Advanced Strategy in Spades

Just recently someone at elite and a newbie to spade had asked me if there were any guidelines I follow when bidding, playing if there were any specific strategies involved with spades. I have asked them to read a post I had made about a year or so ago (post 30928) which highlights a few simple tips and strategies for beginners. Here is a follow up, which covers most of the strategies and tips in much more detail. I have compiled this from various sources, experience and tips from some of the better spades players I have played with.

I am sure 99% of the people won’t take the time to read through this, deem it useful or agree with the strategies but in some shape or form it helps even a single player out it serves its purpose.

**General Rules:**

This is a team game. You win as a team and you lose as a team.

Never give up. The cards always change and anything can happen.

Do not make mistakes. Making mistakes are the number one reason most people are beat. Taking risky nils, making risky bids, under bidding, bagging, missing sets and getting set etc. These are also the hardest things not to do. Take for example if your team underbids an average of 2 over a course of a normal Elite 5-hand game, your team takes 10 bags. Your team is losing 100 points due to bagging, plus the 100 points for not bidding your tricks.

Sometimes a 1 bid is a good bid. Don't start taking risky nil's until you absolutely have to. Do not nil with the Ace third in. You might be able to make it if you are short in a suit, you lead first and your partner's bid is over six but not always worth the risk.

Always worry about your bid first. Worry about bagging or setting next. Getting set on a 5 bid is equal to going back on bags.

If it is a 12 bid, go for the set. If it is an 11 bid evaluate your hand and who bid what. If you might be able to take one or two extra, think about setting. Always watch what your partner takes or most importantly what he throws off. If your partner trumps an Ace and/or a King, or over trumps your opponent, you may have a good chance of setting. If one or both of your opponents trump with high spades they are opening themselves up to get set. On the other hand if your partner is throwing off when he has a chance to cut,
he is trying to bag and does not want to set. If your team is bagging, you can sometimes
catch your opponents trying to bag you out and open themselves to being set, if this is
the case go for the set. Setting a 5 bid costs your opponents 100 pts; going back on
bags costs your team 100 pts (actually only 90 points due to bags being worth 1 point
each). On the other hand if your opponents are likely to go back on bags they are more
likely to overbid their hands and more likely to sluff their tricks, making them perfect
targets of a set. (In 5 hand games you must first evaluate the score, bid accordingly and
then set or bag as needed to do what it takes to win).

In a 5/500 game, if you see that after hand 2 your team or the opponents are in no
danger of bagging, (less than 3 bags) go for the set every hand. The reason for this is,
the chances of your team taking 7 or more bags in 3 hands is extremely unlikely and the
same applies to giving your opponents the bags. Also, bags count as points. I have won
plenty of games because I had the bag advantage on or after the last hand. If you
happen to set, you just increased your chances of winning. You will often find that your
opponents stay in a sluffing mode to avoid bags, which helps your chance of setting.
This is especially true in a game like mirrors 5/500 games where the chances of a team
bagging are almost slim to nil.

When bidding in last hand, be aware of the score and all the possible scenarios and bid
accordingly. If you are bidding first on the team always keep in mind how your bid will
affect your partner's bid.

If your opponent and partner are both nil and your opponents will win if they make the
nil. You have to play full set on either the nil or the nil's partner's bid; this may cause
your partner to get set but his nil is useless unless your opp's get set.

Be cautious of hands in which you have 9 or more cards, in one or two suits (one or two
suited) or 11 or more cards in three suits. With these hands, someone is usually nil. If
someone isn't nil, they are usually good hands to set with or be set with. A lot of Aces
and Kings get trumped in hands like this.

**The Lead:**

Try never leading a suit with the King in hand unless you also have the Q in which case
u can lead your K first just in case your partner has the Ace.

*Usually the first card a person plays (exception when leading Aces and Kings) after
taking the lead is usually his short suit.* So as a partner you should try to return the suit if
possible.
Never Lead a smaller card if you have the honor card in your hand. For example don’t lead the K when you have the A in your hand because if your partner is void in that suit he might cut your K thinking the opp’s have the Ace.

Don't lead a non-spade suit that the person on your right is void in.

Don't lead a non-spade suit that you know the player on your left is void in, unless you know your partner is void in the suit also.

Try to lead a non-spade suit your partner is void in or what your partner led. If you see your partner plays a high card in a suit (second to boss) without any apparent reason to play it (such as bags or played to force the player after him to play high), lead that suit. Your partner is either is void in the suit or has boss. One common convention is for a player to play high in a suit to signal to their partner that they are short in that suit.

If you have three non-spade aces don't lead them one after another. Lead the two that are either likely to get trumped or the two suits you want your partner to lead to you. The reason for this is, if you lead all your aces you have taken yourself out of the hand and probably won't have any chance of getting the lead back.

Don't lead short suited Aces. If you wait, one of your opponents may lead the suit allowing you or your partner to take the suit with a lower card. This opens you up to being able to trump the King the third time the suit is played.

If you have the Ace and Queen in a suit and u want to try to set, there are few ways to get them both to count. The best way is to wait and try and get the person on your left to lead the suit. Then you can play the Queen and comeback with the Ace. Another way is to lead the Queen and hope the person on your left has the King and is afraid to play it. Another way is to wait for your partner or your right to lead the suit and hope the person on your right has the King. If the person on your right plays the King, you can take the trick with the Ace and come back and take the following trick with the Queen. If the person on your right does not play the King, you can play the Queen and take the trick and comeback with the Ace and taking the following trick.

LEADING HIGH: Queen in a suit in which you know probably won't go around three times is a good lead. This forces the ace out if your partner counted the king. If your partner has the Ace, it gives them the option of throwing off and letting the queen go (do not recommend this if the suit may only go once or twice). Another option if you have the Queen is to lead low. If the person follows you does not play the Ace, then you
partner will be forced to play the King, but you can make up the trick with your Queen. This also gives you a better chance of getting the Queen to take a trick, if the suit goes around three times. The worst lead you can make is not to have led high enough and force your partner to have to play the King and have it fall to the Ace.

If you know the person on your right is holding the King in a suit and the person on your left is void in the suit, you can lead the suit. What usually happens is the partner trumps their partner's King. What you want to avoid happening is having your partner or the player on your right leading the suit. This is an excellent lead if you know your partner is void in the suit too.

Don't lead spades unless:
1. Your partner has their bid or you can cover their bid.
2. You know your partner bid high spades. Not leading spades might just give your opponents a chance to set you by trumping with lower spades.
3. Either one or both of your opponents are void in any non-spade suit you could lead.
4. If you're trying to slough and have nothing better to slough in.
5. One way you can set your opponent is if you are two suited (spades being one of the suits.) You can run spades and make your other suit good. (be very careful that you do not set yourself by setting your partners bid in the process).
6. If your partner first led spades and is going for a set.
7. When trying to set a nil.

Always avoid either leading the 13th card of a suit or a suit that you have all the rest of.

**General Play:**

Don't trump your partner, unless you can cover the trick and remember if your partner trumps your honor lead, keep track and count it as one of your tricks. (unless you have no clue how your partner plays or are pretty sure he has no clue how he plays either)

If your partner leads boss or plays boss and you are void in the suit don't trump it unless:

You believe the person who follows you is void in the suit and in this case you better trump high.

You are trying to avoid taking a bag.
In general never cut a 13th card lead from the second seat. Your partner will always have the last play and cut accordingly.

Bid correctly for the situation. For instance: If the score is such that you will lose the game if you do not set them, and you are the last person to bid, then push the bid to a total of 14. It doesn't matter if you can't make it, because you'll lose either way. Your partner may have underbid.

Bid your Kings but be careful. Most Kings fall because of improper leads and play. The King is trumped almost always on the 3rd time the suit is led.

If the person on your right leads, even with the queen, you don't have to play your king. Odds are the person on your left will play the Ace if they have it or let the Queen go.

If the person on your right leads a suit for the first time and you are holding the queen. Evaluate your hand. Is it evenly distributed? Will the suit likely go around 3 times? If the suit is likely to only go around twice play the queen. This forces the person who plays after you to play the king if they have it, if they don't have it and the person who led has it, you just picked up an extra trick. Unless of course they are holding the Ace.

If your partner leads a spade, evaluate what your partner bid. Did your partner bid spades? Is your partner trying to set or not to bag? If your partner is possibly trying to set and leads a low spade, play your highest spade and lead back spades if you take the trick. If your partner is trying not to bag, they may lead a high spade to give you a chance to dump a high spade or to dump their high spade.

When avoiding bags, lead your short suits first to attempt to get rid of a suit ASAP. If that suit is led, and you have discarded it, you can then slough or trump your partner as necessary.

**Covering a Nil:**

If your partner has a nil bid, always cover the nil first. Don't let your partner get set because you are worried about bags or getting set.

Don't leading a suit that one or both of your opponents are a void in and your partner has. This can be one of the worst leads possible, especially if one of your opponents is nil and void in the suit. What occurs with this lead is it allows your opponents to dump high cards and spades that may be required to cover your partner's nil. Example:
If there aren’t more then three bags and you have a weak cover hand, take the bags as soon as you can. This will force the other team to concentrate on making their bid. If your partner's nil gets set, then your opponents bid gets set.

If your partner is going nil try to confuse your opponents. If you have a high streak in a suit play, don't play the highest card you have in that suit first. Your opponents may believe your partner has the higher one(s). Example: You are holding the Ace, King, Queen Jack in a suit. If you play the King then the Queen your opponents may believe your partner has the Ace.

If your partner is going nil, you know your partner is void in a suit AND you play before your partner, trump with a high spade. This allows your partner to dump a high spade and your opponents will still have their high spades to cover with too. If you don't have a good suit to comeback in or you are going to have to cover a different suit with spades or you really need to throw off a different suit you might not want to do this. Keep this rule in mind if your partner is maybe trying a 4-spade nil.

If you have a short suit with a low card and a high card, try to avoid leading this suit. Ideally what will occur is, one of your opponents will lead a moderately high card and your partner will likely be able to play under. You will then still be holding the high card to cover with.

Always pay attention to what your partner is throwing off. If your partner throws a 5 under an Ace, you can safely lead a low card in that suit to avoid bags.

**When to Nil:**

If the person on your right bid nil and you could make a nil, put some thought into it. Your partner has to cover both nils since he plays after the other nil's partner, which means your partner will likely take all the bags. Sometimes it is better to try and set the nil.

If the person on your left had bid nil, try and nil if you can. In this situation you can try a riskier nil, because the other nil's partner will have to cover their partners nil.

Don't blind nil unless you have to. This means if your partner bids eight don't blind nil. A nil-8 bid is worth almost 200pts and if you have to bid 1 a 9 bid is worth almost 100pts.

Don't let a four or five suited Ace prevent you from nilling.
Setting Nil's:

Do not cover your opponent's nil. Play under and force the nil's partner to cover. Try to force the nil's partner to trump with their spades, when they don't have too.

If one of your opponents is nil, trump with your high spades whenever it is possible to do so without covering the nil. Be careful not to get your team set.

Don't let you or your partner's bid get set because you are trying to set a nil, unless it is a must set the nil situation or you have a guaranteed set on the nil.

Don't lead a suit that your opponent's nil is void in, especially if the nil or the nil's partner knows the other one void in the suit.

I will typically underbid one or two tricks, if I bid after a nil and my partner. The reason for this is it allows my partner and me to throw off in suits, in which we would normally have counted or had counted, and still make our bid. This also allows for you and your partner to trump with your high spades and not get set.

If you only have an A or K in a suit or just a couple of high face cards in a suit, don't lead them. You know you will cover in that suit. Wait for your partner or the nil's partner to lead the suit. Don't give the nil's partner a chance to throw off his low cards in that suit, unless you have to.

Leading spades can be a good lead or a devastating lead. I recommend only leading spades if you feel you can run your opponent out of spades and then set.

Mix up which suit you lead. What you are trying to accomplish with this is confusing the nil's partner on what has been played. This can cause the nil's partner to trump a suit which doesn't need to be trumped or not trumping when actually needs to trump. (only works with weaker opponents)

If your opponent is nil and you have little or no chance of setting the nil; consider setting the nil's partner. This can be easier sometimes, because you can lead Tens and Jacks and Queens and your opponent might not play over them in order to cover their partner's nil. Make your decision clear to your partner by either leading high or bidding high.

If the opponent on your right has a nil bid, try to lead a low suit. The first time you lead, lead your second or third lowest card, preferably a card that is an 8 or under. Most likely
the person covering the nil will still play their highest one in that suit. This will still leave you a low card in that suit to set with.

If the opponent on your right is nil and you know his partner is void in a suit, lead low in that suit and force the nil's partner to cover. This also gives your partner a chance to throw a spade if your opponent is under the card you lead.

Leading spades can be quite effective when the nil is on your left. What occurs in this situation is the nil has to play a spade; question how high of a spade they can play and their partner will be able to cover. If the nil plays low, your partner has a chance to throw off a high spade.

**Bags:**

Every trick you don't bid is 10 less point you don't get. If you set the other team back 100 points on bags it is probably 100 points that you didn't bid.

Trump with the lowest spade you counted. Trumping with your high spades makes it easy for your opponents to set you if they decide to.

Okay, I have another thing to say about bags now. If possible over trump the tricks your opponents bid. This does three things.

a) Puts you in a position to set them.
b) Gets rid of your high cards, if you don't want to try and set.
c) Makes them stop sloughing and start worrying about their bid.

**Bidding:**

There are really only two ways to bid your spades. You bid your spades on whether you will trump a non-spade suit or if spades are run, how many tricks can you get. A lot of times you bid your spades in a combination of the two. If you trump too many times in non-spade suits you are setting yourself up to have spades run on you and the spades you counted on if spades were run will be overtrumped because they are no longer protected by your lower spades. Keep track of what trump you planned to trump with and in what suit you planned to use it while remembering what trumps you counted on taking if spades were run. If you play second or third, be extremely careful trumping a suit the 4th time it is led.

Be careful bidding spades on suits you are void in. Your partner may have bid the Ace and King in that suit. Remember if you are short suited in a suit, someone else may be
short in the same suit. This usually occurs when you are two suited.

Be careful bidding based on what the player on your left may bid, when you bid third. Underbidding to try to avoid your opponent from nilling can cause more damage than good and is not very effective. Underbidding to avoid your opponent from Double Nilling can be quite effective. Two reasons you may want to underbid are:
1) Opponent on your left is probably going to nil. If you underbid one or two tricks, it will be easier for you try and set the nil and still make your team bid.
2) Your opponents are behind and need a DN. A good number of players will DN if it’s an 11 or 12 bid all ready before they have a chance to bid. Underbidding and making it a 10 bid prevents the DN is some cases.

If it is the last hand and you are behind do whatever it takes to win or force opponents to make a mistake. If the only way to win is to get a double nil and you have already looked at your cards inflate your bid to 5, 6 or 7 to encourage your partner to double nil. You never know your opponent might just try a risky nil afraid your partner will double nil.

Etiquette:

Never set the other team on the last hand if you have the game won.

Use good manners when you play. Don't make the other team feel bad by over celebrating a super hand, the cards can soon turn and usually do. By all means congratulate your opponents and your partner on every positive play in the game. Everyone likes to play with a good sport no one wants to be the partner or opponent of a poor sport.

Just remember that if your partner’s nil gets set, more often than none it is a result of a lead or a play you made, and just as easily something that you could have avoided. Just say “my bad sorry partner I couldn't help” and move on.

Play fair! Have Fun! Remember it is just a game!

GOOOOOOOOOOOOO Eliters !!!

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Comments and discussions appreciated