

This post is addressed to beginners. Experienced players will already have this under their belts.

There are two little rules of thumb that are honoured by some beginners more in the breach than in the observance, and this concerns which card you should play from a choice of touching cards which are therefore of equal rank. While there are exceptions to these rules, and I deal with some of them below, the starting point has to be understanding the basic guidelines.

There are three situations to consider:

- 1) When you are declarer
- 2) When you are defender sitting over declarer (and under dummy) and you are leading the suit.
- 3) Any other case, which can be reduced to the following:
 - a) when you are either defender, following to the trick, whoever led it.
 - b) when you are defender sitting under declarer, leading the suit.

The rule applicable to situations 1 and 2 is identical: play the highest of the touching cards. The only reason that I separate situations 1 and 2 is to highlight that the reason behind the rule differs in each case. In situation 1 the purpose is to conceal information from the defence. In situation 2 the purpose is to provide information to your partner.

The rule applicable to case 3 is to play the lowest of the touching cards.

Both rules (high in situation 1 or 2, low in situation 3) are demonstrated in the following seven examples, followed by seven exceptions. Neither the examples nor exceptions are exhaustive. The cited exceptions equal the examples in number by coincidence, but bear in mind that in real life the examples arise with greater frequency than the exceptions..

Example 1 (you are declarer):

LHO leads a small card, dummy plays low, RHO plays the Jack and you (declarer) hold both KQ. With which card should you win? Answer: the King. Why? Answer: RHO would normally play the King if he held it (third hand high, and with non-touching KJ would play the K. Indeed, you can place the Ace with LHO for the same reason). By playing the King you leave LHO in doubt about the location of the Queen, where by playing the Queen you would have left LHO in no doubt about the location of the King.

Example 2 (you are declarer):

RHO leads a small card, dummy holds only small cards, and you hold AKx. You decide to play one of the AK, but which? Answer: The Ace. Why? Answer: If you win with the King, RHO will place you with the Ace by reason of LHO failing to cover the King. There will be situations where LHO should duck, but generally he will normally win. However, if you win with the Ace, RHO is left in doubt about the location of the King, as LHO would not normally sacrifice the King under the Ace (he might wish to unblock, but again we are only considering the general case).

Example 3 (you are declarer):

This example just extends example 2 to lower sequences: Suppose as declarer you hold KQJT9 and RHO leads small through you. If you play the King, the only card that LHO might win with is the Ace, and whether or not he does so the position of all the lower cards is concealed. Concealment is your objective. You have no partner to whom you might wish to signal. If you play the 9, and LHO wins with the Ace AND the defence has the (optimum) agreement to win as cheaply as possible with touching cards, then it will be immediately apparent to RHO that you hold all of the KQJT. Even if the defence does not have that agreement then RHO would still normally expect LHO to win (if possible) with the lower of non-touching cards. So, if he wins with the Ace and in so doing erred by playing the higher of touching cards, he remains limited to a touching sequence headed by the Ace, which

limitation can only be of assistance to RHO, an unnecessary piece of assistance that would be avoided by playing the King.

Example 4 (you are defender, sitting over declarer, under declarer):

You are on lead, holding the QJx. You decide that it is appropriate to lead one of the QJ, but which? Answer: the Queen. Why? So that partner with a higher card knows when to play it and when not to waste it by playing it unnecessarily. If dummy holds the King and partner the Ace, he knows not to play the Ace if dummy plays low, as he knows that your Queen will win. Leading the Jack leaves partner in doubt about whether it will lose to declarer's Queen if he plays low. It might still be right to play low, but better if that decision is based on accurate assumptions and information. Likewise if you led the bottom from a sequence and led the Jack from either KQJ or QJ, and partner has the Ace but cannot see the King, he might prefer to overtake with the Ace opposite QJ (potentially crashing declarer's singleton King) but might prefer not to waste it on the same trick as the Jack opposite KQJ. It may be right for partner to overtake anyway, to avoid a suit blockage, but better that his decision whether or not to do so be an informed one.

There are some defensive signalling methods that prescribe leading the second top of a sequence, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this article. The situation is essentially no different from an agreement to lead the top: The point is that partner knows where the top of the sequence ends, whichever card you lead, provided that you have the prior agreement.

Example 5 (you are defender sitting over dummy, under declarer):

Partner leads small, dummy has only low cards, you hold QJx. You follow the "third hand high" rule, but Queen and Jack are essentially equal cards, being touching. Which do you play? Answer: Jack. Why? You expect declarer to win. With both Ace and King you would expect him to win with the Ace (see previous examples). With a choice of non-touching cards with which to win the trick, he would win as cheaply as possible. Had declarer held a suit headed by AQ he would normally be mad to win with the Ace and leave the Queen exposed to capture by the King, when he could win this trick with the Queen for certain. If declarer wins with the King, then the position of the Queen is concealed from your partner (hence declarer would win with the King rather than Queen holding both KQ, see former examples). There is nothing that you can do about that. There will always be some hands that leave an element of doubt. However, if declarer wins with the Ace (not holding the King) then your partner (who has underled the King) can be sure that you also hold the Queen (from declarer's failure to win with that card). Had you played the Queen and lost to the Ace, having adopted the inferior agreement to play the Q from QJ, then your partner is left in doubt over the position of the Jack.

Example 6 (you are defender sitting over dummy, under declarer):

Extending example 5, partner leads a small card, small cards in dummy, you hold KQJT9, which do you play? Answer: the 9. Why? Answer: you are not sure about the position of the Ace. Partner may hold it. If partner holds it and you play the 9 it will win the trick. Declarer would normally win if he could, so simply playing the 9 tells your partner that you hold the KQJT as well. Had you played the King, it will come as no surprise to partner that you win the trick, as he holds the Ace and there is no other card to beat the King, but he is left in doubt about the location of the lower cards. If declarer holds the Ace, he would again win with a cheaper card holding non-touching cards, so your partner can place declarer with a touching sequence (of possibly just one card) headed by the Ace, and you with a touching sequence of which the 9 is the lowest. He is left in doubt about the border where the top of your sequence ends and declarer's bottom of declarer's sequence starts, but that is a far more restricted population than alternatives. In so far as doubt is a relative, not absolute term, he is left in "less" doubt about your possible holdings by playing the 9 than the King.

Example 7 (you are defender sitting over dummy, under declarer):

You are on lead with KQJT9. The Ace is not visible in dummy. This is perhaps the most difficult situation to understand. However the principles of example 5 pretty much translate. The main difference is that you are not under the "third hand high" obligation. Nor are you

under an obligation to partner to show where the top of the sequence ends, as partner who is playing third to the trick in front of a visible dummy is left in no doubt about the risks of playing his various options. Lead the 9, perhaps but consider whether exception 7 below might apply.

Exceptions:

I cannot hope to identify all exceptions, but here are a few

Exception 1 (you are defender, generally):

On the particular facts and circumstances of a particular hand, from the perspective of the defence it may be more important to deceive declarer than to convey honest information to the other defender (and also to declarer).

Dummy holds AJT and you, sitting over dummy, hold KQx. Partner leads the suit and dummy inserts the J or T. If you play the Q it will win and partner will know that you hold the K. Declarer may also suspect that you hold the K (he will have no such degree of certainty), and he may decide that alternative lines of play offer a better chance than repeating the finesse. If you decide that it is more important to persuade declarer to repeat the finesse than to confirm the position of the honour holding to your partner, then you might win the first round with the King. Partner will assume that declarer has the Queen. But perhaps more importantly, declarer may assume that your partner holds that card.

Another instance of this example is when you are sitting over dummy, under declarer, and partner leads a small card toward your AKxx, and you are committed to playing one of the AK and leading back a low card through declarer's possible QT. Declarer may get it right anyway, but if you win the King and lead a low one back, and declarer trusts that you will always play the K from AK, then he may guess right to rise with the Queen. By contrast if you win the Ace and lead low back he may take a losing finesse against the Jack. An experienced declarer will also be alive to the opportunities for deception by the defence, so there are no guarantees - he may guess right anyway.

Exception 2 (you are declarer, generally):

Declarer is concerned principally with deception, and has no incentive to signal honestly. However it can be more important to deceive one defender than the other. Playing the higher of touching cards may provide for the leaving a specific defender in the greatest doubt, but if you reliably play the higher card, then the other defender might be successfully deceived if occasionally you play the lower, and on the specific facts that might be the higher priority.

Exception 3 (you are declarer, generally):

When leading a card from hand, from a choice of touching cards, which card you lead may depend on whether you want the opponents to duck or win that trick, particularly LHO. Suppose you have a semi-solid trump suit missing just the Ace, and you are concerned that the opponents may be able to take an immediate ruff in a side suit. You wish to draw trumps as fast as possible. Suppose further that your LHO holds the Ace. If you lead (say) the Jack from KQJ, LHO may play low on the first round, in the hope that partner can win the trick and fearing that playing the Ace will crash it. The deception will only last for one trick, of course, but that may be sufficient for the next round of trumps to exhaust the danger hand of trumps and deny the ruff. By contrast, if you wish to encourage the opponent to win early, lead from the top.

Another instance of this example is when dummy has singleton in a side suit, and you as declarer have a long running sequence missing the top outstanding card, say KQJT9 missing the Ace, which is held by LHO. If you lead the 9 out of hand, LHO is under considerable pressure. He would not want to win with the Ace when his partner might be able to win with the ten. By contrast he would not want to duck the Ace and lose forever the opportunity to win the trick partner cannot win it. He may guess right, or he may guess wrong. But he will always guess right if you lead the King.

Exception 4 (you are defender, certain to win the trick):

You are certain to win the trick with one of touching cards, and are committed to leading back the other touching card at the next trick. By the time that partner is required to make any decision he will know beyond doubt that you held both cards. The order in which you play those cards may then be used to convey a signal, for example your count in the suit (even v odd number) or some other prearranged message.

Exception 5 (you are defender, sitting over dummy, under declarer):

A classic exception to "third hand high" is when partner leads against NT, you hold AQx of the suit, the position of the King unknown (ie missing from dummy). The Ace and Queen being non-touching cards it would be normal to play the Ace. However it might be right to play the Queen, particularly if you think it vanishingly unlikely that declarer holds King singleton. If the Queen wins, you would follow with Ace and another.

The purpose is this: If declarer holds Kxx, and you first win the Ace, then continue the suit, declarer can safely duck the second round and win the third, in order to sever communication between the two hands, secure in the knowledge that his King is safe once the Ace appears on his right. Opening leader may have no entry to enjoy the established long cards in the suit. By contrast if you play the Queen on the first trick, then declarer, being left in doubt about the location of the Ace, may be induced to win the first trick with the King, fearing it being his last opportunity to take the King. Later you can play the Ace and another and partner can run the suit. If leader had the King all the time then it matters not which order you play the Ace or Queen.

If you have reason to think that declarer has at most two cards in the suit (possibly including the King) then you would play Ace followed by Queen, in order to remove from partner any doubt about the location of the Ace, confident that declarer cannot hold up the King and exhaust your suit to sever communications. In that case, this exception would not apply.

Exception 6 (you are declarer, corollary to Exception 5):

You hold, say, AKx in a suit which LHO leads against your NT contract, RHO playing the Queen. For whatever reason you decide to win this trick. Holding (instead) Axx you might be expected to duck two rounds of the suit in order to sever communications between the opponents, but with Kxx you would be expected to win (unless you can be sure from the bidding and lead that RHO holds the Ace, so that your King remains protected). Winning with the King, particularly when RHO might play Q from AQx (see exception 5 above), might leave the opponents in doubt about whether you started with Kxx or AKx, when winning with the Ace might (from your failure to duck) be more reliably interpreted as being from AKx.

Exception 7 (you are defender, usually over dummy and under declarer):

If you hold a particularly long sequence and lead the bottom card from that sequence, it may be card sufficiently low ranking that partner may be in doubt about whether you hold a sequence at all, where it may be important that this message be conveyed.

This can be overcome by varying the agreement as an application of the "two card difference principle". Where you would normally play the bottom of a sequence, instead play the bottom of 2 touching cards but the top of 3 (or more) touching cards. Partner has a good chance of guessing accurately which option you hold.

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