

Opening Leads

Desperation leads and flights of fancy should be shunned.

--Hugh Kelsey, Killing Defense at Bridge

The opening lead carries implicit within it the chance to land the first blow. And yet many players seem instead to regard it as the first chance to go wrong. Making the opening lead has sometimes been characterized as “shooting in the dark,” and many a player fears he will make the only lead that will allow declarer to make his contract. While it may be a fact that you will sometimes give a trick away on the lead, and sometimes even give away the whole contract, nonetheless, the responsibility of leading can become a sizeable advantage to you. The field is not very adept at leading. If you become adept, then you will have an advantage on the field whenever it is your turn to lead.

Leading Against Suit Contracts

I will go out on a limb and say that most players try to select the best lead by looking at the cards in their own hand. They will decide against hearts, for instance, because they have a few cards to an ace, and they want neither to lead the ace nor underlead it. They may, instead, be attracted to lead small from the suit headed by a king, but then form a firm feeling of confidence in the queen from QJ10. These ideas reflect some important considerations, to be sure, but the first general assumption behind them is not accurate. We should not be selecting what to lead based principally upon the cards in our hand. We should, instead, be basing our choice on what has been revealed by the bidding. Our first consideration should be what is in the opponents' hands, and then what is in our partner's hand, and then finally what is in our own.

Throughout our lessons we have been inquiring into the holdings of the other players in the game. Particularly important to the discussion of leads are our initial five lessons, the five lines of defense.

Priorities for the lead

1st priority: Does the circumstance exist that you can see a clear plan that stands to defeat the contract?

For example, have the opponents bid slam and do you have a side suit holding of AK that might cash? Then by all means, use your head; cash the ace, look at dummy, see partner's signal, watch the card that falls from declarer's hand, and then decide if continuing with the king makes sense. Or, again if they are in slam, do you hold a KQ in one suit and an ace in another? You would need a strong reason not to lead the king from KQ.

But, you say, I just told you that your own hand ought not be the source of your lead selection. Well, this is an exception to that rule, although even now I hope you don't think you should totally disregard the bidding you've heard. You wouldn't try to cash the AK, for instance, if declarer has somehow indicated he is void. In any case, always follow the path of intelligence over the path of mere rules. So on those occasions when you can see the defense clearly, follow the plan you can see, even if its inspiration is your own hand.

2nd priority: Does the auction call for the lead of a trump?

If it does, then lead a trump. In this circumstance, the lead of trump has priority over any other choice. It has priority even over leading partner's suit. Lead a trump when any of the following circumstances exists:

- Responder takes a suit preference only
- Misfit hands
- Dummy denies interest in NT
- Dummy bids 2 suits and raises a 3rd
- You are strong in other suits
- The opponents are sacrificing
- You control their side suit
- Your side has a trump stack
- They have bid a grand slam

3rd priority: Does the auction call for a forcing defense?

First let's review when the forcing defense is called for:

- When you have 4 trump
- When partner has 4 trump
- When declarer has a 2 suiter
- Whenever the long trump can be forced
- When opponents play a 4-3 fit
- (Do not force when dummy has an imposing side suit)
- (Do not force when it will set up a trick in dummy)

When a forcing defense is called for, we seek the suit that will compel declarer to ruff. Our own hand may suggest what this suit is, or partner may have indicated a lead by opening, by overcalling, or by doubling. Even so, we still do not lead partner's suit blindly out of some misplaced sense of allegiance. If a suit that you yourself hold has more potential to force declarer's ruff, lead your own suit. If the suit suggested by partner has more potential, then lead partner's suit. Most importantly, remember that a forcing defense has been called for. That is the priority item.

4th priority: Does the auction call for an active defense?

Our review of the circumstances of when to go active states:

- One opponent has a threatening side suit
- Both opponents have bid a side suit
- They have shown slam interest, vigorous bids
- They have bid a small slam
- 3NT is being attempted with reliance on a long running suit
- Anytime your tricks might go away

In this case we want take our top tricks right away, or at least set them up right away. We are once again looking, as we did in the forcing defense, for our partnership's most likely source of tricks. This may be our own suit, or it may be the suit suggested by partner.

5th priority: Does the auction call for a passive defense?

- No sign of a long suit against you
- You have key cards in their suit
- Declarer is strong, dummy weak
- They have bid tentatively
- You are defending a grand slam (lead trump)

Leading passively means leading safely. Here is a possible occasion for leading the top of a sequence, because you will not be setting up any tricks for declarer. Leading a suit in which the opponents already have the established tricks is also a safe, passive lead. Leading partner's suit can be a passive lead. Leading trump can be passive, especially when you feel pretty sure that you are not harming any hope that partner may have in the trump suit.

6th priority: Can the lead of your singleton produce a defensive trump trick?

- Your short suit is partner's bid suit
- Your short suit is an unbid suit
- You can win an early trump trick plus you can reach partner's hand
- You have no better line of defense
- You can predict partner's shortness and give him a ruff
- You do not have a natural trump winner

I have rated this lead as low priority because the lead is often overrated. But if the proper conditions for this lead exist, it could rate as high as active defense, especially if it is combined with leading partner's suit.

7th priority: When you don't know what sort of defense is called for.

When you can't determine what sort of defense is called for, then you really are shooting in the dark.

- Strongly consider leading partner's suit
- Compare the lead of partner's suit to any suggestive holding of your own
- If defending a partscore, consider a trump
- Consider an unbid suit
- Avoid leading a suit bid by declarer
- Avoid a potential 5-card suit of dummy's
- If you have the missing points, play passive
- If partner has the missing points, try not to harm him

You should not find yourself in the dark very often. Most auctions suggest a line of defense. If you are frequently leading in the dark, try to improve your bridge hearing.

Leading Partner's Suit

When you do lead partner's suit, the card you select has significance.

If you have a doubleton, always lead the higher. This includes holdings with an honor. Lead the king from Kx, the queen from Qx, the jack from Jx, etc. You are not promising a touching honor. You are showing your count. Leading ace from Ax works out well when partner has the king, but poorly when declarer does.

But if you do happen to have touching honors, lead the top. If you hold QJx, lead the queen. If it wins, next lead the jack. Partner will have to figure out whether you have QJ doubleton or QJx or even QJxx.

If you have three to the king, queen, or jack, lead your lowest. If you have four to the king, queen, or jack, lead the lowest. If you have five to the king, queen or jack, lead fourth best.

If you have three or more with no honor, lead the highest. Some partners prefer some other agreement from such a holding, such as low from three, or starting with the middle card followed by the higher (middle, up, down, or MUD).

Leading Other Suits

Leading according to known agreements is essential for purposes of understanding what partner is doing and for drawing inferences. If you don't abide by lead agreements, you will not be able to coordinate your defense with partner's. All of the following agreements are standard carding and are generally intelligible to any educated bridge player.

If you are leading from a sequence, which is three or more connected cards, such as KQJ, always lead the top card. The same is true if the sequence consists of smaller cards, say the 10 9 8.

If leading a suit with touching honors, lead the higher. So from KQxx lead the king, and from QJxx lead the queen. Strongly advised, but not entirely universal, is the lead of ace from AKxx. Partners who lead the ace seldom suffer confusion about partner's

holding because the lead of an unsupported ace is very unusual. The advantage of leading the ace is that partner can distinguish AK from KQ, and therefore he can signal his attitude more accurately, especially when he holds the jack.

From three or four cards to a single honor, lead low. From a five-card or longer suit, lead 4th best. Leading from a king is less risky than leading from a queen. Leading from a jack is typically useless or harmful.

From a holding of three or more with no honor, the highest card is best, or if the highest could become valuable, lead the 2nd highest. For instance, holding 10 8 7 4, the 10 could become important, so lead the 8.

From a doubleton, play high-low. But do not even consider leading king from Kx or queen from Qx if partner has not bid the suit. You may easily be throwing away a trick. Honor cards have significance. Declarer wants to find them. Make him hunt. Find something else to serve on silver platters.

The same is also true of singleton kings or queens. Don't lead them. You will not likely get a ruff from leading an honor card, but you may earn partner's rebuke. Consider as an alternative the sweetness of winning a finesse with your singleton honor!

Leading jacks, tens, and nines

Here is a carding agreement that cannot be called standard, but if you check out play in a bridge tournament, you will find it a favorite of the experienced players.

The lead of a jack denies a higher honor. The lead of a 9 or 10 promises zero or two higher.

More specifically, these leads show "interior sequences," which are one of the following holdings:

A J 10

K J 10

A 10 9

K 10 9

Q 10 9

Of course the entire suit is probably 4 or 5 cards long. Interior sequences are difficult for the partner to read when you don't lead according to this special agreement. But now partner knows immediately when he sees the jack that you hold no card higher than that, so there is definitely no interior sequence. But when he sees a 10 or 9, he perks up and looks for evidence that will clarify whether you have no cards higher or else two cards higher. Kantar call this agreement "an invaluable convention for undoing the confusions of olden times."

This agreement applies both at suit contracts and at notrump contracts. It applies on the opening lead and also throughout the hand.

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Lead Directing Doubles

Even though it will not always be partner's priority to lead your suit, in practice he frequently will, so he will be helped by any lead indicators you can provide in the bidding. He may find lead information from you valuable when he seeks to initiate a forcing defense, an active defense, a passive defense, a short suit defense, or a notrump defense. Therefore, giving partner lead indicators has high value and is good bridge. You strive to give such indicators by opening the bidding, by overcalling, and by opening light in 3rd seat. Yet another method of indicating a lead is called a lead directing double.

Lead directing doubles arise when the opponents are bidding and their auction contains artificial bids. For example, imagine that you hold a 6-card club suit headed by KQ when your left hand opponent opens 1NT and your right hand opponent responds with two clubs, Stayman. Everyone knows they don't mean to play in clubs, but you should double anyway. The meaning of your double is that you hold clubs and can invite the lead of clubs.

Lead directing doubles offer a safe method for you to enter an auction that generally belongs to your opponents and still communicate important information to your partner about the lead. When the auction belongs to the opponents, and you or partner

double an artificial bid, the meaning is that you have a holding in that suit, and you are inviting the lead of that suit. The leader is not absolutely compelled to lead the doubled suit, but he will need a strong reason not to do so.

Here are typical artificial bids that can be doubled as a lead directing double:

- Stayman
- Transfers
- Cue bids
- Responses to Blackwood

If you get an opportunity to make a lead directing double, it's important that you make it. Here's why. When your partner is deciding what to lead, he may reason like this: "I'm not certain if I should lead a club or a diamond; however, partner had a chance to double Stayman to show me a club lead. Since he didn't double, he must not want a club lead, and therefore I will lead a diamond." So failing to make a lead directing double tends to suggest that you do not have that suit. Pay attention, and make your lead directing doubles.

Leads Against Notrump

Against no trump you need not consider leading trump, or playing a forcing defense, or evaluating the success of a short suit lead. Against notrump your choices come down basically to making either an active lead or a passive lead. These are the two basic types of notrump defense. Subsequently, leading against notrump is somewhat easier than leading against suits.

But this does not mean you automatically decide to lead 4th down in your longest and strongest suit. In fact, leading 4th down from a four-card suit headed by an honor is seldom a successful attack, and so it should hold no particular attraction to you.

Even if your four-card suit is headed by two honors, this suit still may not be your best choice of lead. Because this point of view may seem unusual, let's open our minds and take a fresh point of view about leading at notrump contracts.

Up to now we have characterized notrump

contracts as a race between the defenders and the declarer to set up their tricks. This perspective often holds true. When you have a suit to attack with, you will want to attack and set up your suit. Let's define an attacking suit principally as a five-card suit. When you have five, that leaves one less out against you and improves your chance to set the suit up. What's more, if you succeed in setting it up, you have an extra card to take an extra trick. Four-card suits, however, are more difficult to establish, and even when you have established it, you win only a limited number of tricks. So five card suits are attacking suits, and a four-card suit is an attacking suit only if it is headed by a sequence.

If you hold an attacking suit, or if partner holds an attacking suit, as indicated by the bidding, then an attacking defense should be initiated. Without an attacking suit in either your hand or partner's, then a passive defense is generally indicated.

How can it make sense to play a passive defense?

Here's how. Tricks at notrump come from long suits and from high cards. When you lack the length of a five-card suit you also lack the reward of getting an extra winner. That puts more of a premium on the high card or two you hold in any suit. It puts a premium on them for you because you lack the resource of a long suit; and it puts a premium on your high cards for declarer, who has not had the advantage of having had your honor underled into the holdings he possesses.

Now he will have to manage his hand in relation to that high card that you have not exposed. If he also lacks a long suit, then he too will have to rely on making his own high cards good. He will have to guess the location of the missing high cards, and he will have to use his own high cards to pressure you out of yours.

So what we have said is that a passive defense at notrump can work quite well when declarer lacks a long suit. In this case he has to find the way to make his own high cards do the work without any help from you. If declarer lacks an attacking suit and you do too, then play a passive defense by making leads that are as harmless as possible.

<u>West</u>					
♠	K J 9	S	W	N	E
♥	K J 6 5	1NT	P	3NT	P
♦	9 7 4	P	P		
♣	K Q 6				

You have no evidence of a long suit for declarer and you have no attacking suit of your own. Partner, of course, has nothing. If you lead the five of hearts, you will just make it easier for declarer to win his queen, or perhaps even his 10. What's more, he will then know the location of the missing honors and will be able to plan his play around them. For similar reasons, leading spades or clubs will only assist declarer. So be a stubborn defender and refuse to help. Lead a diamond and let declarer figure the hand out by himself. Since partner is out of it for this defense, you can lead any diamond you wish

NORTH											
♠	Q 7 6										
♥	10 9 8										
♦	A K 5 2										
♣	J 10 8										
WEST	<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		EAST
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♠	K J 9	♠	5 4 3								
♥	K J 6 5	♥	7 3 2								
♦	9 7 4	♦	J 8 6								
♣	K Q 8	♣	9 7 5 2								
SOUTH											
♠	A 10 8 2										
♥	A Q 4										
♦	Q 10 3										
♣	A 4 3										

On the lead of a diamond declarer has gained nothing and can count seven winners only. He has to do his own work. If his technique is good, he will return a low spade at trick two and still come eventually to 10 tricks. If, on the other hand, the opening leader starts a heart, declarer wins dummy's eight and starts his quest for the contract with a cheap trick. Now if West does not play just right, declarer could make 11 tricks.

So our summary so far would state that we play an active defense whenever we or partner holds a true attacking suit, or whenever we believe that declarer has a long suit of his own. We play a passive defense when our side lacks an attacking suit and when the opponents have not shown a long suit.

But one more factor effects our choice of lead at notrump, and that is entries to our hand. We might

have a great suit to set up, but if we don't have entries to our hand to enjoy our good tricks, we didn't get anywhere by setting the suit up. If that is the case, then we should try to help partner set up something in his hand, presuming of course that we think he may have entries.

If we decide then, that our own hand, which lacks entries, is not suitable for attack, then we can expend our advantage of the initial lead by trying to benefit partner's hand. What clues might we have as to partner's hand?

If the opponents have bid Stayman and failed to find a fit, then you may be able to analyze a major suit holding by your partner. For example, consider the following situation.

<u>West</u>	S	W	N	E
♠ K 10 9 4	1NT	P	2	♣ P
♥ 6 5	2	♠ P	2NT	P
♦ 9 8 7 4 2	3NT	P	P	P
♣ J 6				

A few players will lead a spade, despite South's bid, but most of the field will probably lead the nine of diamonds. But setting up this suit may take quite awhile, and our spade entry may be wiped out long before any diamond tricks are ready to go. Partner, however, stands to have about 10 points. He may be able to do some damage, especially if we can help him on the lead. South has denied four hearts, so he can hold only a maximum of three. North has not transferred into hearts, so he has just four hearts. Therefore partner has at least four hearts, and he may have five.

	NORTH											
	♠ Q 6 3											
	♥ Q 7 3 2											
	♦ K 3											
	♣ Q 5 4 3											
WEST	<table style="width: 100%; text-align: center; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		EAST	
	N											
W		E										
	S											
♠ K 10 9 4		♠ 8 5										
♥ 6 5		♥ A K J 10 8										
♦ 9 8 7 4 2		♦ 10 6										
♣ 7 6		♣ K 9 8 2										
	SOUTH											
	♠ A J 7 2											
	♥ 9 4											
	♦ A Q J 5											
	♣ A J 10											

On the lead of the heart six, dummy will play low, and East will win the 10, demonstrating to West that his lead has hit the jackpot. East will perhaps switch to spades, but if not, South will have to play spades himself before long, and West is in to send through the second heart. South is sunk.

But if West leads the 9 of diamonds and not the heart, South will get the tricks needed for his contract. Even if West switches to hearts when he wins the king of spades, he is too late. East needs two heart leads by West to run his suit.

The lead of hearts in the foregoing hand came from an inference given to us by the opponents use of Stayman. We do not always have that particular clue as to the resources of partner's hand. Without any substantial clue, you may elect to lead any unbid major in the attempt to reach partner. Be wary about leading any suit that partner could have overcalled but did not overcall. On the other hand, if there was a suit that partner had no convenient opportunity to overcall, that suit may be partner's suit.

Summary of Notrump Leads

Notrump defense can be either active defense or passive defense. Play active defense when:

- * declarer or dummy probably has a long suit to run or to set up
- you have a five-card suit to set up and entries to get in with
- * partner has a five-card suit and entries to get in with

Prefer a passive defense when:

- no one at the table seems to have a true long suit to establish
- partner is busted and you hold all outstanding honors

Attempt to set up tricks in your own hand when your hand has entries. If your hand is lacking entries, make a lead designed to help partner set up his hand. Clues as to partner's suit may be:

- partner has opened or overcalled
- partner has made a lead directing double
- the opponent's Stayman auction indicates that partner has a major suit
- the opponents have shunned at least one major that partner may hold
- the auction has possibly prevented partner from overcalling a suit

Summary of Suit Leads

The auction will almost always dictate which line of defense will probably apply to the hand, so the lead should be selected according to the needs of that particular line of defense. The chief deviation from this prescription is the circumstance wherein a winning line of defense is strongly suggested just by the possibilities in your own hand. A priority of leads can be established:

- Lead what is required to follow a near certain defense based upon your own holding
- Lead trump if the auction calls for this line of defense
- * Lead the partnership's best suit if the auction calls for a forcing defense
- Make an aggressive attacking lead if the bidding indicates you should go active
- * Make safe leads when the auction indicates you should go passive
- * Make a short suit lead when such a lead meets the guidelines for short suit leads
- If compelled to shoot in the dark
 - Consider partner's suit
 - Consider your own resources
 - Consider a trump against partscores
 - Consider an unbid suit
 - Avoid one of declarer's suits
 - Avoid a dummy suit that may be five cards long
 - If you have the missing points, play passive
 - If partner has the missing points, try not to harm him