

## Stealing Tricks - Legally

One of the most satisfying parts of bridge is when you're able to sneak a trick that you're not entitled to. We're not talking about finesses or establishing tricks through proper play. We're talking about **false cards**. When properly executed, a false card gives your opponents the wrong impression of your hand, which leads them to take an inferior approach. It can happen on defense, but it's much more common when declaring since you don't have to worry about misleading your partner.

**Consider the following situation:** West opens 1♥ and you, South, end up declaring 4♠. At trick 1, West leads the ♥A. Given that start, how do you expect the first three tricks to go?

**North**

♥Q 7 6

**South**

♥J 5 3

Based on the bidding, West has 5+♥. So, East has 2 or fewer. West should also have the ♥AK based on the lead. As a result, the first three tricks are likely to go to the defense: ♥A and ♥K by West, ♥ ruff by East.

What happens, though, if we change things up a bit? Let's keep everything the same except that South only has a singleton ♥. In that case, West is likely to lead the same way to the first two tricks. But this time, we trump the ♥K and now have North's ♥Q set up for a second trick. So, if West thinks you have a singleton -- say you made a splinter bid in ♥s -- then his best move is to NOT lead the ♥K at the second trick.

Is there a way we can use that in the first situation? Yes: discard the ♥J on the first trick! If West believes that it's a singleton, then he'll lead a different suit and you may be able to avoid East's ruff. Won't this cost us a trick? Not likely: If West still leads another ♥, we're no worse off than in the base situation. (Note: East can help West out by following their signaling agreement.) You will also need to make the play smoothly or West may realize what you're up to, since there's no need to think if you have a singleton.

**Another common situation** is when declarer has touching honors. Let's assume West leads low. North follows and East contributes the jack. What happens if South wins with the natural queen? Then, West will know that South also has the king; otherwise, East would have played it on the first trick to avoid letting South win a cheap trick. East won't be quite as sure: West should have an

honor or two, but it's not clear which one. But what if South plays the king instead? Now, both defenders will be in the dark about the Queen. This pattern is consistent with either of them having that card.

**North**

7 6 4

**South**

K Q 2

**The most famous example** of this move was done by Ely Culbertson, one of the all-time best players. On the hand below, he opened 1♦ and ended up in an ambitious 3NT. West led the ♥5 and East played the ♥10. Ely realized that his contract was safe if the ♦K was onside: He'd win four ♠s and five ♦s to make his contract. But, what if the ♦K is offside and the finesse loses? Then, West could easily set the contract by switching to a ♣. So, what did Ely do to improve his chances? He won the first trick with the ♥A! He then crossed to dummy with a ♠ and took the ♦ finesse. That lost to West's ♦K, but he was in the dark about declarer's ♣s. So, instead, he led another low ♥, so partner could win his "known" ♥Q and defense could take a few more ♥ tricks to set the contract. Obviously, that's not what happened, which is why this is one of the most famous bridge hands ever played.

**North**

♠ A Q 3 2

♥ 8 6

♦ Q J 10 9 8

♣ J 7

**South**

♠ K J 4

♥ A Q 4

♦ A 7 3 2

♣ 10 5 2

**Another false card** that declarer can take advantage of is confusing defenders' signals. Let's assume defenders are using standard carding. West leads an ace indicating that he also has the king of that suit. East doesn't want West to continue the suit, so he plays his lowest card -- the 6. If South follows with the routine 3, then West is likely to figure out East's signal. But what if South drops the 8 in tempo instead? Now, things are much more difficult. The 6 doesn't look very high, but it's the card East would play from Q 6 4 3. What if we'd prefer that West didn't continue the suit? Then, we would discard the 3, which is likely to make the 6 look more discouraging. This particular false card depends on a few factors. First, like all false cards, it has to be done in tempo. In other words, try and make it as natural as possible: not too fast, not too slow. Second, you need to know what your opponents' methods are: If they're playing upside-down attitude, then the above advice would be reversed. If they're giving count, then you're trying to affect whether West thinks East has an even or odd number of cards. Third, only use this when it can actually help. For example, if East follows with the 10 or 2, there's not much you can do to change the meaning of that signal. So, save this ruse for when it can actually help you.

**North**

10 5 2

**South**

Q J 8 4 3

One final example for declarer -- the make-believe finesse. Let's go back to the spade holding from that hand played by Ely Culbertson. When South needs to get to dummy to take the **♦** finesse, she can use either the **♠A** or the **♠Q**. But, there's a difference to the defender's view of the hand. If she wins the trick with the **♠A**, then both defenders will know that declarer has the **♠K**. If she didn't, then the natural play would be to finesse the **♠Q** to try to establish two **♠** tricks. So, a better play is to go to dummy with the **♠Q**. Clearly, this doesn't change West's perspective: he's not looking at the **♠K** and partner didn't win the trick, so declarer must have it. But, what about East? She's still in the dark. From her perspective, either declarer or West could have the **♠K**. This uncertainty can be useful as it will make it harder for East to place the rest of the high card points. Granted, the jig will be up in a few tricks, but that small advantage early in the hand is often the difference we need to steal a trick or two.

## North

♠ A Q 3 2

## South

♠ K J 4

In general, there are several key rules to make a false card successful:

1. Make the play in tempo. If you play it super quickly or think about it for a long time, the defenders are likely to realize you're up to something.
2. To help #1, ask your questions about your opponents' signaling methods BEFORE you play from dummy. This will make any hesitation you make look less suspect.
3. When playing online, remember which hand is the dummy. This might seem like a weird one, but it comes up a good bit with BBO Robot Games since you always declare for your side, but the hands don't get rotated. False cards don't work if the opponents' can see your full holding.
4. Use them sparingly. If you always play a random card, it'll lose the desired surprise effect when you need it.
5. Have fun and don't sweat any disasters. It's quite possible, even likely depending on the level of your opponents, that they'll see through your deception. But that doesn't mean it isn't worth the effort!