

GIVE ME A RUFF

You are sitting in the West and South stops in 2♠. What is your lead?

West
 ♠ 63
 ♥ AK83
 ♦ 964
 ♣ A1085

You have a natural lead of the ♥A. When you have AK in a suit contract, the Ace is usually the best lead. There are several reasons. First of all, it is safe. It doesn't finesse your partner and it almost always gives you the first trick. Second, it allows you to look at the dummy to judge what your next lead should be. Often, your partner will help you by the card he plays on that first trick.

You see this dummy and your partner plays the ♥10:

	North	
	♠ 9754	
	♥ J74	
	♦ AK10	
	♣ 964	
West		East
♠ 63		♥ 10
♥ AK83		
♦ 964		
♣ A1085		

West	North	East	South
			1♠
Dbl	2♠	All Pass	

What does this card from partner mean to your decision for the second lead?

The ♥10 is an encouraging signal. It might be a singleton or the top of a doubleton. Either way, it says "come on and play your ♥K. How does he know you have the ♥K? If you didn't, you wouldn't lead the unsupported ♥A. Leading the Ace of an unbid suit is the second worst lead in bridge. The worst lead is to underlead an Ace. Both leads tend to give away an extra trick when that Ace can be used to capture a King.

Anyway, you follow up with the ♥K and partner plays the ♥6; declarer, the ♥5. Now you know that partner started with two hearts and declarer started with four. You are going to lead the third heart to give your partner a ruff. What card do you lead to the third trick?

The answer is critical to defensive signaling. You want to lead the card that will guide partner back to your hand. You have another trick to take in clubs and you would like to see your partner lead a club when he wins the ruff. Therefore, you lead the ♥3 – a low card to ask for the return of a the lowest suit – clubs.

Partner ruffs the third heart and catches the signal. He leads the ♣Q. Declarer puts the ♣7 on it and you play an encouraging ♣10. Partner leads a low club to your ♣A which captures declarer's ♣K. Now what do you do?

You've taken the first five tricks and you need one more to set the contract. The dummy has no more hearts but the declarer does have one more heart. If you lead another heart declarer must ruff in the dummy. But there is chance that partner has another spade that is higher than the ♠9. Declarer will be forced to play his ♥Q, but partner's trump will provide the 6th and setting trick.

You lead your ♥8, declarer puts the ♠9 on it and partner wins with his ♠J. This play is called "an uppercut". It is a type of trump promotion. Partner's ♠J would have been lost if declarer could have started drawing trump. You allowed him to use it for a ruff that promotes it to be a winner.

This deal has three important defensive lessons. One is to signal encouragement on an Ace lead. Another is to signal suit preference on the card you give partner to ruff. The final lesson is to think of trump promotion using the upper cut technique.

This is the entire hand:

11		N North		W N E S			
D		♠ 9754		X	2♠	P	1♠
		♥ J74		P			P
		♦ AK10					
		♣ 964					
W West		E East					
♠ 63		♠ J8					
♥ AK83		♥ 106					
♦ 964		♦ Q8732					
♣ A1085		♣ QJ32					
		S South					
		♠ AKQ102					
		♥ Q952					
		♦ J5					
		♣ K7					
				2♠ S NS: 0 EW: 0			

You can see how this hand should be played by clicking on this link:

<http://tinyurl.com/nz66pf4>. Or, copy and paste it into your browser. Click on the "Next" button on the bottom to advance through each trick. Alternatively, by clicking on "Play" you can play all four hands and see if you can make the hand on your own.