

JACK DENIES

Standard jack-leads and ten-leads are ambiguous. The jack, if not from shortness, can be from a suit headed by the J10, the KJ10, or (against notrump contracts) the AJ10. Likewise, the ten, if not from shortness, can be from a suit headed by the 109, the Q109, the K109, or (against notrump contracts) the A109.

Bridge theorists devised a way to eliminate the ambiguity of jack-leads: lead the ten instead of the jack from suits headed by the KJ10 or AJ10. That, however, adds to the ambiguity of ten-leads. So, stop leading the ten from suits headed by the Q109, K109 or A109; instead, lead the nine from those holdings.

Instead of three sequences or internal sequences from which the jack may be led, there is only one sequence. Instead of four sequences or internal sequences from which the ten may be led, there are only three.

This lead convention is commonly called "Jack Denies," a shorthand for the full explanation that a lead of a jack denies a higher card in the suit, while a lead of a 10 or 9 shows 0 or 2 higher cards. If you adopt it, you may also want to use it when shifting to a new suit in the middle of the play, but that requires a separate agreement. A better agreement, in my opinion, is *second highest honor shifts*, so that a jack may be from a suit headed by the AJ, KJ or QJ, and a ten may be from a suit headed by the A10, K10, Q10 or J10.

Is *Jack Denies* an improvement upon standard leads? Top experts divide on this issue. All acknowledge that it makes things easier for the leader's partner, but it also helps declarer. Personally, I've almost never misdefended from misreading my partners' *standard* jack-leads, but I've often gained when declaring against opponents whose jack-leads deny a higher card. Nonetheless, except when playing for money, I've yielded to partners who insist on playing *Jack Denies*.

Recently, I was playing with such a partner, and I had to lead against 3NT from a suit in which I held J9852. The standard lead from a suit whose internal sequence is headed by the nine varies with the size of the higher card. If the higher card is the king, fourth highest is much better than the nine. If the higher card is the queen, fourth highest is slightly better than the nine. If the higher card is the ace, despite the case that Marshall Miles has made for leading the nine, fourth highest may still be better. If the higher card is the jack, however, the nine is *much* better than fourth highest. Here's why: dummy may have three cards, including the ten, in the suit, and it's important that partner not play a king or queen unless declarer calls for dummy's ten.

Case 1. Dummy has 10xx and plays low. Partner can play the king from Kx or the queen from Qx without blowing a trick *immediately*, but harm can come if you regain the lead before partner gets in to return your suit, as then you cannot continue the suit safely.

Case 2. Dummy has A10x or K10x and plays low. If partner plays the queen from Qx or Qxx, declarer obtains a third trick in the suit and a valuable tempo.

Case 3. Dummy has Q10x and plays low. If partner plays the king from Kx or Kxx, he blows a trick just as in Case 2.

Although I knew a nine-lead was *the right technical card-play*, I knew also that if I led the nine, I'd be violating a partnership agreement, and misleading my partner, who would place me with either a weaker (9852) or stronger (Q10952, K10952 or A10952) suit and go wrong in the defense as a whole. So I led the five. Dummy played the seven from K107, and that gave declarer a ninth trick. Partner had a doubleton queen: if he played low, dummy's seven would win; if he played the queen, declarer could finesse against my jack on the second round.

Jack Denies had turned a top into a bottom, as the opponents had overbid and the "field" had stopped in a comfortable partscore. My only consolation was that we were not playing for money, and the opening-lead convention, like most of the other conventions my partner favored, had brought him pleasure.

In pre-Copernican times, many people believed that the Earth stood on the shoulders of a giant elephant. A skeptic asked, "And on what does that elephant stand?"

"On another elephant," came the reply from a believer.

The skeptic persisted: "On what does the second elephant stand?"

To forestall further questions of the same kind, the believer answered cleverly, "It's elephants all the way down!"

Could *Elephants All the Way Down* save *Jack Denies*? That is, could "Jack Denies" be expanded to mean, "Jack denies a higher card in the suit; ten, nine or eight shows 0 or 2 higher"?

Well, yes, but then new harm would arise. For the eight, besides being a top-of-nothing lead, is low enough to be *fourth highest* from AQ1082 and several other holdings in a suit, and is also the indicated card from weak holdings that include the ten, such as 10873, when the opening leader would like his partner to shift to some other suit.

The elephants who are lower down may support the elephants at the top of the stack, but the elephants at the bottom of the pile are too heavily burdened for the scheme to work.