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This Week in Bridge

(254) Card Combinations in the Middle of the Hand

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Level: 3

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General

Opening leads can be a bit of a gamble. We cannot see the dummy's holding before we select our opening lead and though the suit and card we chose to lead may have seemed reasonable when we selected it, once the dummy hits it may be the case that we wish we had led something else. This is often because we recognize that the card combination in dummy is such that leading this suit is likely to cost our side a trick and it would have been better for us to wait and force declarer to lead the suit themselves. When we are breaking a new suit in the middle of the defense, we do not face this same problem, as we can see the holding in the dummy and thus consider if there is any danger in our leading this suit. Here we look at some card combinations that we may face in the middle of the hand and attempt to diagnose when they are dangerous for us to lead and when we can freely attack them.

Leading Away from a King

One of the classic aggressive, and thus sometimes dangerous, actions is to lead away from a King. Let's look at some examples and see when this action can cost and when it is completely safe.

Example 1

```
      xxxx
Kxx   Jxx
      AQ
```

Here leading away from our King, as West, will cost our side a trick. When we see no honors in the dummy, on our left, it can be dangerous to lead from our King.

Example 2

```
      xxxx
Jxx   Kxx
      AQ
```

In this situation leading away from our King will not cost. If the AQ are behind us, then the finesse will work, as declarer could have gone over to the dummy and led up towards the AQ themselves.

Example 3

Qxxx
Kxx Jxxx
Ax

Here leading away from our King in the West hand is likely to cost because the declarer can play the Queen from the dummy and win 2 tricks. If this is a suit contract, we have lost our trick in this suit. We prefer for East to get on lead and lead this suit towards West's King.

Example 4

Qxxx
Jxxx Kxx
Ax

Again, leading this suit away from the King (this time by East) can cost a trick. The declarer can just duck that around to the dummy's Queen and win 2 tricks, losing none.

Example 5

QTxx
Kxx Jxxx
Ax

Here leading away from the King can cost but with the Ten in the dummy declarer may misguess, playing the Ten from the dummy instead of the Queen, and we may set up our King as a winner (partner's Jack driving out declarer's Ace). Attacking this suit may allow our side to build a winner but may give away a trick if the declarer gets it right. There is risk and reward in attacking this suit from the West hand.

Example 6

Axxx
Jxxx Kxx
Qx

If we lead this suit from East, then declarer can play the Queen from their hand and win 2 tricks, losing none. (This is just Example 3 with the honors rotated 180 degrees around the table).

Example 7

Axxx
Kxxx JTx

Qx

Leading this suit from West, away from the King, allows declarer to duck this around to their Queen and win the trick in their hand, winning 2 tricks, losing none!

Example 8

Jxx
Qxxx KTx
Axx

Here, if we lead this suit from either side we can use our honors and good spot cards to drive out declarer's Ace and win 2 tricks, so attacking this suit from either West or East will not cost.

There are many more combinations where we could look at even more complicated options; this just scratches the surface. But notice that the times when we are in danger of giving up a trick are when we lead away from our King and the dummy holds either the Ace or the Queen - a touching honor. This will be a theme for when it is dangerous to attack a suit.

Leading Away from the Queen

Leading away from a Queen also has a risk in a variety of different situations.

Example 9

Kxx
Qxxx Txx
Ajx

Example 10

Axx
Qxxx Txx
Kjx

In both of these cases leading away from our Queen costs a trick because we lead into declarer's tenace.

Example 11

KTx
Qxxx Jxx
A9x

Leading this suit from either side can cost us a trick. If we lead low from the West hand, the declarer can play low from the dummy, capture partner's Jack with their Ace, and then use dummy's KT as a tenace behind our Queen to finesse us out of our trick.

Example 12

Kxx

Qxxx ATxx
 Jx

Here, if we leave declarer to lead this suit, we will score 2 tricks (covering their Jack with our Queen and promoting partner's Ten as our second winner). But if we lead this suit from West (away from our Queen) then declarer can play low from the dummy and win a trick for their side.

Again, we notice that leading away from a Queen is frequently dangerous when there is a touching card in the dummy.

Leading from Touching Honors

Leading from touching honors, especially three touching honors, is usually a safe action. But leading from just two touching honors can sometimes cost a trick.

Example 13

 xxx
AKTx xxx
 QJx

In this example, if we leave declarer to tackle this suit, we will capture each of their Queen and Jack (with our Ace and King) and our Ten will win the 3rd round of the suit. But if we lead our Ace or King then declarer will have 2 honors left to use to develop a trick for their side.

Example 14

 ATx
QJxx xxx
 Kxx

If we lead the Queen from the West hand, then declarer can play low from the dummy, win with the King in hand, and then finesse with the AT on dummy. This is a classic situation where when we lead from the Queen-Jack we really hope to not see ATx or KTx in the dummy, because we may have just blown our trick.

Conclusion

Card combinations can be a tedious and somewhat frustrating part of defense. It is not fun to try to memorize hundreds of different card combinations and then apply that information at the table. Instead, we do better to understand what generally makes for a dangerous situation, and to know that we should rethink things before playing that suit. That does not mean that you will not lead a suit that has danger of costing your side a trick, but when you choose to take that risk and attack this suit, you should do so knowingly, not because you failed to recognize the danger of the situation!