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This Week in Bridge

(398) Power Leads vs. NT Contracts– Aces/Queens or Kings?

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Level: 6 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

When we lead an honor (against a suit or a notrump contract) it is important for us to know what piece of information partner is trying to communicate with us with the card they play. If we have a mix-up about what partner is showing (or what we are showing to partner) it can be very costly to our defense and we may not be able to recover from this early mistake. This is particularly true against NT contracts, where we have some more sophisticated opening lead options. Let's look at how we use our agreements to help us better communicate with partner.

Power Leads Vs. Notrump Contracts

When we are on lead against a notrump contract and we have a good suit to lead from with several honors, we lead one of those honors. We need three touching or nearly touching honors in order to lead an honor card (in order for us not to choose a 4th best lead). Partner will generally give us an attitude signal – do they have a useful card in our suit? When our suit is extremely powerful, we do not care much about partner's attitude in our suit. Instead, we want partner to give us a count signal (or unblock any honor they have) so that we know the layout of the suit around the table.

In standard carding we lead the following (A/Q for Power Leads)

- **AKJT** Here we lead the Ace as the power lead, asking partner to give count or unblock an honor if they hold one.
- **AKJx** Here we lead the King to ask for Attitude. "Partner, do you have the Queen (or other honor – Jack or Ace)?" In this situation, the King is an unusual lead, the second best of touching honors (not top of touching honors).
- **KQTx** Here we lead the King to ask for Attitude. "Partner, do you have the Ace or Jack?"
- **KQT9** Here we lead the Queen as the power lead – asking for the unblock of the Ace or Jack or to give count if partner holds neither of these cards.

In standard lead agreements vs NT contracts, Ace or Queen opening leads ask for Count or Unblock (Power Lead) and King asks for Attitude.



In these cases, if partner unblocks their honor, then we will be able to run the suit or safely continue it and are unlikely to give up an extra trick because partner wasted their honor. If partner does not unblock their honor, denying that they have it, then they will give count and we will then know the layout of the suit around the table. In the examples where we are missing the Queen (say we have AKJ+) then from partner's count, we will know whether we can drop declarer's Qx or if declarer has Qxx and we need to get partner in to lead through declarer's positional stopper.

Let's take a look at some examples to help us see how to make use of a power lead.

Example 1

763
AKJT8 94
Q52

Here we lead the Ace and when partner plays the 9 (playing standard carding) we know that declarer has the Queen and that declarer has 3-cards (partner showed 2 or 4 by playing high, giving count). We make use of this information by trying to get partner on lead in another suit, so that they can lead through the declarer's Queen.

Example 2

763
AKJT8 942
Q5

Here we lead the Ace and when partner plays the 2 (playing standard carding) we know that declarer has the Queen, but likely only has 2 cards (partner has shown either 1 or 3 cards, giving count). We can now play our suit from the top and take the first 5 tricks.

Notrump Defense – Different Power Leads (K for Count or Unblock)

Some partnerships play their signaling agreements to honor leads differently – playing King as their Power lead (asking for count or unblock) and playing the Ace/Queen asks for Attitude. This is a non-standard lead agreement, but an increasingly popular one.

These are examples of powerful holdings from which we will lead our “Power Card” – King!

- AKQx+
- AKJxx+
- AKJT+
- KQJx+
- KQT9+
- KQTxx+



A/Q for Attitude, K for Count in Suit Contract

It is possible (and sometimes useful) to be able to get count information from partner when defending suit contracts. This will be true when we have powerful holdings and don't need any honor-attitude information from partner. We can agree to lead the King (asking for count) in these situations also. This is also not Standard American.

Examples

AKQx+

KQJx+

AKxxx++

This agreement can help us know how many honors (tricks) to cash before the opponents will ruff in (before declarer will be out of cards in the suit).

This agreement that "K asks for count" affects our choices for opening leads. From AK+ we can lead either the Ace or King depending on our holding, to get the information we desire. From KQ+ we lead the K from strong holdings (to just get count in the suit) and lead the Q from KQ+ when we want an attitude signal from partner.

Note: This agreement can add some complexity to partner's ability to work out what holding our lead is from, but it does clarify what information we are looking for from partner and is frequently a useful tradeoff.

Conclusion

Having good agreements about signaling can be difficult – especially at trick 1. The most important thing is for you and partner to discuss the situation and be working together to communicate. Once you have come to an agreement then you can use this tool to get the information that you need in order to best defend the contract. In general, the stronger your holding (either through honor cards or extreme length) the more you want a count signal and when you have a slightly weaker holding (fewer honors or a shorter suit) then you will need to know partner's attitude. Make sure that you discuss this with your regular partners and decide on what works best for you!