



Declarer's Options with a Defender's Penalty Card

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Law #50D2

It is not that uncommon for one defender to have a penalty card when that defender's partner gains the lead. Should you be declarer when that happens, stop the defender from leading and call the Director to have your possible lead-directing options under Law 50 explained.

To start, the Director needs to consider whether it is a minor or major penalty card because rectification is different. A minor penalty card is a single card below the rank of an honor exposed unintentionally (as in playing 2 cards to a trick or dropping a card accidentally). Any honor card (which includes the 10) or any card exposed deliberately becomes a major penalty card. If a defender has 2 or more penalty cards, all of them are major penalty cards regardless of their initial status.

For a minor penalty card:

- a. No other spot card, that is, a non-honor card, in the suit may be played before the penalty card is legally played, but an honor card may be played instead at the offender's option.
- b. If on lead, the offender is not required to lead that suit; another suit may be led.
- c. There is no lead restriction on the offender's partner, but information gained through seeing the penalty card is unauthorized.

For a single, major penalty card, declarer chooses from 3 possibilities:

- a. Allow the defender on lead to lead any card he/she chooses. The exposed, major penalty card remains on the table and must be played at its first legal opportunity.
- b. Require the lead to be in the same suit as the penalty card.
 - i. This restriction is one time only.
 - ii. The exposed card is no longer a penalty card and is returned to the defender's hand. Knowledge that partner has that card is forbidden to the player on lead, unless that information is available or later becomes available by other, legal means.
- c. Prohibit the lead to be in the same suit as the exposed card.
 - i. This restriction applies for as long as the player retains the lead.
 - ii. Same as ii under b above.

In sorting through these major penalty card choices, declarer wants to select the option most likely to benefit his/her side. In the discussion that follows, no single factor holds complete sway—especially since circumstances vary as to auction, strength, broken strength, tenaces, etc.—so consider the aggregate of possibilities before making a selection.

1. **Allow any Lead:** The benefit of the major penalty card remaining on the table (by allowing any card to be led) is almost always outweighed by the benefit of requiring or prohibiting the lead of that suit. But if you can't see a specific benefit of those options, allow any lead and keep the penalty card face up on the table. Selecting this option may lead to a bit of serendipity. If the player on lead retains the lead and the penalty card hasn't been played, the lead directing options are in force again. Now that you have a little more information, the benefit of requiring or prohibiting the lead of the penalty card suit may be clearer.



2. **Require Leading the Suit of the Exposed Card:** The one-time requirement to lead this one, specific suit (which loses the benefit of the penalty card) is often chosen when the lead will be into a tenace, or start/continue setting up a long suit, or help enable a ruff by the hand short in trumps. Or maybe it's a trump and you want to pull trumps quickly.
3. **Prohibit Leading the Suit of the Exposed Card:** The on-going, i.e. as long as the lead is retained, requirement not to lead this one, specific suit (which loses the benefit of the penalty card) is often chosen when you fear this suit is your weak link in the contract. Perhaps the opponents have strength in that suit and there are immediate losers there, or the lead may expose losers by dislodging your lone stopper. Or maybe you fear LHO will get a next round ruff. If this is the right choice, it is often apparent.

Now that we've reviewed the possibilities and some of their ramifications, you should be in a better position to make an informed choice when faced with a defender being on lead when his partner has a major penalty card on the table. But remember, each time you face this decision, the circumstances are likely to be different, so consider the aggregate of possibilities (in light of your plan for playing the entire hand) before settling on your likely best choice in the particular circumstances.

P.S. One of the ways this lead-directing situation arises is when a defender makes a lead out of turn during the play and declarer refuses to accept the lead. If declarer were to accept the lead, play would continue normally, without any restrictions. But if not accepted, a lead out of turn during play would be deliberate and therefore ruled a major penalty card. When the proper defender assumes the lead, his/her partner has a major penalty card on the table and all the lead directing options are in play.

P.P.S. If a defender has two or more penalty cards that can be legally played, declarer designates which is to be played!