

OPENING LEADS

The first big advantage of the defenders is the opening lead. Opening leads can be a source of immense profit (or loss) as well as one of the most entertaining and challenging aspects of the game. Opening leads should be based upon what you have learned from the bidding and what you can see in your hand. Sometimes, the bidding will make it clear as to what suit to lead, other times you will have a clear-cut lead in your own hand. The rest of the time you will have to make an intelligent guess. The most important point here is to listen to the bidding. Without listening you cannot begin to defend.

Your objectives are: (1) to defeat the contract or hold it to as few overtricks as possible, and (2) to communicate with partner about the holdings in your hand by leading and signaling properly. The main difference between defending suit contracts and notrump is that you are no longer trying to set up long suits in suit contracts because the declarer has the trump suit to counteract those measures. Therefore, against suit contracts you are more likely to be leading from shorter suits.

Attention must first be given to the selection of the suit to be led. The most important point in this process is to listen to and remember the bidding. I'm sure you've all heard the saying that "there's no such thing as a blind lead, just a deaf defender."

What Suit to Lead. Let's start with a list of do's when considering what suit to lead:

- (1) Lead partner's suit if he has bid.
- (2) Lead from a solid sequence of your own. (Example: KQJxx)
- (3) Lead from AKx, AK, KQ, KQx, QJ10 or similar strength holding in an unbid suit.
- (4) With length in the trump suit, lead from length in a side suit, not from shortness. For example, against a 1S - 2S -4S auction, holding K964 K8643 Q2 54, lead the four of hearts. The idea is to force declarer to trump so that you will soon have as many or more trumps than he has.
- (5) If there are two unbid suits and you hold the Ace in one of them, lead the other suit. Leads of Aces make life too easy for declarer.
- (6) Lead trumps (small from two or four small, middle from three small) when:
 - (a) the bidding indicates that declarer intends to ruff in dummy.
 - (b) partner has passed your takeout double.
 - (c) declarer has bid two suits, one of which you are strong in and the other becomes the trump suit.
 - (d) you and your partner have most of the high cards and the opponents are sacrificing.

(7) Lead a short suit (singleton or doubleton) when you have a trump entry and a reasonable chance to get a ruff. For example, after an auction of 1S - 2S - 4S, from A32 K1065 Q986 76, lead the seven of clubs. Since you're going to get in with the Ace of trumps, you may be able to get a club ruff.

(8) If the opponents have stayed away from notrump, give consideration to leading the unbid suit even if you would be leading from a combination that you wouldn't generally lead from.

(9) Make a passive lead when you know you have the preponderance of the outstanding high cards or are faced with a collection of unpleasant suits to lead from against uninformative bidding. This will avoid giving the declarer a free gift.

(10) When you have a choice of leading from two unbid suits of approximately equal strength, leading from the longer suit is safer, but leading from the shorter suit, while more aggressive, is more likely to establish tricks for your side. For example: leading from Qxxxx as opposed to leading from Qxx.

(11) Play a forcing game (leading good tricks to force declarer to ruff) when you are long in trumps as you may cause declarer to lose control.

What Card to Lead. Once you have decided upon the suit to be led, the next decision is which card to lead.

(1) From the AK(xxx's) combination the proper lead against suit contracts is the Ace or the King depending upon your partnership agreement. While you would lead fourth-best against notrump as you would be trying to set up a long suit for the defense, in suit contracts you should be more concerned with developing quick tricks. An exception here is against NT contracts, the lead of the Ace asks partner to unblock any honors or absence honors, to give count. An example would be AKJ10xx.

(2) From the KQx, KQxx, KQxxx, etc., the proper lead against suit contracts is the King, but against notrump contracts may well be fourth-best. Exceptions to fourth-best leads are:

(a) When your holding in the suit to be led is headed by at least a three-card sequence, the top of the sequence should be led (Example: QJ1032). Sequence leads are usually better than fourth-best leads so a four-card suit headed by a three-card sequence is often better than a longer suit without a sequence (Example: QJ103 vs 108654). Sequence leads also apply when the third card in the sequence is missing by one spot (Example: QJ93).

(b) When the suit to be led is comprised of honors of which two are touching, the standard lead is the top of the interior sequence. For this consideration, the nine is an honor. The following portrays the proper lead from those special holdings:

(This exception also applies when holding only three cards in the suit.)
Examples: KJ10xx, Q109xx versus suit or notrump contracts and AJ10xx or
A1098x versus notrump contracts.

(3) If you choose to lead from a suit headed by the Ace (no King), the proper card to lead is the Ace. It is usually incorrect to lead fourth-best from an Ace as you would in notrump; in other words, try not to underlead an Ace against a suit contract.

(4) From three small in partner's bid suit, lead your smallest card in the suit unless you have supported the suit in the auction. If you have supported, lead the top card from three small.

What Not to Lead. There's also a list of leads to avoid:

(1) Avoid leading suits the opponents have bid unless you have a sequence.

(2) Don't lead Aces as they were meant to capture Kings and Queens, not two's and three's.

(3) Avoid leading suits that partner could have overcalled at the one level but did not.

(4) Don't be hesitant to lead fourth-best from an honor such as the King. Whoever said, "don't lead away from a King" doesn't understand that in order to take tricks you have to get help from partner.

(5) Don't lead trump just because you're in doubt. Also, don't lead a trump when you are very long in declarer's side suit as partner will need his trumps to overruff dummy. Also, it may be wrong to lead a trump from a holding that is likely to cost a trick.

Once again, an important point to remember is that most of the rules for opening leads apply any time a suit is initiated later in the play of the hand--how else can we communicate intelligently with partner. However, sometimes common sense will dictate deviating from the hard fast rules.

Marilyn Hemenway 2000