

MIKE LAWRENCE



BRIDGE TIPS

tips on
CARDPLAY



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CARDPLAY

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PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

When Mike Lawrence first suggested updating his 'Topics' series and republishing it, my first reaction was to search the bookshelf to see how many of the books I could get my hands on. The answer was five out of the original thirty-odd. Even Mike didn't really have a full set, but eventually he was able to scrounge the last few from a friend. The digital files, where they existed, were in pretty bad shape, so the next step was scanning and reviewing — and finally, we were in a position to start the project.

Much of the advice was as fresh as it was when first written over twenty years ago. But bridge has changed, and even some of Mike's own views have changed. As well, there were topics that were intended to be included in the original series but that somehow never got written. There were also some obvious gaps — for example, passed hand bidding and Drury — a convention on which Mike has some new and useful ideas.

Organization of the topics into books was another problem, since they had been intended as stand-alone booklets. Mike and I eventually decided on three books, broadly divided into the themes of constructive bidding, competitive bidding, and play and defense. (I say 'broadly', because, as you'll see, the topics didn't arrange themselves quite as neatly as this.)

Treat each chapter in this book as though you were taking a lesson from Mike — in particular, study the examples, and whether or not you come up with the same answer as the author, study his reasoning. No one writes more clearly than Mike Lawrence, and that makes it very easy to understand what he is trying to get across.

If you just pick up one key idea from each chapter, and remember to apply it when you're at the table, your results will improve noticeably.

Ray Lee
Master Point Press
November, 2015

In memory of Pat Golden

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1. MISTAKES IN THE PLAY

All of the errors shown in this chapter are valid. I wish I were innocent of committing them.

NOT ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS

This one is simplicity itself. I won't spend much time on this topic. I will, however, emphasize it as strongly as possible. Bridge is a game. Look it up in the dictionary. But it is one of the most intense games you will ever play. It's also one of the most complex games you will ever play. We know intellectually that we want to have a good time but in our hearts, we also want to win. Setting Mrs. Smith 800 points is usually a satisfactory conclusion. Making 3NT by swindling Mr. Jones could be a stunning highlight to the afternoon. But are these single triumphs what you are looking for? Do you want the occasional spectacular result or do you want to be a winner in the long run?

The fact that you are reading this implies you want to improve your game and be a long-term winner. You can undertake all the technical learning you wish, you can learn every nuance of dummy play and defense, and you can study all the conventions in the world. Still, technical perfection will leave you short of being a winner if you fail in any of the mental aspects of the game. You have read about them and you have probably heard about them from your partner. You may even have preached some of them *to* your partner. Are you guilty of any of these?

1. Failure to pay attention. Do you ever find yourself wondering what card your partner played three tricks ago? If I asked you at Trick 10 how the bidding went, would you know?
2. When your partnership has a disaster, do you accept that you might have been partially or totally responsible, or do you find a way to blame partner?
3. When you get a bad result, do you dwell on it for half an hour or do you address the problem in front of you?

UNDERLEADING ACES AGAINST A TRUMP CONTRACT

There are no errors you can make that will so mislead, embarrass, and therefore annoy your partner as errors that catch partner in their web. Many errors you make are of a solitary nature; that is, you goof and you pay the price. Your partner will share the bad result with you but usually he won't share the blame or the guilt. Not true when it comes to underleading aces. If you underlead an ace and partner does the wrong thing, *he* looks foolish. This kind of thing ruins a partnership.

Against 4♥, West decides to lead a low spade.

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

If West leads the ♠2, dummy will play the queen. What should East play? If East thinks West's spade is a singleton, a logical conclusion, he will play low. Declarer will discard a diamond and will get an easy overtrick. How do you think East will feel

about this? My advice? *Do not* underlead aces against a trump contract. A misunderstanding like this one will ruin the partnership. It is not worth it.

This hand shows the general idea. Underleading aces is not a good habit. There are many more examples of this in Chapter 7, Opening Leads Versus Suit Contracts.

RUFFING IN FRONT OF THE DUMMY

This is one of the most costly mistakes I know of. I've seen it at the table all too often but I have never seen it discussed in print. Here's the scenario. Neither side vulnerable. West leads the ♣K against 4♠.

	♠ 10 7 2										
	♥ K 3										
	♦ K 9 8										
	♣ A 10 7 6 4										
♠ J 8 5 4	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%; height: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr><td style="border: none;"></td><td style="border: none;">N</td><td style="border: none;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="border: none;">W</td><td style="border: none;"></td><td style="border: none;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="border: none;"></td><td style="border: none;">S</td><td style="border: none;"></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ Q
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ J 9		♥ Q 10 8 6 2									
♦ Q 7 3		♦ J 10 4 2									
♣ K Q J 9		♣ 8 5 2									
	♠ A K 9 6 3										
	♥ A 7 5 4										
	♦ A 6 5										
	♣ 3										

Dummy takes the ♣A at Trick 1. Now before continuing the play, look at all four hands. Declarer will ruff two hearts in dummy and will end up losing two spade tricks and a diamond trick.

Watch what happens when West gets busy in the defense. Declarer plays the ♥K, the ♥A, and leads a heart, intending to ruff in dummy. If West ruffs in with the ♠J (dummy will discard a diamond) and returns a spade, declarer makes six! South wins the spade in his hand and now proceeds to ruff his last heart *and* his losing diamond in dummy. West's ruffing in costs two tricks. It's so rarely right to ruff in such a circumstance that you should give each opportunity careful consideration. Erring here is expensive. I would go so far as to say that if you are thinking of ruffing in with a natural trump trick, you shouldn't.

Even when you don't have a natural trump trick, it is likely to be wrong. Be very sure you are doing the right thing before you act.

Here is another example. There is a setting trick available but it probably isn't the one West imagined when the play started.

West	North	East	South
1♠	dbl ¹	4♠	1♦
all pass			5♣

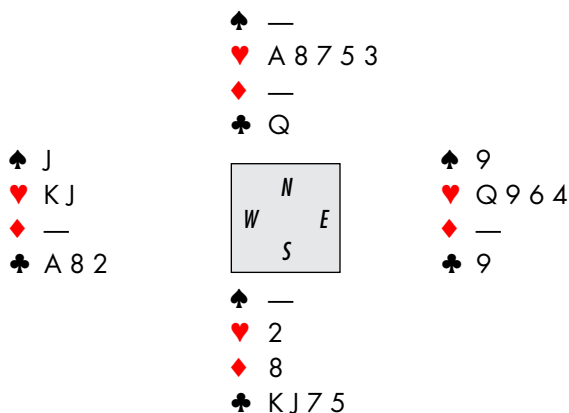
1. Negative.

	♠ K 7 4										
	♥ A 8 7 5 3										
	♦ 7 3										
	♣ Q 10 6										
♠ Q J 10 8 5	<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A 9 6 3
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ K J 10		♥ Q 9 6 4									
♦ Q 2		♦ J 10 9 6									
♣ A 8 2		♣ 9									
	♠ 2										
	♥ 2										
	♦ A K 8 5 4										
	♣ K J 7 5 4 3										

West leads the ♠Q against 5♣. From declarer's point of view, he has two black aces to lose and can make 5♣ if he can set up the diamonds and draw trumps. Declarer therefore ruffs the second spade lead and plays the ♦A, ♦K, and another diamond. How should West defend?

Let's see what happens if West ruffs with the ace and returns a trump. Declarer will win the trump in his hand and ruff a diamond, which sets up his last diamond, and will draw trumps. Claiming.

Now try the effect of letting declarer have his diamond ruffs in dummy. Declarer will ruff the third round of diamonds and will come back to his hand with a spade ruff in order to ruff his last diamond. West once again discards, letting South get his ruff. Here is the position after seven tricks:



Now that the diamond is good, declarer can start to draw trumps. He leads the queen from dummy and plays low from his hand. West now has to make a good play. He lets the queen win. Declarer comes to his hand by playing the ♥A and ruffing a heart, but he is cooked now. South has the ♣KJ left and West has the ♣A8. South can lead a club but West will take it and return his last spade, which forces declarer's final trump. West's ♣8 is the setting trick.

This was an interesting hand. If East had returned a club at Trick 2, West would have played two rounds of trumps and the contract would have been down automatically since declarer would have been able to ruff only one diamond in dummy.

The side issues of the defense are not important. There are many hands where someone defends incorrectly and gets a second chance. What is important is that West didn't rush in with his high trump. That would have been the final nail in the defense's chances. Remember this principle:

Principle

When declarer is ruffing something in dummy and you have the option of ruffing in first with a high trump, it is almost certainly wrong to do so.

LEADING AN ACE AGAINST A SLAM

This is something I get asked about more than anything else when I am talking about opening leads. The truth of the matter is that leading an ace against a slam is an extremely inexact science. There are no hard rules as to when you should lead an ace. This discussion will provide a few guidelines that range from gentle hints to tentative suggestions. Keeping in mind that I can't possibly cover more than generalities, I offer the following thoughts, most of which are based on experience. My thoughts are not 'provable'.

1. Do not lead an ace against 6NT. Much of the time (75%) it won't matter what you lead. Of the remaining 25%, it will be wrong to lead an ace more than 20% of the time and right to lead an ace less than 5%. My advice: Don't lead aces against 6NT.
2. Against six of a suit, the chances are good that leading an ace is the right choice. Still, there are times when leading an ace is terribly wrong.

When is it 'right' to lead an ace against six of a suit?

a) If you think partner is short in a suit, you might lead an ace hoping to give partner a ruff. For instance, the opponents may bid and raise one suit before ending up in another suit. If you have A743 in their side suit, there's a good chance partner has a singleton.

Sometimes the auction suggests your partner is short in some suit. In the following sequence, your partner preempted with everyone vulnerable so he rates to have some feature. It's your lead.

West	North	East	South
	1♣	3♠	4♥
pass	4NT	pass	5♦
pass	6♥	all pass	

♠ 8 7 ♥ 9 2 ♦ A 10 7 6 4 2 ♣ J 8 3

Your partner is likely to have a singleton. If it is a diamond singleton, the $\heartsuit A$ is the killer lead.

b) If the opponents have had a general value sequence, you might lead an ace. This sequence is an example.

West	North	East	South
			1NT
pass	4 \clubsuit ¹	pass	4 \heartsuit ²
pass	6 \heartsuit	all pass	

1. Gerber.
2. One ace.

The opponents can't be sure that all suits are accounted for. They are bidding 6 \heartsuit on total points, not controls. They weren't able to check up on everything.

- c) If your side has bid and raised a suit, it's probably all right to lead the ace. There are a couple of reasons for this:
- i) You may not get your trick if you don't take it.
 - ii) It is relatively less likely that you will be giving them a crucial trick.

The last two times to lead an ace are based on different factors.

- d) If the opponents' sequence has told you they have a good source of tricks, you can consider grabbing an ace. If the opponents have staggered to their slam, consider waiting with your ace.
- e) Good luck judging this one. You have to know your opponents. Against good bidders, I am slow to lead aces unless I see a specific reason to do so. Poor bidders, on the other hand, may be off two fast tricks. Use your judgment.

You'll notice that the times it is right to lead an ace are not specific. There aren't many times that leading an ace is clearly right. It's easier to say when an ace should *not* be led.

When is it 'wrong' to lead an ace against six of a suit?

- a) It is wrong to lead the ace of a suit that has been bid by declarer.
- b) It is usually wrong to lead the ace of a suit that has been bid by responder. This is a fairly strong rule. Unless you are hoping to give your partner a ruff, you should tend to lead aces of unbid suits only.

Some secondary factors to consider:

- c) Remember that holdings like A103 or AJ74 are more than normally dangerous to lead. The ten or the jack could be an important defensive holding if you don't lead the ace. Unless it is clear to lead these suits, you should think twice.
- d) The length you have in a suit is important. The shorter your suit is, the more dangerous it is to lead the ace. If you have two or three cards in the suit (assume this is an unbid suit) it is more likely that declarer will have a secondary loser than if you have five or six cards in the suit. For instance. If you have A92 to lead from, declarer may have K874 opposite Q63. Declarer has two losers if he has to play this suit himself. But if you have a five-card holding to lead from, there is less chance that declarer will have two losers. The dummy may have the Q6 instead of the Q63. This means declarer has only one loser since he can ruff the others in dummy.

TAKING ACES, KINGS AND QUEENS TOO QUICKLY ON DEFENSE

Far too many hands are misdefended because a defender took a high card too soon. It isn't always clear what to do on defense. Declarer leads a little card toward dummy's queen and you have to decide whether to take your king. Some of these situations are clear guesses. But some are not. Take the following suit. You are West, defending against 3NT. Here is what you see when declarer leads the $\spadesuit 2$ toward the dummy. What do you do and why do you do it? Assume there are no side issues. You want to defend this diamond suit to best advantage.

Note: The cards in parentheses represent one possible layout.

	Dummy	
You	♦ 10 7 3	
♦ Q 9 5	▬	♦ (K 8 4)
	♦ (A J 6) 2	

In general (close to 99% of the time), it is correct for West to play the ♦5. In the diagram, if West plays low, East takes his ♦K and West gets the ♦Q later. If West takes his ♦Q, South will later finesse East for the king. Ask yourself this. If declarer had the ♦AKJ2, would he really play them this way? Wouldn't he go to dummy to take a finesse?

There are many such situations where a defender grabs a high card prematurely and pays a heavy price for it. Here is another common example. You will see this one a lot.

	Dummy	
You	♠ Q 10 7 4	
♠ K 6 5 2	▬	
	♠ 3	

Declarer plays the ♠3 toward the dummy at an early stage of a 3NT contract. What should you do? Again, unless you know something is going on, you should play small. If partner has the ace it probably doesn't matter who takes the trick, but if declarer has the ace he will have to guess whether to play the queen, hoping you have the king, or whether to play the ten, hoping you have the jack. If you play low smoothly, most declarers will misguess. Interestingly, you should defend the same way against a suit contract. The only time playing low against a suit contract costs you a trick is when declarer started with the doubleton ace. The chances of this happening are very, very slight in comparison to all the other situations where declarer is making an honest effort to set up some tricks in this suit. Note that if declarer plays the ace first before leading a low card, you should still play low. I admit freely that playing low will cost you a trick now and then. I promise, however, that you will come out ahead in the long run. Here is the entire suit:

	Dummy	
You	♠ Q 10 7 4	
♠ K 6 5 2	[]	♠ J 9
	♠ A 8 3	

If West takes his king immediately, declarer will take three tricks in this suit. If West plays low *without thought*, declarer is likely to go wrong. That is the hard part, recognizing the situation and playing low in tempo.

Sometimes the situation is reversed. Instead of the ♠Q1074 being in dummy where the defenders can see them, they may be in declarer's hand. The nature of declarer's problems won't be as clear to the defenders. Here is a play found by Pamela Granovetter against a world champion. Pam was sitting East in the following diagram. Spades were trumps. At Trick 3, declarer led the seven from dummy toward the closed hand. How should East defend?

	Dummy
	♠ A 9 7
	[]
	East (Pam)
	♠ K 2

This is another tough one. You have to duck smoothly or you give the show away. Making the situation even more nervous is that you may lose your king of trumps. That would be terribly embarrassing. Can that happen, though? Let's assume that your side didn't bid so declarer can't know about your ♠K. Why is he making this strange play? The answer is that he has a broken trump suit. This might be the suit:

	♠ A 9 7	
	[]	♠ K 2
♠ J 8 4	♠ Q 10 6 5 3	

If you play the two, declarer may guess to play the queen, but he is more likely to play the ten, losing to the jack. Later, declarer will finesse the nine in dummy, losing to your king. This is not a bad line by declarer. It fares poorly, but it is a reasonable play. Note that if East takes the king on the first round, declarer has no further problems. The key for the defender in these three

hands is this. If you fear a certain holding, ask yourself how declarer would play the hand if he has that holding.

FAILING TO LEAD AGGRESSIVELY WHEN IT IS CALLED FOR (AGAINST A SUIT CONTRACT)

One error that deserves as much mention and repetition as possible is the reluctance of new players to lead aggressively. It's something learned early in one's career and unless it can be corrected, it is likely to remain in effect for a long time. I talk about this error for many pages in Chapters 6 and 7, Opening Leads Versus Notrump and Opening Leads Versus Suit Contracts. *Do not be afraid to lead away from kings and queens.*

Somewhere back in the days of whist, someone came up with one of the worst bits of advice in bridge history. Never lead from a king. This is often terrible advice. Leading away from a king or a queen (or from a jack for that matter) is not necessarily a bad thing to do. In some cases, it may be the only lead worth considering. Here are some warning signs and some encouraging signs.

The warning signs

Generally speaking, don't lead from a king or a queen:

1. If your RHO has bid notrump strongly.
2. If your RHO has bid the suit.
3. If your LHO has bid the suit, it is OK to lead it with proper caution.

The positive signs

Generally speaking, it is good to lead from a king or a queen:

1. If it is an unbid suit.
2. If your partner has bid the suit.

These two guidelines especially apply if the opponents have bid aggressively. Even to the point of leading against a slam. Here are three example hands. You are West.

West	North	East	South
	1♠	pass	2♥
pass	3♥	pass	4♥
all pass			

What do you lead?

♠ 8 5 3 2 ♥ A 7 3 ♦ K 10 8 5 ♣ 10 6

Lead the ♦5. It is more likely that your partner will have the ♦A or ♦Q, which will help you set up some defensive tricks. If you lead your doubleton club you may set up a trick, but you won't do much more than that unless partner has very good clubs. You have reasonable worries that declarer will be able use dummy's spade suit for tricks.

West	North	East	South
	1♣	pass	1♠
pass	2♠	pass	3♠
pass	4♠	all pass	

What do you lead?

♠ Q 8 ♥ Q 10 7 4 ♦ J 8 3 ♣ Q J 9 4

Lead the ♥4. The auction warns you against making your normal lead of the ♣Q. It's true that opener may have short clubs, but it's not wise to cater to this. The ♥4 is much superior. Remember. The correctness of your leads is judged by how often they work, not the fact that some of them didn't work.

West	North	East	South
			1♦
pass	2♥ ¹	pass	3♣
pass	3♦	pass	4NT
pass	5♦	pass	6♦
all pass			

1. Strong jump shift with good hearts.

What do you lead?

♠ K 9 8 5 2 ♥ J 7 2 ♦ 10 9 8 ♣ J 7

Even against a slam, it can be right to lead from a king. Lead the ♠5. It's likely that a spade lead is necessary. If you lead passively (say the ♦10), you give declarer time to set up his tricks. The spade lead is going to be correct three or four times as often as a non-spade lead. Don't let the fact that there was a jump shift bother you. Attack. The signs are right.

LEADING OR RETURNING INCORRECT SPOT CARDS

Good defense requires that each defender help the other as much as possible. It is impossible to be 100% effective on defense short of showing partner your hand, but there are easy ways to make the defense simpler.

How careful are you, for instance, when your partner leads a suit and you, sooner or later, return it? Say partner leads a low spade against 2NT. Dummy, on your right, has two small cards. You play the king and declarer wins the ace. Do you know which card to return when your original holding was K853? Do you return the same card if your original holding was K53?

First questions first. The opponents bid 1♥ - 3♥ - 4♥. You have the following spade suits, which you decide to lead. Which card do you lead?

♠K9742 Lead the four. Do not lead a careless two. If you do, your partner may err in a number of ways. Here is just one layout:

	♠ 8 5 3	
♠ K 9 7 4 2	▬	♠ A Q J
	♠ 10 6	

If you lead the two, your partner will take the ace and will return the queen. When the queen wins your partner, thinking you have a four-card suit, will continue with the jack, no doubt congratulating you for a fine choice of leads. When declarer ruffs

this, your partner will experience second thoughts. Especially if it turns out that a different return by him would have set the hand. *There is no need to fool partner.* He is on your side! Note that the lead was away from a king. I promise that this lead works if you do it at the right time.

♠9763 A good agreement to have is that when you lead a low card, you promise something good in the suit. If this agreement is in effect, you will lead the seven. Partner should work out that you don't have an honor and hopefully he won't think you have a doubleton. Discuss this with your partner. If you do, I suggest you lead low when you have the ten or better in the suit.

Leads from interior sequences

Note that my answers reflect normal agreements. Some partnerships have different rules for leading from a sequence.

Q 10 9 6
K 10 9 6 4

Lead the ten from both of these combinations. This is known as leading from an interior sequence.

KJ 10 6

As above. Lead the jack. Not the six.

J 9 8 5 3
K 9 8 5 3

It is best to lead the five from these holdings. Only the jack and ten are led from interior sequences.

Later play by the opening leader's partner

♠ KJ92	♠ 10 8 4 □	♠ Q73
	♠ A 6 5	

Against 4♥, West leads the ♠2. East plays the queen and declarer wins with the ace. What spade should East play if:

1. West gets in and cashes the ♠K?
2. East gets in and returns a spade?
3. East decides to discard a spade?

In all three cases, East should play the ♠7. It's crucial to do this. Here's why it is correct. East wants to tell West how many spades he has. The way East does it is to play the seven, which is the top card of the *two* he has left. If East started with four or more of this suit, he would play his original fourth best. Usually, East will not have more than four of this suit so West will be able to tell what is happening.

Here are some examples to compare. West leads the three and East plays the king, losing to declarer's ace.

K 7 East plays the king and his next play must perforce be the seven. West will know East has two or three cards, but not four cards.

K 7 4 East plays the king. His next play is the seven. West will know the four is missing and he may suspect that East has it. West can't be sure.

K 7 4 2 East plays the king. His next play is the two, his original fourth best. West won't know whether East has two or four of them, but it may be guessable. Here is an example of how this signaling method helps. Against a notrump contract, West leads the ♥4.

♥ Q 10 8 4	♥ 6 3	♥ K 7 2
	▬	
	♥ A J 9 5	

East plays the king and South wins with the ace. Later in the play, East gets in and returns the ♥7. Declarer covers with the nine and West wins with the ten. Should West cash the ♥Q? He should think about it. West knows that East started with three hearts and that declarer has the jack and a little one left. West can take his queen if he feels the defense has no more tricks, but if West wants to take *two* more heart tricks, he will have to get East in again to lead through declarer's jack.

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TIPS FOR BETTER CARDPLAY

Twenty years ago, Mike Lawrence published a series of short booklets entitled *Topics on Bridge*, offering tips on various aspects of cardplay and bidding for intermediate players. Now this material is being republished as a three-book series — revised, updated, and with new topics added. Topics covered in this volume include:

- ◇ Mistakes in the Play
- ◇ Timing
- ◇ Endplays
- ◇ The Simple Squeeze
- ◇ Loser on Loser Play
- ◇ Opening Leads
- ◇ Suit Preference and Defensive Signals
- ◇ Third Hand Play

MIKE LAWRENCE (Tennessee) has Hall of Fame credentials both as a player and a writer. An original member of the Dallas Aces, he has won three world titles and eighteen national titles. Several of his books are widely regarded as classics of the game.

