

When to Force Declarer

- When you have 4 trump
- When partner has 4 trump
- When declarer has a 2-suiter
- Whenever the long trump can be forced
- When opponents play a 4-3 fit

- Do not force when dummy has an imposing suit
- Do not force when you will set up a trick in dummy
- Force an overruff to prevent discards
- Force a weak dummy with a strong suit

The Forcing Defense

Forcing declarer to ruff is often an advantageous play, for it shortens the Declarer's trump holding often to the point of embarrassment.

--Louis Watson, Watson's Play of the Hand at Bridge

In our last lesson we learned the conditions for leading trump, which amounted principally to an attack upon the hand which was short of trump, usually the dummy. In this lesson we learn another way to attack trump. We're going to attack the hand that has length in trump, usually the declarer's own hand. When we lead trump, we seek to pull trump before declarer is ready to have it pulled. When we attack the hand that is long in trump, we will seek to force declarer to ruff too often, causing him to lose control, first of his trump suit, and then of the whole hand.

To attack the hand long in trump, we force declarer to trump more often than he can afford to. Because we are forcing him, this type of defense is called "the forcing defense." Declarer does not gain tricks when he ruffs in his own hand. His small trumps would typically end up being good anyway because trump is his long suit, and the small cards in it become established. When we force him, he wins his small trumps *too early*, and thereafter he runs out of trump too soon.

Let's look at a sample hand and see the principal of the forcing defense in action. You are West in the hand in the adjacent column defending against South's contract of four hearts. When South sees the dummy he will probably feel fairly secure. He may be thinking that his contract is in the bag, with a potential overtrick if the diamond finesse wins. But he is not aware of the notable features of your hand, which are the four trumps and the excellent club holding. You may have led the ace of clubs, or, if you wanted to give your partner complete insight, you could lead the queen of clubs. Your queen wins and next comes the ace or king, ruffed by declarer in his hand.

	NORTH										
	♠ 8 7 2										
	♥ K 3 2										
	♦ A 10 5										
	♣ 7 6 4 2										
WEST	<div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;"> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center; width: 100%;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table> </div>		N		W		E		S		EAST
	N										
W		E									
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♠ 4 3		♠ Q J 10 9 5									
♥ 10 9 7 6		♥ 4									
♦ 7 6 2		♦ K 8 3									
♣ A K Q 9		♣ J 10 8 5									
	SOUTH										
	♠ A K 6										
	♥ A Q J 8 5										
	♦ Q J 9 4										
	♣ 3										

Now declarer plays a trump to the king and a trump back to his hand. East does not follow to the second round of hearts. If South now pulls your last two trump, he will also deplete his own trump suit and must risk all on the diamond finesse. Most likely he will simply try the diamond finesse first, which loses. If East is asleep and returns a spade, South will make the contract. He will win the ace of spades, pull your trump and take his diamonds. But if East is paying attention, upon winning the king of diamonds he will return a club. South is done for. To stop you and partner from cashing two club tricks, he must ruff. But when he does, he shortens himself to one trump, and you still hold two. A hand that had seemed so promising to South sinks to down one.

One of the conditions for applying the forcing defense is when you hold four trump. Another case is when partner holds four trump. In both cases,

you or partner begin with nearly as many trump as declarer does. It usually takes but one force on declarer's hand to put him in jeopardy. To force him to ruff, you must find the suit he is short of and lead it. In the previous hand, the club suit was evident. When it isn't evident, you will lead from *length*. Don't make the error of leading your short suit, hoping to trump in your own hand. You will be taking the exact reverse of correct strategy. Lead from length, not from shortness.

Let's see this principal in action again.

NORTH

♠ J 4 3
♥ K 7 4 2
♦ 7 6 5
♣ Q 10 9

WEST **EAST**

♠ Q 8 6 2 ♠ 9
♥ J 10 9 8 ♥ A 6 5
♦ J 4 ♦ 9 8 3
♣ A 7 6 ♣ K J 8 4 3 2

N

W E

S

SOUTH

♠ A K 10 7 5
♥ Q 3
♦ A K Q 10 2
♣ 5

West

♠ Q 8 6 2
♥ J 10 9 8
♦ J 4
♣ A 7 6

	S	W	N	E
1	♠ P		1NT	P
3	♦ P		3 ♠ P	
4	♦ P		4 ♠ all pass	

You would not have bid these hands as North-South did in this auction. North should have raised spades immediately so that South could have concealed his two-suiter. Then East-West may not have found the best defense.

West knows the best defense is to force South, but he isn't sure he can. He chooses his own most powerful suit and leads the jack of hearts. East knows from the jack that South has the queen, but since

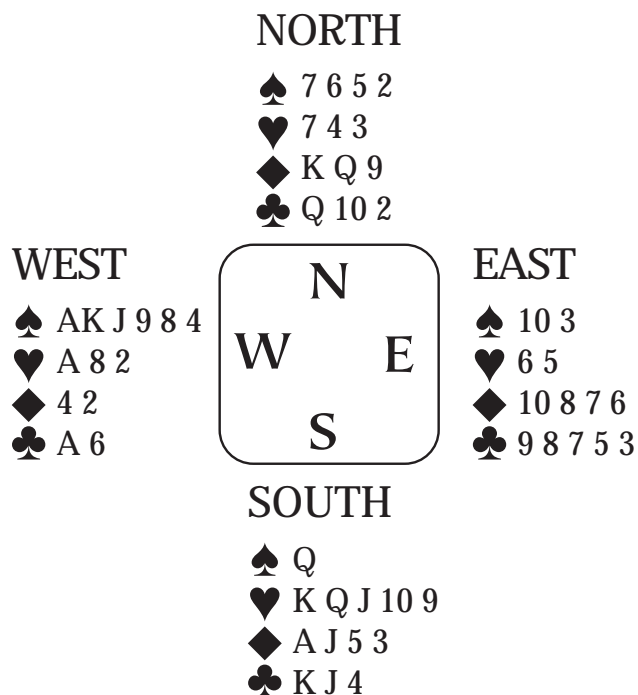
South is at least 5-5, the queen could be stiff, so East hops up with the ace of hearts. When South's queen doesn't drop, East learns that clubs is the suit in which South holds a singleton or void, so he switches to the 4 of clubs. Because he knows that South cannot have more than one club, he isn't fearful of leading away from his king.

This switch to the four of clubs is a deviation from the rule of thumb that says to return your partner's suit, but the deviation is correct. Rules of thumb are for general cases and are only generally correct. Specifics and intelligence must rule over general rules of thumb. South has announced a two-suited hand, thereby suggesting to savvy defenders a condition in which the forcing defense might be applied. What's more, East holds only a singleton trump. Based on what he has heard, West must have four trump, only one less than declarer. This is definitely a circumstance for forcing declarer, and East now knows that clubs is the suit to force with.

Once East finds the club shift, South is, in essence, down. Once he ruffs in on the defenders' club plays, South may now try to play the ace and king of spades, hoping to drop the queen, or, if not, to find the spades split 3 and 2. But neither of these conditions obtain, and West will be able to win both the queen and the eight of trump.

Without the club switch, South has no problem. If, for instance, East had returned his partner's lead, South could overtake the queen of hearts with dummy's king and lead the jack of trump for a finesse, losing to West's queen. West can now cash the ace of clubs and continue a club, but it's too late. South ruffs the second club, draws West's trumps, exhausting his own, and now he can just cash out his diamonds for 10 tricks.

So far we have observed that the forcing defense should be attempted when declarer has a two-suiter or when one of the defenders has four trump. Sometimes neither of these conditions apply, but the forcing defense may come up anyway. It may begin simply and innocently, as it did for West in the following hand.



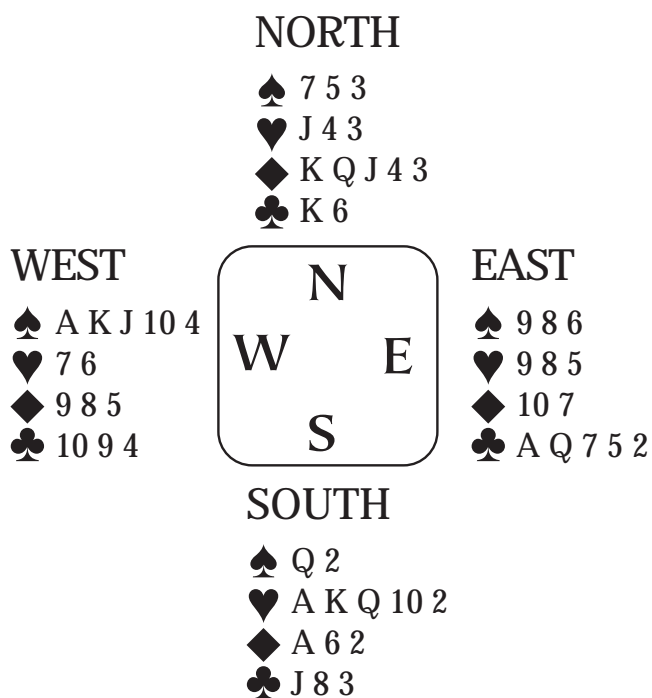
Despite West's fine hand, North-South have wrested the hand away and landed in 4 hearts. West's chances of cashing two spades and 2 side aces seem slim, but he nonetheless leads the ace of spades. To South, the way ahead may look clear. He has to lose the three aces he is missing, but that should be it, shouldn't it? When West's ace brings down South's queen, he may initially feel discouraged that he cannot cash out four quick winners. But forcing declarer doesn't look like it would hurt anything. In fact, since West has the ace of trump, he will be able to get back in again and force South's hand a second time. This may bring South's trump holding down to an unmanageable size. So West persists with the king of spades.

South ruffs the king of spades in his hand and continues with a trump lead. West will let one round go by, but will then take his ace on the next trump lead. West sends back another spade, and South can no longer control the hand. He can draw the last trump and take his diamonds, but when he finally plays a club, West will have all of the remaining tricks. If, on the other hand, South does not continue trump, and tries cashing diamond tricks right away, West will win a trump trick together with his three aces. You

may try to find some other alternative for South if you wish to, but all roads lead to down one. The forcing defense prevails once more.

Now that you have seen how the forcing defense operates, and you have learned to attempt its application whenever the declarer is two-suited, or when one defender or another has four trump, the time has arisen to advise you of some dangers.

Danger number one:
dummy has a long formidable suit



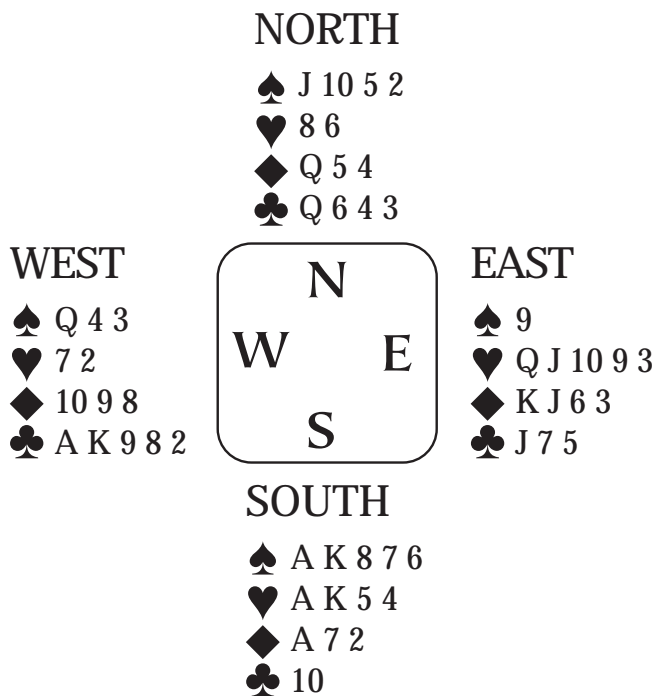
North-South has reached four hearts, and West makes the natural lead of the ace of spades. East plays the 6 of spades, expressing no help and not a doubleton. So when West wins, he also cashes the king of spades, bringing down South's queen. Of course this means that South could be forced with a third spade, which may not do North-South any real harm, but isn't it a safe lead?

No, it is not a safe lead. North has a long and imposing diamond suit. If South has the ace of diamonds, he will be able to take 5 diamond tricks. These together with 5 trump tricks will bag the game.

If East-West are to have any chance, West must try the club suit right away, simply as the only hope available for the defense. If it should later turn out that East has the ace of diamonds, there is no problem, because he will always win that trick. And if East has a heart trick coming, he will always still have it coming. The only tricks that can go way are club tricks, so West must immediately switch to clubs instead of forcing South to ruff.

Remember the danger signal. When dummy has a long imposing suit, don't let declarer in yet. Attack elsewhere, even if your motivation is nothing more than hope or desperation.

Danger number two:
Don't set up a card in dummy

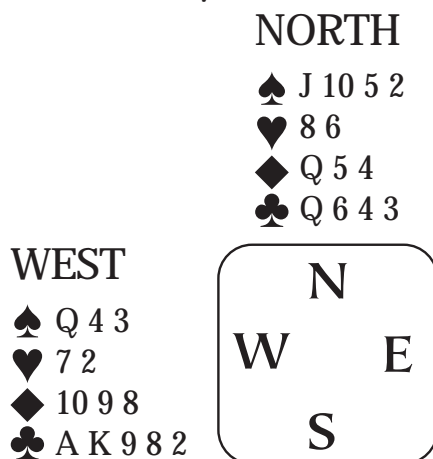


West leads his ace of clubs against South's four spade contract. East plays the five and South the 10. West knows from these spots that South started with a singleton club and can be forced with the king of clubs. But how unwise is that? Not only would West lose his king to South's trump, but dummy's queen will be set up for a trick. This play would make no sense whatever. Instead, West should reject the club continuation altogether. He should also reject a trump continuation since he will certainly win his

queen in time, and a heart switch simply does not look fruitful. By the process of elimination, West should switch to the 10 of diamonds. On this hand, the switch to the 10 of diamonds sets the contract. South just lacks the horsepower to avoid losing two more diamonds whenever you get in with the queen of trump.

Regard our warning of danger. Don't set up a card in dummy. This warning applies whether we are talking about forcing declarer or whether we are talking about something else. Even if declarer couldn't trump the king of clubs, there is no sense in setting up dummy's queen. When you rush to take your trick, you are exhibiting bad timing. Usually you can get that trick later on. Don't be in such a rush that you set up tricks for the declarer.

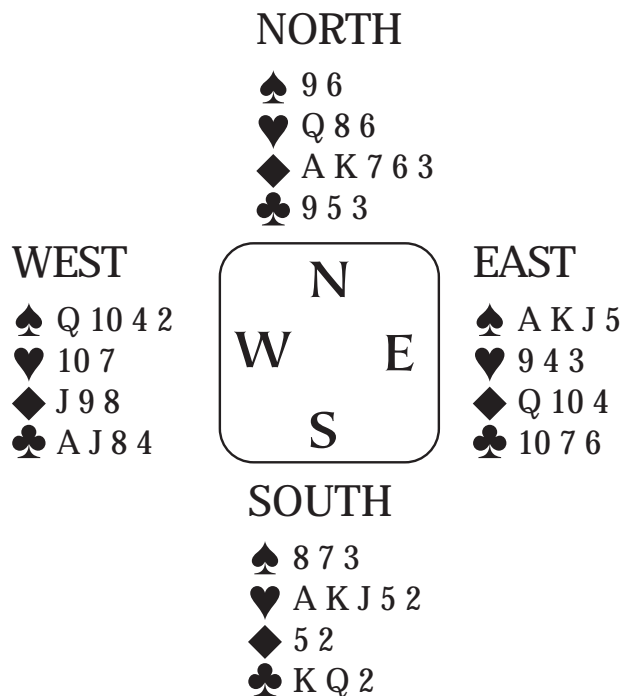
Before we leave the topic of not setting up a trick in dummy, let's consider one last observation.



Again let's say you cash the ace of clubs, partner playing the 5 and declarer the 10. Declarer is now out of clubs, so you discontinue clubs and switch to diamonds. If partner gets in and wants to force declarer, HE can lead clubs. When East leads a club, South must play ahead of you. If he does not trump, then you win a club trick that you could not otherwise win. But if he does trump, you play low, retaining your king and still stopping the dummy's queen from becoming a trick. This sort of defensive play can be quite effective whenever you want declarer on lead, especially if you also want to stress his trump holding.

Variation on our theme:
forcing the dummy

The forcing defense itself is an attack upon the hand long in trump, which is typically declarer's hand. But from time to time a weak dummy can be forced in order to eliminate an entry to a dangerous side suit.



South is playing four hearts. West has led the 2 of spades, East winning with the king and continuing with the ace, which also wins. The rules of thumb might advise us now to lead up to dummy's weakness, which would indicate a shift to clubs:

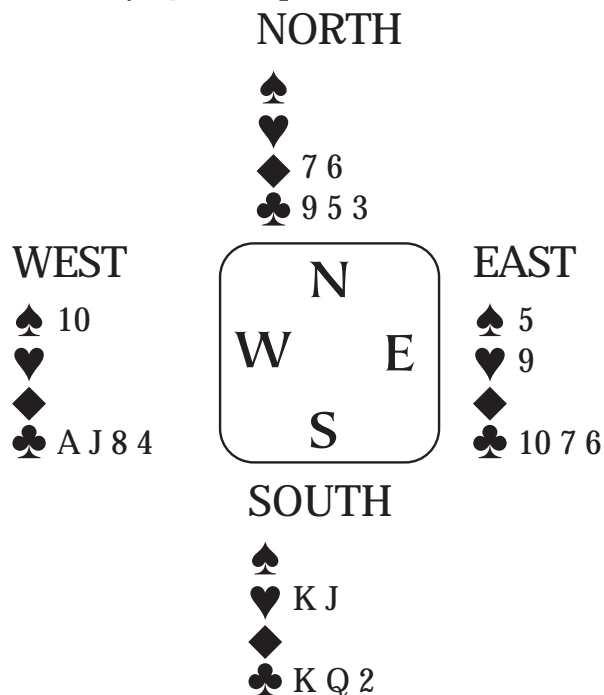
**when dummy sits to your right
lead the weakest thing in sight.**

But in this case the rules of thumb will lead us astray. Where are declarer's tricks going to come from? The only choices are clubs and diamonds. If the answer is clubs, then the lead of clubs wouldn't be right. But looking at dummy, doesn't it appear that diamonds are the answer? It looks like declarer will need to establish those diamonds. If he has just 2 diamonds, then your partner will have just three of them. So declarer will cash his two top cards and ruff a diamond, bringing down all the opposing cards. Before he tries the diamonds he will probably cash the the ace and king of trump, and after he ruffs out the diamonds, he'll play one final trump to dummy's queen, which

draws the last trump, finally enjoying those established diamond tricks. Do you see any way to foil this plan?

If you see that you can lead one more round of spades to force dummy to ruff, then you see the best defense. Now declarer won't have a trump entry to enjoy any diamonds after he establishes them.

This brings us to a very important defensive point. Let's say that you did find the spade continuation and forced dummy to ruff a spade with the 6 of hearts. Now declarer plays the 8 of hearts to his ace. He plays a diamond to dummy, cashing both the ace and the king. He leads a third diamond from dummy and trumps it, bringing down the entire suit. Now he leads a trump to dummy's queen. Here is how the cards are lying at this point:



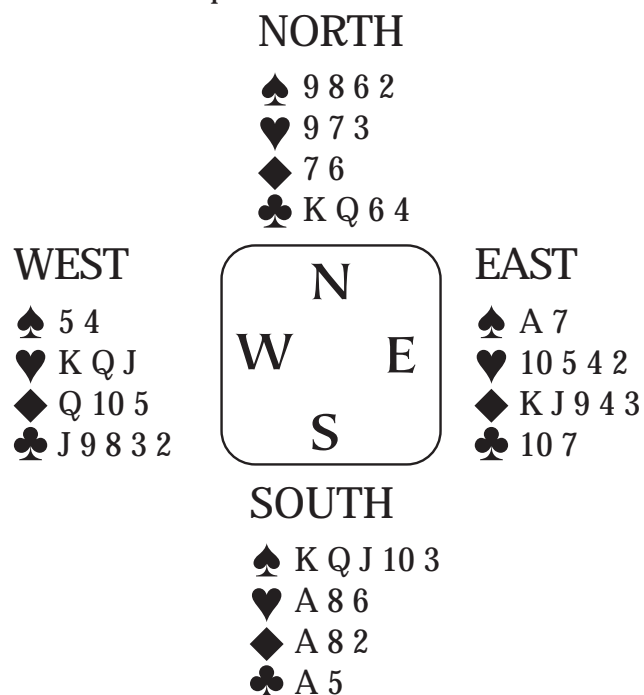
Declarer now calls for a diamond from dummy. What should you play?

The answer is your 9 of hearts. You know that you will be overruffed, don't you? But you are not ruffing in order to win the trick. You are ruffing to prevent South from discarding. He has set diamonds up, now he wants to discard on them. If you don't ruff, he will discard, and then he will lead the other small diamond, and *your* goose is cooked.

Add to your collection of rules of thumb this pearl of wisdom: when you can ruff and be overruffed, you should ruff. Declarer will pitch a loser if you

don't ruff. So by ruffing, you are *forcing* the overruff and preventing a discard. This sort of play happens frequently, so let's look at one more example of it.

Forcing an overruff
to prevent discards of losers



West leads the king of hearts, and South considers his plan to make 4 spades. South has a trump loser, and with this lead he appears to have two heart losers. But he also has a diamond loser. One loser too many. He cannot avoid the trump loser. Neither can he avoid the diamond loser. But he may be able to avoid one of his heart losers. It appears to South that he can discard a losing heart on the queen of clubs after he has cashed the ace and king. This is a play that he would like to do after he has pulled trump, but in this case it is impossible. When he tries to pull trump, the defenders will win and cash their two heart tricks before he can discard one on a club. Therefore, South is compelled to play on clubs right away, before he draws trump, and before he surrenders his diamond loser.

South's plan depends on both defenders having to follow to three rounds of clubs, a situation that could very easily obtain. After all, a 4-3 break of 7 outstanding cards is the most probable distribution. But the most probable thing didn't happen today, and East has only two clubs.

But that won't matter if East does not ruff the queen. If East fails to ruff, South will pitch a losing heart and make the contract. Even if East believed that South would overruff him, still he should ruff to force the overruff and prevent the discard of the heart. Preventing the discard is the key concept.

What if East decided he would, in fact, ruff the queen of clubs, but he didn't want to get overruffed? He could decide to ruff with the ace. But that would be a losing decision. South doesn't mind if East ruffs with a card that South must lose anyway. South will still just pitch his losing heart. Ruffing with the ace is wrong because it does not prevent the discard.

Summary

The forcing defense is an attack on the hand long in trump, usually the declarer's hand. It is called "forcing" because declarer is forced either to ruff when he would rather not, or else to give you a trick that you could not otherwise win. The forcing defense compels declarer to use his small trumps at the wrong time, resulting ultimately in a lack of control.

The conditions for using a forcing defense arise when:

- **declarer has a two-suited hand, in which case he is very short of something, so that forcing him is relatively easy; or,**
- **either defender has four trump; or,**
- **declarer is playing in a 4-3 trump fit (no examples given); or,**
- **on some other occasions when defenders can repeatedly force ruffs in the long hand.**

But do not force when dummy has a long imposing suit. Instead, find your immediate winners. Also do not force when doing so would set up a trick in dummy.

There are variations of the forcing defense, most notably forcing an overruff to prevent declarer from discarding a loser, and the unusual circumstance of forcing a weak dummy with an imposing suit.