

A Suit Combination to Recognize

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Today we will look at a suit combination that happens frequently and discuss how to play it.

You and your partner are defending against a suit contract with your left-hand opponent as the declarer. For the opening lead, your partner leads a small card from a side suit. (We'll say that it's diamonds, but it could be any suit.) Dummy's holding and your holding in the suit are shown below. The question is, which card do you play at trick one?

<u>Dummy</u>	<u>You</u>
♦ 8 7 4	♦ K J 6 5

Your first instinct might be to play the King. After all, "third hand high" – right? But let's think this through:

- Partner has led a low card in a side suit against a **suit** contract. Therefore, you know for a fact that partner does NOT have the Ace in that suit. How do you know this? Because you should NEVER underlead an Ace against a suit contract. No exceptions. (If your partner doesn't know this, then either have a talk with him or find a different partner.) So if your partner had the Ace, he would have made a different opening lead.
- So partner doesn't have the Ace (of diamonds, in this case), dummy doesn't have the Ace, and you don't have the Ace. Therefore, who has the Ace of the opening lead suit? Declarer has it.
- Partner has led a low card in the suit. Therefore, it is likely that partner has an honor (or honors) in the suit. Declarer has the Ace, you have the King and Jack. Therefore, partner probably has the Ten and/or the Queen.
- What you'd really like to know is, who has the Queen? Is it declarer or is it partner?

If you play the King at trick one, declarer will most likely play the Ace and win the trick. This gives you absolutely no information about who has the Queen.

But let's say that you play the JACK instead of the King. There are now two possibilities:

- Declarer wins the trick with the Queen. You now know that declarer has the Ace and the Queen.
- Declarer wins the trick with the Ace. You now know that your partner has the Queen!

So playing the Jack, rather than the King, allows you to determine who has the Queen. This can be important for several reasons. First, knowing that partner has the Queen will make it easy for you to underlead your King if you get on lead. Second, you now know whether these two HCP are in your partner's hand or in declarer's hand. This can help you to get a count on declarer's hand and determine where his points are, which in turn can help you defend properly.

You might think that playing the Jack could cost, in that it will allow declarer to win the trick cheaply if he has the Queen. But in fact this is NOT the case. You already know that declarer has the Ace. If he has the Queen as well, then he is entitled to two tricks in the suit. He's either going to get the Ace and then the Queen, or he's going to get the Queen and then the Ace. Two tricks, either way. So playing the Jack rather than the King provides you with information and doesn't give up anything to declarer.

Please note that this lesson applies only to suit contracts. You should never underlead an Ace against a suit contract, but it is perfectly fine to underlead an Ace against a No Trump contract. If partner leads a low diamond against a No Trump contract and you have the holding shown on the front page, you should definitely play the King, not the Jack. Partner could be leading from Axxx, in which case declarer has Qx. If this is the case and you play the King at trick one, you and your partner will take four diamond tricks. If declarer has Qx and you play the Jack at trick one, declarer will play the Queen, winning a trick to which he is NOT entitled.