

Forcing Defence to 4-4



By Kitty Cooper

kittymcooper@gmail.com

A reader who wishes to remain anonymous wrote, “In your short summary on opening leads, Item number two suggested that the forcing defense strategy would not work when declarer and dummy both had four trumps. Page 169 in Advanced Bridge Defense by Eddie Kantar would appear to dispute this statement. Any clarification would be appreciated.”

The tip to which our reader refers was the following: “Do you have four or more trumps? Lead your longest and strongest suit. If you can make declarer ruff twice you will usually have more trumps than he and control of the hand. However this strategy will not work when both dummy and declarer have four trumps.”

The idea behind our suggestion that when declarer has a four-four fit a forcing defense will often fail is that even if you force declarer to ruff twice in his hand, dummy still has four trumps, the same number that you do.

If dummy’s trumps are all higher than yours they can be used to draw your trumps. For example, if declarer has AKQJ and you have J1098, every time declarer ruffs you have promoted a trump trick for yourself. But if dummy is the one with J1098 then making declarer ruff will not help your 7654 of trump become winners.

If dummy’s trumps are all smaller than yours declarer may still be able to run a long suit at you, forcing you to spend your master trumps ruffing his winners and leaving the long trump(s) in dummy to prevent you from cashing your winners.

If some of dummy’s trumps are larger and some smaller than yours nothing much changes from the previous analyses, but the cases are more complex.

Even when you have J1098 or some other good holding, the forcing defense will not work if you are relatively balanced and declarer’s plan is to cross ruff. Declarer will cash a few aces and kings and then start ruffing. If you have to follow while each hand trumps, declarer can easily score enough tricks for his contract.

So when does a forcing defense work against a four-four fit? Mainly when the hand not ruffing has a weak trump holding that cannot be used to draw your trumps and declarer’s plan was to set up a side suit and draw trump. The crossruff must not be an option for declarer. For example, after an auction such as 1♠–1NT–2♥–3♥–4♥ declarer’s plan may be to set up his spades and a forcing defense may, therefore, succeed unless he can revert to a crossruff. But an auction such as 1♠–2♣–2♥–4♥ suggests that declarer might be crossruffing so the obvious diamond lead may not lead to an effective forcing defense. Of course declarer could be planning to set up spades or clubs on that auction, rather than cross-ruffing, so the contents of your own hand are the best indicator of the most likely defense.

In summary, perhaps our tip was an oversimplification, but in practice leading shortness, if you have it, or a trump to stop the crossruff is usually more effective against the four-four than the forcing defense. Listen to the auction, look at your hand, and make your best judgment as to declarer's likely approach to the play before you decide what to lead.

This article was co-authored by Kitty's husband, the late Steve Cooper, and previously appeared in the District 17 newsletter. ♣