

MISPLACED FRUGALITY by Maritha Pottenger
It is NOT Always Correct to Follow Low When You Cannot Win a Trick

We learn early in our bridge careers that we should conserve our “good” cards. When Declarer is playing an Ace or other high card and winning the trick, we play our deuce or other low card and don’t “waste” any honors or cards that might win tricks later. This is usually good strategy, but there are exceptions!!

Do NOT Follow Low if it Would BLOCK the Suit.

When partner leads from an honor sequence, particularly in no trump, but also in suit contracts, it is usually better to play your doubleton honor on top of partner’s honor and underneath Declarer’s higher honor (such as Ace) to avoid blocking the suit. If you do not unload your higher honor, when you win a trick in that suit, you will be unable to lead it again and partner’s winner(s) in that suit may languish on the vine and never get cashed. (A typical example would be partner leads the Queen; Declarer takes Ace. You should drop your King under Declarer’s Ace if you suspect partner has no other entries.)

Do NOT Follow Low if You Would be END PLAYED by Winning the Trick.

In “Hail Mary” end plays, Declarer pulls trumps, eliminates two side suits, and then plays the Ace and a small card in a 4th suit in which Declarer has Axxx opposite Jxxx. Declarer’s hope is that one defender has a doubleton honor (Kx or Qx) and will win the trick and be forced to give a ruff and sluff. (Declarer has already discarded one loser so has only three cards remaining in the key suit.) The defender with the Kx must sacrifice the King—throwing it UNDER the Ace—so that partner’s Queen (and hoped-for 10) will win TWO tricks. Note that the skilled Declarer will play that Ace early—BEFORE doing the elimination of side suits—hoping that a careless defender will automatically play low and NOT unblock the King.

A similar end play would develop if one defender holds the Qx in the key suit and the other defender holds the K10x. When Declarer plays the Ace, the defender with the doubleton honor **must** unblock it. If the defender with Qx does not play the Queen under the Ace, s/he will win the second round of the suit and must give Declarer a ruff-and-sluff. (Partner cannot afford to overtake the Queen with the King because that would promote Declarer’s jack to winning rank.) By dumping the queen (EARLY!) under the Ace, you allow partner’s King and 10 to take TWO tricks later.

Remember, good Declarers will make these plays (of cashing the Ace) **early in the hand, before the elimination is completely obvious**. So, defenders with doubleton honors should be suspicious and wonder why Declarer is just playing an Ace and not trying any sort of finesse. If Dummy appears that an end play may be looming, consider unblocking your doubleton honor!

Do NOT follow low if you can CREATE AN ENTRY FOR PARTNER.

Consider the following auction: LHO opens 1D; partner bids 2H (Weak Jump Overcall); RHO bids 3NT. You hold QJ10xx 10x Kx J10xx. You lead your 10 of hearts and Dummy appears with:

Kxx xx Q109xx AKx. Partner overtakes your 10 with the Jack of hearts and continues with the Queen of hearts. Declarer wins the second round of hearts and plays the Ace of diamonds. Declarer must have the Ace of spades and Queen of clubs for the NT bid. You’ve already seen the two red Aces. So, partner is NOT getting the lead in either black suit. What about diamonds? **Partner almost certainly owns the Jack of diamonds**—if Declarer had that card, s/he would be finessing the suit from Dummy. So, at IMPS, calmly drop your King under Declarer’s Ace and hope that partner started with Jxx NOT Jx in the suit. At matchpoints, drop your King if you have an understanding partner who will forgive you when his/her Jack of diamonds is doubleton.

Incidentally, suppose that Declarer **ducks** the second round of hearts, and takes the Ace on the third round—worried that your partner might have jumped on a good 5-card suit. At IMPS, dump your King of diamonds on the third round of hearts for all the above reasons.