



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

My partner and I agreed to play the ace from A-K holding A-K-x (x). One of our better local players said this agreement differs when you are on lead against a suit contract versus a notrump contract. I don't understand the difference. Please help.

George

Hi, George,

Defending a suit contract, leading from A-K-x in an unbid suit will frequently be your best option. For starters, you generally win the first trick, and you're still on lead, this time with the benefit of seeing the dummy and partner's signal.

Typically, your partner will send an attitude signal by playing right-side up carding: high to suggest a continuation or low to suggest a shift. You are just as likely to lead the ace from A-K-x as from A-K-x-x-x. That's not true at notrump.

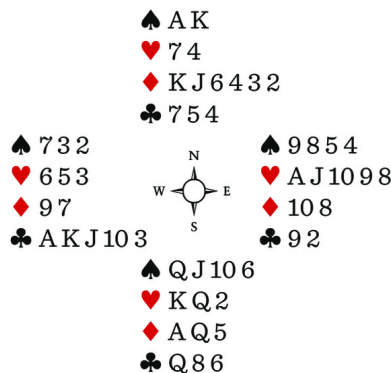
The lead of an ace against any level of notrump sends a radically different message. With a five-card holding such as A-K-J-10-x, you want to know how many tricks you can expect to cash without giving up a trick to declarer's queen. Similarly, with A-K-Q-10 (x), your lead of the ace asks where's the jack and is it falling?

Standard practice, without discussion, is that the lead of an ace requires partner to drop any card he holds that has a picture on it, otherwise, to give count. With no face card to unblock, partner plays his lowest card to show

an odd number, and his highest to show two (second highest from four).

Only the ace has this special meaning. Any other honor lead simply asks partner for attitude. Once again, high if he likes it, low if he doesn't.

Here are two deals. The two-card difference in declarer's hand creates totally different defensive dilemmas. On both deals, South opens 1NT, North raises to 3NT and West leads the ♣A.

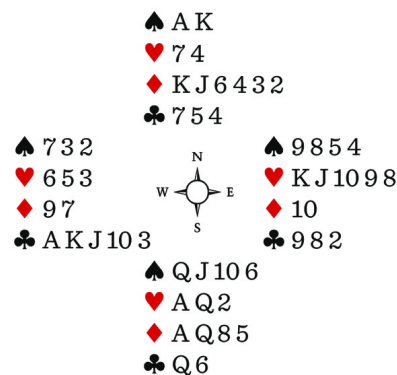


Listening to the bidding and looking at dummy, East, with 5 high-card points, knows his partner can't have more than 8 or 9. From partner's lead, he knows those points are all in clubs.

East's ♣9 denies the queen and begins a count signal showing either an even number or a singleton. Now West knows that South holds either ♣Qxx or ♣Qxxx. To defeat 3NT, East needs a fast entry and a second club. Based on this logic, West shifts to a heart at trick two, which East wins. East's club return through declarer's queen seals his doom.

Now, take away declarer's ♥K and

♣8 and give him the ♥A and the ♦8.



West leads the ♣A. East's ♣2 denies the queen and begins a count signal showing an odd number of clubs. West has learned that declarer holds either ♣Qx or ♣Qxxx. The doubleton queen is the only holding that offers hope for the defense. On this reasoning, West continues with ♣K at trick two and great is the fall thereon! Down one.

This principle applies only to suits that are at least five cards in length. For instance, holding A-K-J-2, you would lead the king, asking for attitude. It would be a tragedy for partner to drop the queen and set up a trick for declarer's 10-9-x-x.

Without discussion, this is standard practice for experienced players. Some pairs reverse the meaning of the ace and the king, making the king the "power lead" that asks partner to unblock an honor if he holds one. While the usage may be infrequent, it is nonetheless a good conversation to have with your partner. ■