

Card combinations when the defenders lead

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As declarer, handling suit combinations correctly is important. For example, how do you maximize your tricks with A1083 vs Q72? There are many references on this topic. The most complete is the *Encyclopedia of Bridge*. (Also, see 2 lectures by Dave Bernstein on the web site from 2008).

This lecture discusses how to play some suit combinations *when the defenders lead the suit*, whether on opening lead or later in the play.

When the defenders lead a suit, there can be good news or bad news:

- **Bad:** they threaten to establish tricks in a suit (or get ruffs).
- **Good:** the lead may give you extra chances and/or information you wouldn't have otherwise.

A32 If you play this suit yourself, you will finesse the J, with a 50%
KJ4 chance for a third trick. However, if LHO leads it, you are
 guaranteed 3 tricks. This is called a *free finesse*.

A32 Simply duck in dummy and you are guaranteed 2 tricks in the
Q45 suit.

Important: Always plan the *entire hand* before playing to trick 1. Sometimes the "right" way to play a suit depends on other factors. In the above example, if you are in a suit contract and RHO bid the suit, LHO might have a singleton, so rise with the A and plan to finesse the Q later.

- ♠ Axxx You are in 3NT and LHO leads a low club. Be sure to plan the
- ♥ Axxxx hand before playing to trick 1! You need to establish
- ♦ xx diamond tricks, and if the opponents hold up their A, look
- ♣ Ax what happens if you played a low club at trick 1: you will
- have no entries to your hand because the clubs are blocked.
- ♠ xx Therefore, forget the "free" finesse, play the club A at trick 1,
- ♥ xx then set up diamonds, which guarantees 9 tricks.
- ♦ KQJ10xx
- ♣ KJx

KJ3 LHO leads a low card. This is *not* a free finesse. If you play the
A54 J and it is covered by the Q, you still get only 2 tricks in the
suit. Sometimes in this situation it's better to duck and retain
the J for later. Maybe RHO plays the Q anyway, or maybe he
will be forced to lead the suit later.

However, be careful not to miss the following situations. In all these cases,
LHO leads a low card:

KJ3 If you play the suit yourself, you will finesse the J. But if LHO
A94 leads the suit, you should play *low* from dummy, which gives
you 2 chances. If RHO has to play the Q, your J becomes a
trick. If RHO plays the 10, you win the A and can still finesse
the J later.

K103 Here you have a chance for 3 tricks, which you wouldn't have
A94 normally. Play low and if RHO plays the Q or J, win the A and
finesse against the other honor. *Do not play the 10 first!*
(because if RHO covers, you no longer have a finesse.)

KJ2 If you play low, there's a small chance that LHO led from
A83 109xx, or that RHO holding Q9x will mistakenly play the Q.

AQ2 If you duck, you get 2 tricks unless RHO has both K and J,
1064 which is better than playing the Q first. (Play the Q only if you
can't afford to lose any tricks in the suit, and you have a way of
discarding the third card.)

AJ6 The best play is to duck, hoping LHO has K10 or Q10, which is
92 more likely than KQ.

Q103 If you play it yourself, lead low to the K and finesse the 10 on
K82 the way back. If LHO leads the suit, you can play *low* from
dummy at trick 1 hoping that RHO will play the A, setting up
your K & Q, or the J, setting up your 10. If he plays the 9, you
can still finesse the 10 (or Q) next time.

102 J3 Q6
AKQ3 AK2 A54

If LHO leads one of these suits, you must play high from dummy, hoping that LHO underled an honor. If RHO led the suit, you can also duck hoping the same thing (unless you can't afford to lose the lead).

Q42 Here there's usually no hurry to play the Q right away. If LHO
A63 has the K, your Q will win later... but maybe you can keep
LHO off lead in case RHO has the K.

Q2 Ducking always guarantees 2 tricks; playing the Q doesn't. But
A103 in a suit contract, assuming you can ruff the third round, you
might play the Q if you think it's more likely LHO underled the
K than the J.

Q104 You have a 3/4 chance of getting 2 tricks by playing either the
A32 10 or Q and if necessary finessing the other honor later.

Q10 In this case, you have to guess immediately.
A32

K10 Your best chance for 2 tricks is to play the 10 hoping LHO has
Q32 the J.

K3 In NT, you should play the K. (If you play low, RHO will play
Q42 an intermediate card, forcing you to win the Q.) If the K holds,
then you hope to keep RHO off lead. If RHO wins the A, you
can hold up on the next round.
In a suit contract, RHO has the A. Often it doesn't matter what
you play, but there can be subtle reasons to play high or low.

Q103 Play the 10, hoping LHO has the J and another honor.
642

J93 Play the 9, hoping LHO underled K10 or Q10.
A4

Q32 Not a hopeful situation. In NT, playing the Q is your best
74 chance: it's possible W led from AKxx. In a suit contract,
duck. Maybe RHO will play the A holding A10xx. From his
point of view, you might have Jx. Then you can set up the Q
for a pitch (if you need it).

Inferences

Often your play in a suit is based on *inferences* from the lead. These are some inferences you can make:

- In a suit contract, the opening leader did not underlead an Ace. (In NT, you can't assume this.)
- An honor lead shows the next lower honor (unless partner bid the suit).
- A low card lead tends to imply an honor while a high card (e.g. 8 or 9) tends to deny an honor.
- A low card in a suit contract implies the leader doesn't have an honor combination such as KQ or QJ. (In NT, it's possible that someone could lead low from QJxx, for example).
- If third hand plays an honor, assume he doesn't have the next lower honor. For example,

	743	
2		K
	A86	

If RHO had KQ, he would have played the Q, so LHO has the Q. Therefore (assuming it's a suit contract), you also know RHO has the J, because he would have been led Q from QJ.

Here the opening lead is a low card:

KJ2	In a suit contract, to avoid losing two tricks, you should assume
53	RHO has the A. Therefore you must hope LHO led from the Q, so play the J.
	In NT, playing the J is still right because LHO could have underled AQ.

What if it turns out LHO underled the A after all? Then you just congratulate the opponents on a sneaky (i.e. bad) play! But in the long run you will be *much* better off and they will be worse off by underleading aces. Most "rules" in bridge have lots of exceptions, but this rule is almost ironclad.

To clarify: If you must lead a suit with an unsupported Ace (that is, not AK), it's usually right to lead the Ace. Some examples of how underleading an A hurts:

76432	64	Q
K	K532	J1092

In the first case, you never win your A. In the second, you only get 1 trick instead of 2. In the third, your partner can take his King, but declarer can take a ruffing finesse through your A to set up his suit.

Notice that this applies to the **opening lead only!** Later in the play, there can be legitimate reasons to underlead an Ace, because the defenders can see the dummy. So if you are declarer, and it's *after* the opening lead, then it's not so clear whether to play the K or J.

K72 Here you may lose 2 but you have a guaranteed third round
J3 trick by ducking.

K72 If LHO leads a low card, of course you must duck. Suppose
1063 LHO leads the Q? Assume LHO also has the J (unless his
partner bid the suit) and duck the first round. The suit is now
frozen, which means neither opponent (or you) can lead it again
without giving up a trick. If LHO continues with the J, cover
with the K, which sets up your 10. If LHO continues with a
low card, play low, forcing RHO to win the A.

Holdup plays

In notrump contracts, a common play is to *hold up* taking a winner in a suit where the opponents have length. For example, you have xx vs Axx and the opponents lead a low card. If LHO leads 4th best, you often delay taking your Ace til the third round, then try to keep LHO off lead.

Often even with 2 stoppers, say Ax vs Kxx, it is right to hold up the first round. That way if a defender who gets the lead had a doubleton, he can't lead the suit back. The main reasons *not* to hold up are:

1. You are more afraid of another suit, and don't want them to switch.
2. You only have to lose the lead one more time and then you have the rest of the tricks.

A common situation is the "Bath coup" where **LHO leads the K.**

872 You can infer LHO has the Q. If you win the first trick, RHO
AJ3 only needs to get in once, and they can run all their tricks.
If you duck the first trick, LHO can't continue the suit without
giving you a second trick. If they shift, then RHO will have to
get in and lead the suit, and then you still have the option of
holding up at that point.

A72 The same logic applies as in the previous hand.
J43

But don't confuse that with this, where the J is behind the Q:

J72 Here, you are *guaranteed* 2 tricks if you win the A (you know
A43 where the Q is). If you duck, and they shift, you may never
 score the J.

Important: If you can guarantee a second trick by winning, and you can't by ducking, win the trick! People often err in this situation.

102 LHO leads the K. If you win the A, you are guaranteed two
AJ3 tricks. If you duck and they shift, you will only win 1 trick in
 the suit. The same thing applies if LHO leads a low card and
 RHO plays an honor (Make sure you play *low* from dummy
 and then beat whatever RHO plays.)

32 LHO leads low and RHO plays the Q. Don't hold up! Your
AJ95 chances of getting a second trick are excellent by winning
 immediately.

32 Suppose RHO had bid this suit and LHO leads the 9. Then
AJ4 you can assume RHO has KQ, so you are getting 2 tricks for
 sure. If RHO plays the Q, it's usually right to *duck* the first
 time. This is another holdup play. It doesn't change the number
 of tricks you get, but it makes it harder for them to establish
 the suit.

32 LHO leads *low* and RHO plays K. LHO is marked with the Q
AJ4 (otherwise RHO would have played it). Do you duck or win
 the Ace?

This is a tough one. You can't guarantee 2 tricks. Assuming you think LHO has the length, you have 2 options:

- Hold up twice and then try to keep LHO off lead, hoping RHO is out.
- Win the A and then try to keep RHO off lead so that he can't lead through your J.

See the following examples.

Examples

♠ 32
♥ AQ1076
♦ 765
♣ A65

You are in 3NT. LHO leads the ♠ 6 and RHO plays the K. You will take the H finesse, and 4 heart tricks are enough for your game, but you may have to lose the lead to RHO. Therefore, duck twice in spades in case RHO has only 3. Then if RHO has the ♥ K, he won't be able to return spades.

♠ AJ4
♥ J93
♦ AK4
♣ K432

♠ 32
♥ J92
♦ A765
♣ A765

Same contract, same lead. This time, you might lose the lead to LHO. Therefore, win the *first* spade with the A, go to dummy and take the heart finesse. If it loses, LHO can't lead spades without giving you another trick.

♠ AJ4
♥ AQ1076
♦ K4
♣ K43

♠ Q2
♥ AQ2
♦ J10765
♣ J109

LHO leads a low spade. You have no choice but to try the Q; unfortunately it loses to the K. Now what?

♠ A54
♥ KJ76
♦ KQ4
♣ K43

You have 5 tricks in the majors and have to set up diamonds for the contract. You must hope that RHO has both minor aces and only 3 spades, so hold up *twice* in spades.

When you play diamonds, RHO takes the A. The good news is, he has no more spades. The bad news: he leads a low club: what do you play?

Just looking at the clubs, usually you'd play low hoping RHO has the Q so you can get 2 club tricks. But on this hand, that doesn't matter. You have enough tricks as long as you can keep LHO off lead. Your best chance to do that is to play the K! (If it loses, you are going down either way.)

EXAMPLE HANDS

1. 3 NT by South

	♠J42	
	♥732	
	♦AK5	
	♣J765	
♠KQ1093		♠876
♥QJ95		♥K104
♦76		♦10983
♣43		♣A985
	♠A5	
	♥A86	
	♦QJ42	
	♣KQ102	

W leads ♠K against 3NT. Declarer can count 6 tricks outside of clubs and must lose a trick to the ♣A to set up 3 club tricks. Should declarer duck the first round of spades? No! Declarer knows W has ♠Q as well, so the ♠J will provide a second stopper. If declarer ducks, the defenders can easily defeat the contract by shifting to a heart, or continuing a low spade.

2. 3 NT by S

♠K4
♥AJ109
♦7652
♣A76

♠A9763
♥75
♦Q108
♣J103

♠J108
♥Q432
♦J9
♣9854

♠Q52
♥K86
♦AK43
♣KQ2

W leads the ♠6 against 3NT. Declarer can count 8 top tricks: 1 spade, 2 hearts, 2 diamonds and 3 clubs. Hearts can provide (at least) 1 extra trick, but there is a 2-way finesse against the Q, so a trick may have to be lost.

The best play is the ♠K at trick 1. There are 2 possibilities:

1. E wins the A and continues the suit. Then declarer can *hold up* the Q til the third round. Then declarer should finesse hearts *through* W, hoping that if the finesse loses, E is out of spades. (If E has another spade, it means spades are 4-4 so you still make the contract.)
2. The ♠K holds. Then declarer should run the ♥J from dummy, finessing *through* E. This way, if W has the ♥Q, declarer's ♠Q is safe from attack.