alone (or 18 IMPs if you are playing a team game — gain 6 IMPs by setting the contract, or lose 12 if it makes). Worse still, the key play may ambush you at Trick 1 instead of presenting itself in a leisurely way at Trick 12, when you have plenty of information.

Most experts agree, too, that defense is the toughest part of the game of bridge. When players gather after a session one seldom hears defense discussed. It is too hard! It is rare that there are quick and easy answers to defensive problems. And defense is often complex. When you say, 'I played the king because it loses only when partner had jack-ten-eight, and if he had jack-ten-seven or worse, it couldn't cost,' you find your friends looking away and changing the subject. In any case, improving players generally are advised that bidding is the most important skill to develop, and they focus on learning the latest conventions and the laws of this and that. A large number become very competent declarers indeed, since that is a proficiency that is easy to study alone. The majority of bridge players, however, completely neglect their development as defenders.

Even among those who want to improve as defenders, few players realize their potential; they do not understand how to go about developing their defensive skills. Of course, they will spend much time agreeing on a system of opening leads, and they probably hold earnest discussions on what signaling system to use. Many players can tell you the main tactics available to a defender, such as preventing a ruff or attacking declarer's communications. A few become careful counters of points and distribution, and use this information when making their plays. An even smaller group tries to fathom what declarer is doing and then counter his tactics. All these are important weapons in the arsenal of a good defensive player. Necessary, even vital, but not sufficient, I say.

As a defender, you do not know your side's exact assets, and even though you grasp defender's tactics and count meticulously, unless you go through a process of visualization (which involves opening your mind to several possibilities instead of focussing on just one) you will often overlook the right play. The hardest part, no doubt, but the crucial element in becoming a top defensive player, lies in developing the ability to visualize possible hands around the table, sorting out which ones are most likely, and which, if any, the defense can do something about.

We have all heard that bidding is all-important and that defense rarely swings matches in the finals of World Championship or National team play. (There are notable exceptions to this, including the 1982 World Championship, the spectacular last board of the 2000 Vanderbilt, and Board 116 of the 2000 ITT semifinal.) Why, then, should anyone bother working to improve their defensive ability if few matches are swung on defense?

First, you should remember that only the very best players get to play in the finals of National and World Championships, and you can be sure that these players have invested the time and the effort necessary to become top defenders. At every level except the finals, many IMPs change hands as a result of defensive play. In the course of studying several hundred deals in top-level play, I found a big difference between results in the early stages of a competition and those in the finals and semifinals. In the World Championship Round Robin matches I looked at, 1200 IMPs were won and lost, the cause being split almost evenly between bidding and card play. Of the 600 IMPs swung in card play, declarer play and defense were again about equal, so defense accounted for one quarter of the IMPs that changed hands. In the finals, however, bidding accounted for eighty percent of the swings, with only twenty percent coming from play and defense. Why? Because the finalists had driven themselves to high standards of defensive capability.

Outside of a handful of the very top bridge stars, there are great opportunities for players to improve their defensive performance, whether at IMPs or matchpoints, in local club games or national events, playing kitchen bridge or in high-stakes rubber games. Believe me, the potential gain is well worth the pain.

WHAT'S AT STAKE AT IMPs?

First and foremost at IMPs, the object of the defense is to set the contract. Sure, there have been plenty of matches tied and decided in overtime, and others won by an IMP or two, but they are a small percentage of the total. Tough players focus on the set.

The odds favor aggressive defenders by a significant margin. In lowly partscore contracts, you gain 4 IMPs setting a non-vulnerable partscore made by your teammates, and 5 IMPs setting a vulnerable contract made at the other table. Defending against game contracts, if you set a contract which is made by your teammates, you gain 10 IMPs (12 IMPs vulnerable). Slam defenses are even more lucrative. Setting a small slam made at the other table yields 14 IMPs (16 IMPs vulnerable).

Defense is the most difficult part of bridge, and for most players, the hardest part of defense is figuring out what to do. In this book, the author shows you step-by-step how to visualize declarer's cards from the bidding and play, and then how to use this information to form a plan as a defender. The book is based on Jim Priebe's popular articles 'Visualization on Defense' which appeared in the ACBL Bulletin early in 2001.



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Eric Kokish



JIM PRIEBE is a retired business executive who now divides his time between bridge, golf, writing and his seven grandchildren. An expert player with numerous regional wins (partnered by his wife), he has published articles in various bridge magazines and has been a featured speaker at NABC tournaments. He lives in Toronto, Canada; this is his first book.



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