Play & Learn

Pat Harrington

The ace from outer space

You hear this auction:

West	*North*	*East*	*South*
	1♣	Pass	1♠
Pass	2♠	Pass	4♠
All Pass			

On opening lead, it is very unlikely that you would lead the king from a holding of ♣K 8 7 2 or the queen from a holding of ♦Q 10 8 4. What would you gain by sacrificing your high card? If partner doesn't have high cards to go with yours, you have given up your side's only hope for a trick in the suit. If partner does have strength, it is likely that leading a low card instead of your honor would work as well or better.

Because leading *unsupported* honors is unwise, bridge players agree that the lead of the king shows the queen and the lead of the queen shows the jack. When it comes to leading an unsupported *ace* — an ace from outer space — many players don't think the same way. They plop their aces on the table in a proud rush to show their power.

What does this accomplish when the opening leader doesn't also have the king? Well, *someone* has the king. Could partner have it? Partner is one of three other players at the table. Isn't it far more likely that declarer or dummy — the side bidding to show strength — will turn up with the king? Declarer will thank you for making his king good.

Players have various reasons for leading an ace from outer space. Some are afraid they'll never win their ace unless they take it on opening lead. Some say they lead an ace to take a look at the dummy. Why? To see what would have been a better opening lead? Dummy isn't faced until after your opening lead, but you can often picture dummy's cards from the bidding. If the bidding tells you to lead the suit in which you hold an ace, lead it. Most of the time, the bidding will suggest a better alternative.

There is a saying that aces are made to take kings. That is seldom accomplished by starting your attack with an unsupported ace. With a suit headed by a king or a queen, we tend to lead a low card rather than the honor, so how about low instead of the ace? It's fine in notrump, but not when you are defending a suit contract. Bad things can happen if you lead away from an ace when there is a trump suit, which is where the admonition to avoid underleading your aces against suit contracts comes from. How can it hurt? Look and see (the contract is 4♠ by South).

	♠ A K 7 3 ♥ Q 5 4 ♦ A 7 5 ♣ J 4 3	
♠ 5 2 ♥ A 8 7 2 ♦ Q 10 8 4 ♣ 8 6 2	N W E S	♠ 8 6 ♥ J 10 9 ♦ K J 9 ♣ Q 10 9 7 5
	♠ Q J 10 9 4 ♥ K 6 3 ♦ 6 3 2 ♣ A K	

Look what happens if West leads a low heart. Declarer's ♥K and ♥Q both become winners. Without a heart lead, declarer has four losers — two hearts and two diamonds. As long as the ♥A does its job, there's no way for declarer to avoid any of these losers. Suppose that, after drawing trump, declarer leads the ♥3 towards dummy's queen. West had better follow the guideline "second-hand low" and allow dummy's queen to win, saving the ace to use on declarer's king. If West flies up with the ♥A, he captures declarer's 3 and dummy's 4, leaving declarer with two heart tricks instead of the one he deserved. Aces were made to do better things.

On this deal, my choice for an opening lead would be the ♦4, but it turns out that West can lead anything but a heart, and 4♠ will be set. ❐

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