

# ChRONicles of Cardplay

District 6 TableTALK – June-July 2009

By: Ron Kral – [RonKral@gmail.com](mailto:RonKral@gmail.com)

## Negative Inferences

Last time I wrote about inferences you can draw from the opening lead. To continue on with a similar theme, this article is about Negative Inferences you can draw from the bidding and play.

Early in your bridge career, you play a “straight up” game. When partner opens 1NT, you know that he has a balanced hand with 15 to 17 high card points. When partner leads an honor, you know he has the touching honor below it. When partner responds 2♠ to your 1♠ opener, you know he has 6-9 HCP and 3 spades. These are *positive* inferences.

However, as you play, read and learn more about the game, you will come to the realization that there are lots more subtleties involved. The lack of a positive inference often implies that there’s a *negative* inference available. Negative inferences often come to light by putting two and two together. Here are some examples.

**Q:** You open 1♣ and your LHO overcalls 1♥. Your partner now bids 1NT. How many spades does he hold?

**A:** Well, we’re not 100% sure of the actual number, but we DO know he doesn’t hold 4 or more. If he held 5 or more, he’d have certainly bid 1♠ rather than 1NT. Since most partnerships play negative doubles, if he held 4, he’d have made a negative double. So we know he holds 1-3 spades because he didn’t make a better bid he had available to him.

**Q:** You open the bidding 1♥ and your LHO overcalls 1♠. Partner bids 2♥. What’s his hand?

**A:** Well, he should have about 6-9 HCP and 3+hearts. Why not more HCP? Because with more, he should cue-bid the opponent’s suit (2♠) to tell you he has a limit raise or better in your suit. If you’re not playing this convention (cue-bid=limit raise or better) you should add it to your card. When responder DOESN’T cue-bid, you know they have a very limited hand. In a similar vein, if you now make a game-try, responder should accept with 9 HCP since that’s the MAXIMUM hand he promised on the bidding.

**Q:** Your RHO opens 1NT, you pass, and your LHO bids 2♥ transfer to Spades. Partner passes, opener bids 2♠ and it goes all pass. What should you lead?

**A:** Well, if it’s a tossup between hearts and a minor, lead the minor. Partner had the opportunity to double the artificial 2♥ transfer bid for the lead, but didn’t. All other things being equal, lead another suit. Of course, if you have an obvious heart lead (e.g. a solid sequence), go ahead and lead it. This is a very subtle clue that should only sway you if you have a choice of similar leads. This holds true whenever partner declines to double an artificial bid (such as a response in an ace-asking auction). Your agreement should be to make fairly aggressive doubles of artificial bids to help partner with the opening lead. The failure to do so is a negative inference. By the way, don’t double artificial bids when YOU’RE going to be on lead!

**Q:** Your LHO has passed in 1<sup>st</sup> seat and you’re now playing the contract in 4♠. He starts out by winning the A, K then Q of hearts. His partner discards on the third round. You’re faced with a guess as to who has the Queen of spades.

**A:** It’s unlikely LHO holds the ♠Q. With AKQxx of hearts and an outside Q, he’d likely have opened the bidding. Play RHO for the ♠Q. Note that you’re drawing a SPADE inference based on what happened in HEARTS. There’s another indication that RHO has the ♠Q. LHO has eight cards outside of hearts, while RHO has eleven unknown cards outside of hearts. In addition to the play so far, it’s 11 to 8 that RHO has the ♠Q.

**Q:** You lead a heart against a 4♠ contract. Declarer wins the first trick and immediately leads a diamond. You win your Ace. What do you lead back?

**A:** A lot of things could be going on here. But it’s very suspicious that declarer isn’t pulling trump. There are two likely possibilities: declarer may be trying to establish the diamonds suit to discard losers in another suit, or may be setting up a cross-ruff. You need to decide which one it is. You either need to cash out your winners NOW, before they go away, OR lead a trump to limit declarer’s cross-ruff tricks. You can usually tell which one it is by examining dummy. A singleton in dummy indicates a cross-ruff is in the works.

**Q:** It goes PASS-PASS-PASS to you. What have you learned?

**A:** Well, to some degree, it depends on your opponent's and your bidding methods/style. I (and many other duplicate players) open twelve point hands. Since the three players in front of you failed to open, it's unlikely your LHO has 12 HCP. If you're my partner, you also don't have 12 HCP. And many people open light in 3<sup>rd</sup> seat, so RHO certainly doesn't have an opening hand and probably doesn't have 10 HCP and/or a suit he wants led. If you (or your partner) buys the contract, you need to watch the high cards falling out of the defender's hands and COUNT the HCP in each. If either of the defenders shows up with 10 HCP and you have to guess a queen, the negative inference that since they DIDN'T open the bidding, you should play their partner for the Queen.

**Q:** Declarer is playing in a NT contract. Dummy hits with the KQJxx of diamonds. Declarer wins the opening lead and then leads hearts. What's the inference?

**A:** Declarer almost certainly has the ♦A. Why is he fooling around with hearts instead of establishing his long solid diamond suit? Because the diamonds are already established.

**Q:** You're defending a Spade contract. You lead the ♦A (partner encourages), then the ♦K, then a small diamond which partner ruffs. Partner returns a small club. What does that mean?

**A:** Well, you TOLD him to return a club when you led a small diamond for him to ruff. His returning a SMALL club says he DOESN'T want another ruff, he wants a club back. Either he can't overruff dummy, or has a natural trump trick coming. If he wants another ruff, he should lead a HIGH club to tell you "Don't lead Clubs, lead another diamond".

**Q:** Declarer is playing a Spade contract and dummy hits with the AKxxx of clubs. While pulling trump, declarer throws a small club from dummy. What gives?

**A:** Your partner has the ♣Q and likely the ♣J. Declarer would not be pitching good long-suit tricks if the suit could be established for discards. Declarer likely doesn't even have 3 clubs. Same rationale – an 8-card club fit could be easily established and declarer is abandoning them.

**Q:** You lead a small spade from Kxxxx. Dummy hits with AQx. Declarer plays the Ace. What do you make of that?

**A:** Declarer almost certainly has a singleton spade. With two, he'd try the finesse. What if he plays the Queen? In that case, partner holds the Jack. Holding the Jack, declarer would let the lead run to his hand.

**Q:** Similar situation. You lead small from Kxxxx and dummy hits with Axx. Declarer plays the Ace. Who has the Queen?

**A:** Clearly partner has it. Otherwise declarer would duck to his hand to establish the Queen as a trick. If you need to get to partner's hand later, you can confidently under-lead your King.

There aren't many books available that illustrate negative inferences. The only two I know of are below, but there may be others. These are available from Baron-Barclay with a 10% ACBL member discount.

- Inferences at Bridge – Marshall Miles – ISBN – 1-894154-51-7
- Eddie Kantar Teaches Advanced Bridge Defense – ISBN – 1-894154-03-7