

**Esther "Pop" Quiz #0134:
"Returning Partner's Initial Lead on Defense
Against Opponents' Suit Contract: BUT WHICH CARD
SHOULD YOU RETURN?"**

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As Louis H. Watson noted in his classic 1958 bridge book, Watson's Classic Book on the Play of the Hand at Bridge,

"Most players agree that **defensive play is the most difficult phase of bridge** [emphasis added]. Bidding can become pretty well standardized between any pair of players, and even two players who have no common bidding system can generally coordinate their ideas of bidding to such an extent that they will have some notion of what each is doing. The play of the Declarer is comparatively simple, for he always manipulates half the cards in the deck..., all of which he can see. The player on the Defending Side has no such advantage. He can see his own thirteen cards, and he can see the Dummy's thirteen cards. But the only cards he can play as he chooses are his own thirteen, and he cannot see his Partner's hand at all." (p. 159)

The only way Defenders can overcome Declarer's advantages is by "signaling" (i.e., communicating with each other during play). Partners must make Partnership Agreements about how they will "signal" each other during play.

For example, if against a Suit contract I lead a "side" (non-Trump) Suit Honor in an *unbid* Suit, I am "promising"

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¹ As noted in an article in the Winter/Spring, 2024 article in The American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) Journal, https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/ABTA_1_24.pdf, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! So this article was really, really written by Bruce Thompson.

Partner that I hold the "touching" Honor (or possibly a doubleton, such as Q,x, or a singleton). For example, if I lead the King of an unbid "side" Suit, I am "promising" Partner that I hold Queen in the Suit led.

If I lead the Ace of an unbid "side" Suit, I am "promising" Partner that (1) I hold the King in the Suit led and (2) I will next play the King of this Suit unless the Dummy's holdings suggest the futility of such a 2nd lead (e.g., the Dummy holds a singleton in this "side" Suit). In making the Ace lead I am asking Partner a question: "Partner, can you 'win' the 3rd Trick in this Suit either by (1) ruffing or (2) playing the Queen?"

Partners respond to this query based on their "signaling" agreement. For example, if Partners are playing U.D.A. ("Upside Down Attitude"), "low" = "yes"; "hi" = "no". For example, if we are playing U.D.A., and you on your initial lead on defense play the Ace, and I play the 9, I am saying, "Partner, either I cannot win the 3rd Trick in this Suit, or I do not have any 'low' cards in this Suit." If I play the 2, I am saying, "Partner, I either can 'win' the 3rd Trick in this Suit, either with the Queen or by ruffing, or I have no cards in the Suit higher than my 2."

If you lead the Ace in an unbid "side" Suit, and I lead the 6 on Trick #1, and on your King I play the 8 in the Suit as my "echo" card, because I played "low, then higher", I am telling you, "Partner, I did not have any cards lower than the 6 in this Suit. But I can, indeed, 'win' the 3rd Trick in this Suit."

But beyond these basic BRIDGE CARDINAL PRINCIPLES, what if later during play you at some point "win" the lead? Another CARDINAL PRINCIPLE of bridge is:

RETURN YOUR PARTNER'S INITIAL LEAD. Partner either is "short" in the Suit he led, and may even have initially held a singleton and later "ruff," or Partner holds a "high" Honor.

Exceptions to the General Principle

There are, of course, exceptions to this General Principle. After all, bridge is a game of General Principles, but also a game of exceptions! As noted on the "No Fear Bridge" commercial website in the posting, "Defence Against Suit Contract—Returning Partner's Suit":²

"More often than not, the opening lead against a suit contract is from a suit containing at least one honour. Since the objective is to set up tricks

² See: https://www.nofearbridge.co.uk/acol/HD33_Returning_partners_suit_suit.pdf

in that suit, the opening leader's partner should generally play back the suit. This applies whether he wins trick 1 or regains the lead in another suit. But the opening leader's partner should consider switching to another suit in these cases:

- dummy is strong in the opening leader's suit;
- a continuation would give away a trick;
- opening leader's partner has a strong suit that offers better prospects;
- declarer is short or void in partner's suit;
- to lead a new suit through declarer's strength."

Back to the "General Principle"

But the "General Principle" that you usually should return Partner's initial lead does indeed generally apply. However, the question arises, when Partner made the initial lead of a "side" Suit against Opponents' Suit contract, you will generally want to "return" Partner's initial lead, but **WHICH CARD in this Suit should you return?**

Contract: 4S SOUTH³

	NORTH	
	Dummy	
	♥ 9 3	
WEST		EAST
Partner		YOU
♥ 4 is led		♥ A T 5

1. After you win Trick #1 with your Heart Ace, which Heart card should you "return" on Trick #2?

³These examples are modified from Andrew Robson's web posting, "Returning Partner's Suit": https://www.andrewrobson.co.uk/article/if_you_remember_just_one_thing/2130

Contract: 4S SOUTH

NORTH

Dummy

♥ 9 3

WEST

Partner

♥ 4 is led

EAST

YOU

♥ A T 5 2

2. After you win Trick #1 with your Heart Ace, which Heart card should you "return" on Trick #2?

Contract: 4S SOUTH

NORTH

Dummy

♥ 9 3

WEST

Partner

♥ 4 is led

EAST

YOU

♥ A T 8 5 2

3. After you win Trick #1 with your Heart Ace, which Heart card should you "return" on Trick #2?

To see Esther's **suggested answers**, CLICK:
https://esther-bridge.com/quiz/q0134_a1.pdf