

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

Last week I asked my class what they would lead from this hand against a contract of 4♥. The bidding had been a straightforward 1♥ 3♥ 4♥.

I was pleased when everybody chose a spade, but there was some argument between the old students and those who joined the class this year, which spade it should be. Standard English says the ace, reserving the king for the special lead against a suit contract when holding just ♠ AK doubleton.

♠ 7 6 5  
♥ A 9 8 2  
♦ K 4 3  
♣ K 5

'Well' I said 'Dummy goes down with this hand. It has three spades, the ♠ 7 6 5. Your partner plays the ♠ 10, what might this show?' The class looked blank, all it showed to them was that partner held the ♠ 10. 'Would it mean anything different if partner played the ♠ 2?' More blank faces till John (our oldest, newest student) remembered that the ten would be encouraging and the two discouraging.

Partner might play the ten from a number of holdings

- The singleton ten
- Any doubleton such as ♠ 10 2, ♠ 10 4 or ♠ 10 9
- Any holding that includes the ♠ Q such as ♠ Q 10 9 or ♠ Q 10 4 2. After all it is fairly certain that when you lead the ace, you will have the king as well. Partner wants you to continue with spades and the ten, the biggest card that can be spared, would encourage you to do so.

Conversely partner would play the two from holdings like ♠ 10 4 2 or ♠ 10 9 2 showing no interest in the suit. You may still choose to continue spades, but you know there is no help coming from partner.

So the class agreed that after the ten from partner, they would continue with the ♠ K on which partner plays the ♠ 2 and then play a third spade, which partner trumps. If partner had played the two, they would have switched to the ♦ J at trick 2, hoping to set up winners in diamonds or at any rate giving nothing away.

After that poor display of memory, I thought we had better have a little revision quiz. I based it just on the play of a single suit in which dummy holds the ♠ 7 6 5. The contract is still 4♥ and partner still leads the ♠ A – what card would you normally play?

♠ Q J 10 9      ♠ K 9 4 2      ♠ 8 2      ♠ 9 8 4      ♠ Q 2      ♠ 9 8 4 2

♠ Q J 10 9      Play the ♠ Q, it is a conventional signal showing either singleton queen or the ♠ J. It says partner can underlead the king safely and you will be able to win the next trick.

♠ K 9 4 2      Play the ♠ 9. Partner has made an unusual lead, which if not a singleton must be either from just ace and another or from a long suit. Either way the nine should encourage partner to continue spades.

♠ 8 2      Play the ♠ 8 hoping partner will continue with the king and you will get a ruff.

♠ 9 8 4      Play the ♠ 4, nothing to encourage but it is likely that you hold three small spades when you play a low card.

♠ Q 2      Play the ♠ 2. As we saw on the first hand, to play the queen is a special signal. So this is the one doubleton we cannot show. Just hope partner continues with the spade king. When the queen appears, partner will guess your holding.

♠ 9 8 4 2      Clearly you have nothing to be encouraging about and the card you play will depend on the rest of your hand. Play the ♠ 2 if you want partner to switch, but play the ♠ 8 if you want to stop partner opening up another suit. The ♠ K at trick 2 won't help declarer.

Remember the agreement. In Standard English, when partner leads and you cannot win the trick, either because partner has played a big card or because dummy wins the trick, playing a high card is encouraging and playing a low card is discouraging. Signal with as large a card as you can spare.