

BRIDGEWORKS

INFERENCES ON DEFENSE

CLUES TO ACE-UNDERLEADS

BY MARSHALL MILES

Many players are reluctant to underlead an ace against a suit contract, even after the dummy is exposed, and some absolutely refuse to do so on opening lead. "Aces are meant to take kings," they may say in an attempt to explain their shying away from this tool. Yet, there are many situations where underleading an ace is the percentage play, at trick one or later, and the inferences that can steer a defender to this conclusion follow certain patterns.

		NORTH	
		♠ A 10 5 4	
		♥ 5 2	
		♦ K J 7	
		♣ Q J 6 2	
WEST		EAST	
♠ 6 2		♠ J 9 3	
♥ K Q 9 8 4		♥ A 7 3	
♦ A 9 6		♦ Q 10 8 5 2	
♣ 7 4 3		♣ 9 5	
		SOUTH	
		♠ K Q 8 7	
		♥ J 10 6	
		♦ 4 3	
		♣ A K 10 8	
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 ♣	1 ♥	Double	2 ♥
2 ♠	Pass	4 ♠	(All Pass)

West leads the king of hearts, showing the ace or queen. (It is practical to use ambiguous king-leads *when one's suit has been raised*, even if this is not the partnership's usual practice.) As East and West hold minimum-range hands for their bids, declarer cannot tell whether West has ace-king of hearts and queen of diamonds, or king-queen

of hearts and ace of diamonds. At trick two, West should lead a low diamond *whether he holds the ace or the queen*, because if declarer is allowed to tackle diamonds when the play is more advanced, the defenders will necessarily have tattled on the heart-honor position.

More generally, as soon as he sees the king (and especially the king-jack) in dummy, the defender in front of dummy should consider the possibility of leading that suit through.

At IMPs, it is usually right to aim at a set, even at the risk of letting the declarer make one or more overtricks; but at matchpoints, where unnecessarily allowing an overtrick may cost half a board, it is usually against the odds to underlead an ace through dummy's king, especially when dummy threatens to provide plentiful discards. Underleading the ace will gain only when declarer has the jack and partner has the queen. If declarer has the queen, the defenders will perhaps lose their ace; if declarer has no honor higher than the ten, he will have nothing to gain by ducking in dummy. With several ways to lose and only one way to gain, ace-underleading is rarely justified.

All experienced players know how risky it is to underlead an ace, so declarer is almost certain to misguess if you underlead at just the right time—that is, when partner has the queen and declarer has the jack. How can you tell

when that is the layout? If the defenders trust each other, one may be able to draw an inference from the other's defense. For example:

				NORTH	
				♠ K 8	
				♥ A Q 5 3	
				♦ A K Q J 6	
				♣ 7 2	
WEST				EAST	
♠ A 7 6 3 2				♠ Q 9 5	
♥ 7 2				♥ 9 4	
♦ 8 2				♦ 10 9 5 4	
♣ K Q 10 6				♣ A 9 8 3	
				SOUTH	
				♠ J 10 4	
				♥ K J 10 8 6	
				♦ 7 3	
				♣ J 5 4	
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST		
1 ♥	Pass	1 ♦	Pass		
		4 ♥	(All Pass)		

After West wins the first two tricks with the king and queen of clubs, he should lead a low spade, *even at matchpoints*. East can equally well see dummy's spade holding and source of the discards; if he didn't have the queen

of spades without the jack, he would have overtaken the queen of clubs and returned a spade to his partner's ace. Of course, East would also duck the second club with the ace of spades but not the queen, so declarer must guess.

Whenever dummy reveals a king without the queen behind it, the thought of underleading the ace will occur to the defense (although it usually should resist the temptation). In contrast, underleading an ace on opening lead is rarely considered, even though it has some advantages: If there is a guess, declarer is almost sure to go wrong, and when declarer's side has the king and queen, nothing is necessarily lost by the underlead. The risks are smallest when dummy and declarer have balanced hands. Furthermore, when the bidding has indicated that dummy is strong and declarer is weak, so that the king is much more likely in dummy than in the closed hand, an ace-underlead from a three- or four-card suit is promising, as here:

IMPROVE YOUR DEFENSE

Rubber bridge				
South dealer				
East-West vulnerable				
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST				
Pass	Pass	1 ♣	Pass	
1 NT	Pass	Pass	Pass	
NORTH (dummy)				
♠ 10 9 3				
♥ A 5				
♦ K 10 9				
♣ A Q J 10 6				
EAST (you)				
♠ K Q				
♥ Q 7 4 3 2				
♦ 8 7 3 2				
♣ K 2				

West leads the spade six.

Plan your defense.

(Solution on page 36.)

the king of clubs or a spade ruff.

This type of opening lead may gain even when partner has the queen-jack:

NORTH		EAST	
♠ K 10 8		♠ Q 9 7 2	
♥ A J 6		♥ 8 7	
♦ A Q 10 5 4		♦ J 8 3 2	
♣ Q 6		♣ K 10 2	
WEST		EAST	
♠ A 6 4 3		♠ Q J 7	
♥ 10 4		♥ 8 7	
♦ 9 7		♦ J 8 3 2	
♣ A J 9 5 3		♣ K 10 2	
SOUTH		EAST	
♠ J 5		♠ Q J 7	
♥ K Q 9 5 3 2		♥ 8 7	
♦ K 6		♦ Q J 6 3 2	
♣ 8 7 4		♣ 10 8 2	

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	—	1 ♦	Pass
1 ♥	Pass	2 NT	Pass
3 ♥	Pass	4 ♥	(All Pass)

Many clues align to suggest an underlead in spades, despite the risk of declarer's having a singleton. But when declarer falls into the trap and plays low from dummy, one of the drawbacks of ace-underleads appears: East has a problem. If West would never underlead an ace, East would play the nine on dummy's eight. But a player in a less-rigid partnership should come to the winning conclusion: The conditions were right for an ace-underlead, and if West is leading from the jack, there is little hope to defeat the contract. East should play the queen, hoping to be able to return the suit. [Declarers of the world unite! Make things as tough as possible for the ace-underleaders. For example, if you get a low opening lead through dummy's king-ten-eight-four up to your queen-seven, *put in dummy's eight*, just as you would if holding, say, ace-five.—Ed.]

When that comes off, West should win with the ace of spades and lead the ace of clubs, hoping to be able to tell from East's card whether to try to take

Same bidding, same lead. The play will go: spade to the jack, club ten to the ace, spade to the queen. (At trick three, West doesn't fear a doubleton spade with declarer, because of the play to trick one.)

An ace-underlead based on a different set of inferences helped to win a match at a regional:

NORTH		EAST	
♠ A K Q 6		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ K J 10 9 3		♥ 5 4	
♦ 8		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ K 6 2		♦ Q 8 5 3	
WEST		EAST	
♠ 9 5 4		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ Q		♥ 5 4	
♦ J 9 7 6 3		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ A 10 7 4		♦ Q 8 5 3	
SOUTH		EAST	
♠ J 7		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ A 8 7 6 2		♥ 5 4	
♦ A K 5 4		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ J 9		♣ K 6 2	
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 ♥	Pass	2 NT*	Pass
4 ♥†	Pass	4 NT	Pass
5 ♥§	Pass	6 ♥	(All Pass)

*game-forcing raise

†minimum-range hand; no short suit

§two key cards but no heart queen

Consider West's perspective on opening lead. North presumably has two key cards (and ostensibly at least five hearts, since he knows that his side is missing the heart queen). If he might be taking a chance on losing two fast tricks in a side suit, it must be right to lead a club. If, as suggested by the bidding, North has at least second-round

control in each side suit, he might have either the club king or a club singleton. The odds favor North's singleton, if any, being in diamonds, so a low club is a reasonable shot. It's success at the table was not random; the lead was based on inferences that were sound, even though they were probabilistic in nature.

CLASSIC REWIND

RATE YOUR 1949 GAME

Here are some rubber-bridge declarer-play exercises from a 1949 quiz.

1. West dealer
Both sides vulnerable

NORTH		EAST	
♠ K 8 5 4 2		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ 7 6		♥ 5 4	
♦ 10 5 2		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ K 10 2		♣ A Q 6	
SOUTH		EAST	
♠ Q 3		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ A K 5 4		♥ 5 4	
♦ K Q J 7		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ A Q 6		♣ A Q 6	
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	1 ♥	Pass	Pass
Double	Pass	1 ♠	Pass
2 NT	Pass	3 NT	(All Pass)

West leads the queen of hearts.

Plan the play.

NORTH		EAST	
♠ A 4 3		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ K 7 2		♥ 5 4	
♦ K Q J 9 7 3		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ 10		♣ A Q 6	
SOUTH		EAST	
♠ K 7 5 2		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ A 9 4 3		♥ 5 4	
♦ —		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ A K Q J 9		♣ A Q 6	

"You are South, declarer at a six-club contract. (Don't ask us how you got there!)" says the anonymous author (who, our style-detection service claims, was almost certainly Sonny Moyses).

West leads the spade queen.

Plan the play.

3. West dealer
Neither side vulnerable

NORTH		EAST	
♠ K Q 6		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ 9 3 2		♥ 5 4	
♦ A K J 10 6		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ 8 4		♣ A Q 6	
SOUTH		EAST	
♠ A J 10 9 5 4 3 2		♠ 10 8 3 2	
♥ —		♥ 5 4	
♦ 6 4 2		♦ Q 10 2	
♣ K 9		♣ A Q 6	

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
—	1 ♥	2 ♦	2 ♥
4 ♠	5 ♥	5 ♠	Pass
Pass	Pass	—	—

Heart king, deuce, ten, ?

Plan the play.

(Solutions overleaf.)