



Adventures in Bridge

Leaders in Bridge Entertainment and Education

www.advinbridge.com

This Week in Bridge

(249) Giving Declarer an Ace/Queen Guess

© AiB

Level: 2, 4

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

One of the challenges that declarers regularly face is the “*Ace/Queen Guess*.” When the dummy has a holding like Kx and declarer has no honors in their hand, for example xx, then declarer has little choice but to lead up towards dummy’s honor to attempt to produce a trick in this suit. But when dummy has both the King and the Jack, particularly KJ doubleton, and declarer has two small cards in their hand, then when leading up towards dummy’s holding declarer must guess if their left-hand opponent has the Ace (in which case they should play the King) or the Queen (in which case they should finesse the Jack). This guess is also referred to as the Ace/Queen guess and can be one of the most frustrating parts of declarer play.

As a defender we want to make these Ace/Queen guesses as difficult as possible for the declarer. When dummy has a holding like KJx on our left we need to be prepared to play in tempo so as not to give away our holding. If we hold the Ace of this suit and stop to think before playing, declarer will figure out what we are thinking about (because if we had the Queen of this suit we would have nothing to think about and just play low), and declarer will know to go up with the King. We must plan ahead to play low and do so in tempo, forcing declarer to make the Ace/Queen guess without being able to *read the position using table feel*. Here we look at this Ace/Queen guess in more detail and see how we, as a defender, can use this and similar situations to make life more difficult for the declarer.

Putting Declarer to the Ace/Queen Guess in Dummy

Level 2

As a defender we want to force declarer to make as many of these Ace/Queen guesses as possible. When we see an opportunity to lead a suit and put declarer to this type of guess, we should get proactive and do so. When we see a holding like KJx in the dummy (on our left) then we often want to attack this suit and force declarer to make a difficult decision. In doing so, we may even underlead our Ace, hoping to find declarer with an Ace/Queen guess position.

Example 1

KJx
Axxx Qxxx
 xx

If we underlead our Ace in this position, then declarer will have to guess whether to play the Jack or the King – guessing which honor we have underlead. We do not want to lead our Ace in this position because it takes declarer off the guess.

Here is another example where leading the Ace can be costly.

Example 2

KJxx
Axxx Qx
 Txx

If we lead our Ace and then continue the suit and this is the position, then declarer can guess to go up with the King and drop partner's Queen on the second round of the suit. If we underlead our Ace at trick one, this cannot happen!

The Blind Ace/Queen Guess

Level 2

When dummy is on our right and has a holding like xxx, we frequently want to attack this suit. If we have a holding like Axx, then we may choose to do so by laying down the Ace. But if the declarer has the KJ doubleton (or some other holdings) then this may take them off the Ace/Queen guess. Instead, it is often best to underlead our Ace in this position, hoping to force declarer to make an Ace/Queen guess.

Example 3

xxx
Qxx Axxx
 KJT

If we gain the lead as East, with Axxx it is best to underlead our Ace, forcing declarer to guess how to play this suit. While declarer might always have two losers in this suit, it is also possible one could be pitched on something else in the hand.

In this type of situation, we do not underlead our Ace when we also hold the Jack. This is because when we hold the Jack, declarer cannot hold the King and Jack and thus cannot have a guess of which card to play. They will be forced to play the King and win the trick. So underleading in a case like this only puts our Ace in danger of going away!

Example 4

xxx
Qxxx AJxx
Kx

Here if we as East gain the lead, we simply lead the Ace and then continue the suit. We do not underlead our Ace while holding the Jack!

Put Declarer to the Test Early

Level 2

Now that we have established that we want to put declarer to as many of these Ace/Queen guesses as possible and we have looked a variety of ways to make this happen, we want to push on and continue to look at how to make declarer's life as difficult as possible. One way that we can do this is to force declarer to make an Ace/Queen guess early in the play. The later declarer can delay this guess, the more information they can gain about the layout of the points and distribution, and this will help them make a better guess. Instead, we should strive to put them to the guess early and force them to make a choice before they can learn more about the layout of hand.

Other Defensive Tactics to Give Declarer an Ace-Queen Guess

Level 4

We have a few techniques for helping declarer to go astray with an Ace/Queen guess. One involves the concept of "Split Aces". If the declarer is missing two Aces, they will frequently play for each defender to have one Ace - to play for the two Aces to be in different hands, or split. This is a common situation and a reasonable assumption by the declarer. We can use this against declarer when instead we hold both Aces in one hand by taking our Ace in our outside suit first and then leading through the King-Jack. This play increases the chance the declarer will play us for the Queen, not the Ace, and get the Ace/Queen guess wrong!

Another technique for using the Ace/Queen guess to our advantage on defense is to create a losing option where one does not exist.

Example 5

Kx
ATxx Qxxxx
Jx

If we wait for declarer to lead this suit, they will have no option other than to lead up to the King. But if we lead this suit from West, declarer has to guess; playing low if they think we have the Queen and playing the King if they think we have the Ace. If declarer plays low, we will score a second trick in this suit.

Which Card to Lead When You Attack

Level 2

When we are underleading our Ace through the KJx (especially when it is on the dummy) we need to let partner know that they should go up with their Queen. We let partner know what to do by leading low when we underlead our Ace. The low card shows an honor, which while declarer will not know whether it is the Ace or the Queen, partner will now be able to work out what to do.

Example

	KJ4	
A73		Q982
	T65	

Here we lead the 3 from West so partner knows to play the Queen, not the 8 or 9, if declarer plays low from the dummy.

Example

	KJ4	
T743		Q962
	A85	

Here we lead the 7 from West, not the 3, so partner knows that we do not have the Ace, and partner can thus play the 9, forcing declarer's Ace and saving partner's Queen!

Danger - What Could Go Wrong

Level 2

Although we do underlead Aces in the middle of the defense, especially when we think we will give declarer an Ace/Queen guess, it is not without risk. From time to time our Ace can go away when we underlead it. This can happen if declarer has a singleton King, but this is somewhat rare. It can also happen if declarer guesses correctly to play the King and then uses a side suit to discard their other losers in this suit.

Conclusion

Guessing is a large part of declarer play. The Ace/Queen guess is one that comes up frequently for declarer, and if we can force declarer to make this type of guess early and often, they will often struggle! If you want to be one of those defenders that the opponents find difficult and annoying to play against, look for ways to put declarer to these Ace/Queen guesses as often as possible!