

## ACE FROM ACE-KING

In his thoughtful 1995 book *Defensive Signals*, Marshall Miles tells of the time when he and his then regular partner, the great Eddie Kantar, experimented with “Ace from Ace-King” leads against suit contracts. Soon they found it necessary to make exceptions. I paraphrase Marshall’s “partial list” of situations in which they reverted to standard (king) leads:

- (1) In partner’s suit.
- (2) In your suit if partner has raised.
- (3) Dummy has shown a long suit and you must cash tricks quickly.
- (4) Declarer is distributional and dummy has opened 1NT or 2NT.
- (5) Declarer has preempted and dummy has shown strength.
- (6) Against 5-level and higher contracts.
- (7) In a lone unbid suit.
- (8) In another suit when declarer has shown a 2-suiter.
- (9) When shifting.

Eventually, Marshall “decided that since the exceptions outnumbered the rule, it was better to change the rule.”

I disagree. I believe that “Ace from Ace-King” opening leads are desirable to remove the ambiguity of king-leads that could otherwise be from either ace-king or king-queen combinations. That ambiguity is harmful because partner doesn’t know whether to encourage with the jack (or wanting a ruff, with a doubleton): “right” if the lead is from king-queen, “wrong” if the lead is from ace-king.

Playing “Ace from Ace-King” opening leads removes the ambiguity from king-leads and transfers that ambiguity to ace-leads (which now can be either from the ace-king or from the ace without the king). Because leads of the ace without the king are generally undesirable, a good partner won’t make such leads, so the ambiguity disappears. Otherwise the ambiguity of ace-leads would be more harmful, not less harmful, than the ambiguity of king-leads.

I believe that this is true also against notrump contracts. I’ll digress briefly to say why the usual “conventional” leads of the *queen* from KQ109 and the *ace* to ask partner to drop an honor if he has one are inadequate. *Queen* from KQ109 may mislead partner if he *doesn’t see the jack*, and it does the job for which it was devised only a small fraction of the time (KQ10x, where “x” represents a spot-card lower than the 9, occurs seven times as often as KQ109). In the situations where getting partner to drop an honor matters, you can usually do just as well by leading the honor just above the one that you are missing, e.g. the king rather than the ace from AKJ10xx.

I believe there are only three exceptions, and that your opening-lead agreements should vary according to the nature of your partnership.

We can dismiss “Exception” (9), by far the most important. Because the convention is specifically for *opening* leads, it is not an exception at all to use standard carding in the middle of the play. Some players forget this, but there is an easy way to remember: because a *shift* to an ace without the king is often right, a shift to an ace must not be ambiguous.

Exception (7) is too broad. Most of the time, leading the ace of a lone unbid suit is bad: a trump lead or a lead of a suit bid by dummy is usually a lesser evil. Exception (7) should be changed to “in an unbid suit when the opponents wind up in four or five of a minor on a strong auction in which they declined to bid 3NT.”

The resulting eight “exceptions” become only one if we rephrase the “rule”:

(a) Lead the king when the auction calls for an ace-lead from holding that do not include the king. I don’t want to try to catalog the auctions in which this is true, but an important one is the lead against a “Gambling” 3NT, when *cash-out time* is usually Trick 1.

Here are two more exceptions:

(b) Lead the queen when you have all three top honors and you have already shown a strong suit (so partner won’t think you are making a normal lead of the queen from a queen-jack combination). If you don’t think that partner will be able to read a queen-lead from ace-king-queen as you’d like, lead the king (because you want partner to encourage when he has the jack).

(c) Lead the king as a signal to partner that you are seeking a fast ruff. The ruff can be in the suit you lead (you have ace-king doubleton) or some other (you plan to shift to a singleton).

Notice that exception (a) calls for expert sensitivity to the auction on the part of both partners. The opening leader must know when the lead of an unbolstered ace is indicated, and so must the opening leader’s partner. That is why I believe “Ace from Ace-King” is not for everyone.

Does that mean “Ace from Ace-King” is appropriate only for experts?

No, though I do not recommend it for all weak players. Some weak players are inveterate ace-cashers who seem to follow the rule, “When in doubt, lead an ace,” and are nearly always in doubt. When playing with such a player, you should insist on “Ace from Ace-King” even though your partner may not recognize the exceptions. That’s much better than the Herman Kahn Convention, which is what I use with ace-cashers who refuse to play “Ace from Ace-King” opening leads against suit contracts.

Herman Kahn, you may recall, was a Cold War theorist whose books carried titles like *On Thermonuclear War* and *Thinking About the Unthinkable*. Contrary to what most of his peacenik critics said, Kahn sought not a nuclear holocaust, but arms races and military “preparedness” that he thought (whether correctly or mistakenly) would deter one.

The Herman Kahn Convention says, “The lead of an ace against a suit contract demands that partner ruff, even if he must revoke to do so.”

Because even a weak partner dislikes revokes, and dislikes your ruffing his aces even more, the Herman Kahn Convention deters the nearly-always wrong ace-leads he would otherwise make. I recommend it highly if your ace-cashing partner refuses to play “Ace from Ace-King” with you.