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This Week in Bridge

(251) Opening Leads – Jack Denies, Coded 10s and 9s

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Level: 3, 5

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General

When making an opening lead from a sequence of the three consecutive honors, we lead the top of the sequence. But when we lead from a collection of honors that are broken with one high honor, a break, and then a sequence of honors, the *standard* lead from this holding is the top of the interior sequence.

Standard Leads from Interior Sequences

<i>Suits</i>	<i>Notrump</i>
KJTx+	AJTx+, KJTx+
KT9x+, QT9x+	AT9x+, KT9x+, QT9x+

When we lead a Jack or a Ten, it can be difficult for partner to recognize that we are leading from one of these holdings, rather than from the “top of a sequence”.

Example 1

When we lead a Jack, partner may not be able to tell if we have led from JTxx or KJTx. They may want to win the opening lead if we do not have the King and may want to hold up if we have the second holding.

These opening leads of “top of an interior sequence” produce ambiguity about the layout of the honor cards at trick one, and this ambiguity may cause a problem by giving partner a difficult decision (as in Example 1). But this ambiguity can work to our advantage in giving declarer a difficult decision about the location of the cards at trick one.

Let's look at an alternative approach to opening leads from these holdings.



Jack Denies, Coded 10s and 9s (0 or 2 Higher)

Level 3

Some partnerships find this ambiguity too difficult to deal with at trick 1 on defense. To get rid of this ambiguity, they change their opening lead agreements from these broken honor sequence holdings so that they never lead a Jack from the top of an interior sequence. That means that an opening lead of a Jack denies any higher honors in that suit – “*Jack Denies*”.

With these new agreements, partnerships need to have different lead agreements when they do lead from an interior sequence. These partnerships lead the second highest from that sequence (instead of the top of the interior sequence). This is the “Coded 10s and 9s”, meaning that the lead of a Ten or Nine shows 0 or 2 honors higher when these are led.

Example of Jack Denies, Coded 10s and 9s

Suits	Notrump
KJT _x +	AJT _x +, KJT _x +
KT ₉ _x +, QT ₉ _x +	AT ₉ _x +, KT ₉ _x +, QT ₉ _x +

We can see that when a Ten or Nine is led, it does not have one card higher than it. It either is the top of our holding or has two cards higher than it (including the card immediately above it). This can help partner determine the layout of the cards around the table.

Example 2 – Coded 10s and 9s to Help Partner

	Q _{xx}	
T		A _{xx}
	???	

In this situation, using coded 10s helps East know that either West led from KJT+ or that the declarer has the KJ+. In either case, East can play low (assuming declarer does not play the Queen from the dummy) and will discover the situation. East does not have to worry about Declarer having a singleton King, because that is not a possible holding when partner leads the Ten.

Problems with Jack Denies, Coded 10s and 9s (0 or 2 Higher)

Level 3

By clarifying the position of the cards at trick 1, “Coded 10s and 9s” and “Jack Denies” may also help the declarer know the location of the missing or ambiguous honor.

Example 3 - Jack Denies Helps the Declarer

	AQ _{xx}	
JT _{xxx}		K _x
	xx	

In this position, on the lead of the Jack (playing Jack Denies), declarer knows that the King is “offside” and the finesse cannot work. Declarer plays the Ace and then low, setting up the Queen for a discard.



Example 4 – Jack Denies Helps the Declarer

AQxx
JTxxxx K
 xx

Sometimes when the declarer plays the Ace, it helps them simply drop the singleton King.

Because of these types of positions, most expert players do not play “Jack Denies” and “Coded 10s and 9s”. The help it provides to partner is not as valuable as the help that it provides to the declarer.

“Jack Denies” and “Coded 10s and 9s” in the Middle of the Hand

Level 5

Some expert players do use Jack Denies and Coded 10s and 9s in the middle of the defense. By using these agreements in the middle of the hand, a defender can use the shift of a Jack, Ten, or Nine to clarify the position of the suit. This can help partner know what to do.

Examples – Coded 10s in the Middle of the Hand

Example 5

 Qxx
KJT Axxx
 xxx

Example 6

 Qxx
Axxx KJT
 xxx

In Example 5, if East makes a discard saying they like this suit, West knows partner has the Ace. West can lead the Ten and allow East to work out the position of the honors. A similar play can be made by East in Example 6 (shifting to the Ten) if West makes a signal showing the Ace of this suit.

Conclusion

Playing Jack Denies allows the lead of a Jack to clearly be the top card in partner’s hand. This, combined with Coded 10s and 9s, allows defenders to clarify the positions that can be ambiguous about top honor leads vs. interior sequence leads. But the general consensus for most experienced players is that this clarification of the position helps the declarer more than it does the defenders, and so this is what it is not commonly played by expert players. Having said that, using this technique the middle of the hand, when we are attacking a suit and want to help partner make a good decision, can be an effective agreement. These methods are common enough that all players should be aware that the defenders may be using something like this, and as a declarer you should ask about the opponent’s agreements when you see the lead of a Jack, Ten, or Nine.