

Esther Discusses "Leads on Defense, and in Particular the 'Coded 10s/9s=2, Jack=0' Signal for Honors Card Holdings"

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Bruce: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will talk us through "**Leads on Defense, and In Particular the 'Coded 10s and 9s = 2, Jack = 0' or 'Jack Denies, Ten Implies' Lead Convention**". Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, thanks for taking the time to be with us today!

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Esther!

Bruce: Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. Well, at the outset, would you mind reviewing some of the *general principles* that may be useful when *selecting your lead* when you are playing on defense? Obviously, the lead you select can make a critical difference in the results that you achieve on defense?

Esther: Well, my *gracious giver*, that certainly is correct. Here are a few general principles, ***in order of descending precedence***, that I find useful when selecting my lead on defense:

1. If your Partner bid during the auction, and you have no exceptional reason to do otherwise, especially against a suit contract, because Opponents may otherwise trump your [P]artnership's suit winners later, lead your Partner's bid suit. If you hold an honor in that suit, lead the suit honor. If your lead wins, you know that Partner likely holds the remaining top honors. If your lead loses, you have nevertheless

- "promoted" remaining suit winners held by Partner.
2. If you are defending against a **NT** contract, if you hold "touching honors," lead the top of your "touching honor" if you hold 3 "touching honors," or if you hold a 2 "touching honors" with a "tenace" (e.g., Q,J,9), or a very long suit (e.g., A,K,8,5,3,2).
 3. If you hold 2 high "touching honors" (e.g., A,K,x, K,Q,x) against a suit contract, lead the top of your "touching honors" to promise Partner both that (1) you hold the next-highest "touching honor", and (2) if you win the Trick, you will next lead the remaining "touching honor." If you lead an Ace, your lead **demands** that Partner immediately after the Board comes down answer your question, "Partner, can you take the **third trick** in this suit, either (1) with the Queen, or (2) by trumping?" For example, if Partner leads the Ace, and I hold a doubleton in the lead suit when defending against a suit contract, our Partnership's "attitude convention" is used by me to answer my Partner's question about taking the 3rd Trick. Because I play "inverted attitude", or "U.D.A." ("Upside-Down Attitude"), where "Low" = "Yes" and "Hi" = "No", assuming that the Dummy does not hold a void, a singleton, or a doubleton in the led suit,¹ if I play a "low" card, I am ***promising*** Partner that I will take the third Trick in the led suit *one way or another!*
 4. If you are defending against a **NT** contract, and you do not hold "touching honors," and Partner did not bid a suit, lead the **4th from the top** of your "longest and strongest" suit, so that Partner can apply the most important "Rule" of bridge: the **"Rule of 11!"**²
 5. If Partner did not bid during the auction, lead a suit not bid by the Opponents, and lead "Top of Nothing, Bottom of Something" to signal Partner about your holdings. Leading a low card tells Partner that you *may hold winners in the led suit*.
 6. If you hold a singleton or doubleton when playing against a suit contract, even if Partner did not bid

¹ If the Dummy holds a void, a singleton, or a doubleton in the led suit, then on the third card that I play on the opening Trick, I **must** instead tell Partner what my "**Suit Preference**" is. Within the Esther Bridge Lessons, see "**Lesson #38: How on Defense to Show Partner Your 'Suit Lead Preference'.**"

² Within the Esther Bridge Lessons, see "**Lesson #9: the Rule of 11**".

the suit in which you are short, lead that suit. Partner is expected to routinely "Return Partner's lead!" If you hold a doubleton (e.g., Q,x), lead your honor in the short suit, so that Partner will know you are short in the led suit.

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... First, I am not sure I believe this, but are you again *actually being nice to me*? And second, can you provide some examples of what your leads would be under these principles?

Esther: Well, my *handsome hero*, certainly, I am being nice to you, and certainly I can give you some examples! I have underlined the suggested lead:

1. Partner bid.
 7, 3
 Q, 4, 2
2. "Touching Honors".
 Suit Contract **NT** Contract
 A, K, 6 A, K, Q, 6, 3 ("M.U.D.")³
 K, Q, 8, 5 K, Q, J, 7, 2
3. "Top of Nothing, Bottom of Something", Partner did not bid.
 K, J, 6, 2 T, 8, 4, 3
4. Short suit against a suit contract, Partner did not bid.
 Q, 4
 J

Bruce: Well, OK, Ms. Klink..., errr, I mean, Esther. These were general principles regarding what to lead. But there are obviously ways to "signal" card count or card holding information. For example, against a **NT** contract, Partner can lead 4th from the top of a suit to enable Partner to use the "Rule of 11" to determine how many high cards Declarer holds in the led suit. Are there any special, additional conventions that Partners can play to **signal** to Partner other particular card holdings?

Esther: Well, my *inquisitive interlocutor*, of course. One such "signal" convention that I can mention is the "**Coded**

³ Many players holding 3 "touching honors" play "M.U.D." = Middle, Up, Down (e.g., King, Ace, then Queen).

10s/9s=2, Jack=0" Signal for Honors Card Holdings. This convention is also sometimes called the "**Jack Denies, Ten/Nine Implies' Lead Convention**". In this convention, if I lead a **Ten or a Nine** in an unbid suit, I am saying to Partner, "Partner, I have **2** higher cards in this suit." If I lead a **Jack**, I am saying to Partner, "Partner, I **deny** holding **any** higher cards in this suit!"

Bruce: OK, Esther, but why is this convention given multiple synonymous names? Is this done merely to confuse new and rising players?

Esther: Well, yes, exactly, my *fortuitous friend*!

Bruce: OK. Well, Esther, not to at all question your authority as a bridge expert, since you have 20+ Million ACBL MasterPoints, but does anyone beside you agree that this convention used to "signal" honors card count is a useful convention when on lead?

Esther: Well, of course, Bruce! A very famous bridge player, William S. Root (1994), wrote a *highly* respected bridge book, How to defend a bridge hand, in which he argued:⁴
"This convention should be used by **all** competent partnerships. The advantage of Zero or Two Higher is the card lead makes it easier for your [P]artner to figure out whether you are leading the top of a sequence [e.g., J,T] or from an inside sequence [e.g., A,Q,T,5]."
[emphasis added]

Bruce: OK. Can you give us some examples?

Esther: Sure. Consider the following leads against a **NT** contract, playing conventionally versus "**Coded 10s/9s = 2, Jack = 0**":

Conventionally

J975

KJ94

Coded 10s/9s = 2, J = 0

J975

KJ94

⁴ See: "Jack Denies, Ten Implies"

<https://www.bridgebum.com/jack-denies-ten-implies.php>

And here are some examples involving "interior honor sequences":

Conventionally

K**J**T3

KJ9**4**

Coded 10s/9s = 2, J = 0

J975

KJ**T**2

Bruce: OK, Esther. Are there any good reasons to not use the "Coded 10s/9s = 2, Jack = 0" honors card count "signal" convention?

Esther: Well, let's think about what Larry Cohen, who famously won MANY championships playing with his equally famous Partner, Marty Bergen, had to say about this convention:⁵

Coded 10s/9s = 2, Jack = 0 "is very good against weak players as you give your [P]artner a useful piece of information. Meanwhile, a poor [D]eclarer won't appreciate the inferences available. On the contrary, against good players, this is a **horrible method**. It gives way *too much information* to a decent [D]eclarer. I'll let you in on a Bergen-Cohen secret. We used this 10/9 0 or 2 method against weak players, but standard against good players. We had 2 different convention cards depending on who our match that day was against. Thank goodness, our opponents never knew our criteria!" [emphasis added]

Bruce: Wow, Esther, that is indeed the ultimate example of your admonition to "**Play the Room!**"⁶ Of course, you can't switch convention cards during a competition in online bridge play, or even very easily in "human" in-person play!

⁵ See Larry Cohen. (2015). Opening leads. Bridge Learning Center.
<http://larryco.com/bridge-articles/opening-leads>

⁶ In the Esther Bridge Lessons, see "**Lesson #16: Don't be a 'Results Player', and the Importance of 'Playing the Room'.**"