



Ask Jerry

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Jerry,

I've been playing bridge now for four years after a 30-year break. I have been having discussions with my regular partner about underleading an ace against a notrump contract. Quite a few experts say this is an OK lead if one leads fourth highest of the suit. I'm having trouble accepting that because if the opponents have both the king and queen, I am giving them a trick in three out of four cases where they hold both. The only time I'm not giving them a trick is when the king and queen are on my left and then they will make both anyway. If I do not lead away from it, I can capture one of their honors if it is on my right. What's wrong with my thinking?

Jim

Hi Jim,

You are entirely correct that there are times that leading away from a four-card or longer suit, which includes the ace, will give opponents two tricks where if they had to lead the suit you could hold them to one trick. While this is true, one must consider the goal when defending a notrump contract. It is rare to defeat any notrump contract purely on high-card strength. Far more often, it is the development of length winners that helps us defeat or at least minimize the number of tricks the opponents take. Consider the following example, defending a notrump contract:

♠ 9 2
♠ A 10 8 5 3 ♠ J 6 4
♠ K Q 7

Leading the fourth-best ♠ 5, partner's jack forces declarer's queen. If your partner gains the lead in time, and returns your suit, four more winners! This, you say, is a lucky holding. What if the layout was:

♠ K Q 7
♠ A 10 8 5 3 ♠ J 6 4
♠ 9 2

If you lead fourth-best here, the declarer can win two tricks eventually. If, however, you or your partner gain the lead and return this suit, by ducking, West can ultimately win three tricks in this suit, provided either he or his partner ever gets to lead again. This may or may not be enough tricks for the defense.

The worst-case scenario you cite:

♠ K 7 2
♠ A 10 8 5 3 ♠ J 6 4
♠ Q 9

It is true that if West leads this suit, he surrenders two tricks, but as in the example above, with a little luck, and enough entries, he could still gain three winners in this suit for his side.

The decision on what suit to lead and what card within that suit to lead is based on a number of factors. Playing online bridge these days, I have witnessed many fourth-best leads that had zero chance of success. As always,

you have to consider the auction, and be especially aware of high-card points your partner may or may not hold.

The following occurred in real life, and I've used it many times in my seminars. The background: Over 20 years ago, I was playing a morning side game in a Raleigh Regional with my then and current assistant. She needed approximately two gold points to complete her requirements for Life Master. We were having a good game, and the following hand came up.

Holding:

♠ 10 5 ♥ J 9 8 4 3 ♦ 7 6 2 ♣ 8 6 4,
I heard 1NT on my right, and 3NT on my left.

Being the pseudo-expert that I was, I reasoned that partner likely held an opening hand or better. The failure of RHO to open 1♠ and the fact that LHO did not use Stayman, led me to believe that my partner held at least four spades. Because my hand was entryless, I led the ♠ 10, trying to hit her suit. *Disaster!* The layout in the heart suit:

♥ 6 2
♥ J 9 8 4 3 ♥ A K 7 5
♥ Q 10

On my lead, the opponents took 12 tricks. We garnered a complete bottom, because everyone else in the field led a fourth-best heart. Sadly, we did not get the needed gold points. I felt really bad, but ... in the same situation again, I would lead the ♠ 10! ■