

SEEING THROUGH THE BACKS OF THE CARDS – LEADS AND PLANNING

OPENING LEADS

The suit you choose to lead against a suit contract might be different from the suit you lead against a notrump contract.

What Suit? When choosing your opening lead, first choose the suit you'd like to lead. Give high priority to leading partner's suit if partner opened or overcalled. Notrump leads are generally from length – try to lead your side's longest suit. Length leads are not as important in suit contracts so you might choose to lead a 3-card suit or even a short suit instead of a long suit. In any contract, it's not usually a good idea to lead a suit bid by your opponents.

LEADING YOUR OWN SUIT OR AN UNBID SUIT

Lead TOP from:

- A doubleton.
- A sequence of high cards containing at least one honor (the 10 is an honor). You need three touching or nearly touching high cards in NT but only two touching versus a suit contract. *Leading top of a sequence supersedes leading fourth-best in that suit.* Today, most players are consistent and lead the ace from ace-king in suit contracts. (In days past, the king was a more common lead from that holding.)
- A touching pair of honors in a broken or interior sequence. With a broken sequence having two touching pairs, lead top of the higher pair of touching cards (lead K from K Q 10 9 4 but lead the J from K J 10 7 5, an *interior sequence* with one touching pair plus a higher card.)
- Avoid leading an unsupported ace (no king) or underleading an ace in a suit contract. In notrump we sometimes do lead away from an ace.

Lead LOW otherwise; fourth-best when you have length in the suit. When the opponents have bid several suits, you might have only three cards in the unbid suits. Only In notrump, lead TOP when you must lead from three small in an unbid suit.

LEADING PARTNER'S SUIT

Lead TOP from:

- A doubleton.
- A sequence of two or more high cards containing at least one honor.
- Three small cards in partner's suit provided you have raised that suit during the auction. If not, lead low.

Lead LOW otherwise. This includes low from three small when you have not supported partner's suit. (Exception: don't underlead an ace in a suit contract.)

RETURN PARTNER'S LEAD – WHEN TO AND WHEN NOT TO

In notrump it usually pays to keep plugging away at the suit you or your partner led on opening lead. You need a very good reason not to return partner's lead:

- You are out of partner's suit (nobody can argue with that).
- Your holding in the suit is such that leading it gives up a trick – you need partner to lead the suit.
- You know from the bidding and/or the cards in dummy that continuing partner's suit will not beat the contract and you hope a switch to another suit will work.
- You see how leading another suit will beat the contract.

The mere fact that dummy still has a stopper is not enough reason to switch. Only give up on returning partner's lead when you know that you have neither the time nor the opportunity to establish more tricks in partner's suit.

In a suit contract, you generally have to get tricks before declarer or dummy runs out of your suit and can ruff. When dummy (the shorter trump hand) is ruffing, it's usually (but not always) correct to switch. If you lead a suit dummy can ruff, you should have a specific purpose in mind. Getting rid of a trump in dummy is not an acceptable reason.

WHICH CARD TO LEAD WHEN RETURNING PARTNER'S LEAD

When you return partner's suit, there are guidelines for choosing the card to lead back just as there are guidelines for choosing your opening lead in partner's suit. In fact, the guidelines are similar.

When leading partner's suit later in the hand, play:

- *Top* of a doubleton. (Holding 8 3, lead the 8.)
- *Top* with two or more high cards in sequence. (Lead the J from J 10 3 or from J 10.)
- *Low* from three cards without a sequence and fourth best from four or more cards without a sequence. When returning partner's lead, lead low from three or more remaining cards. (Technically lead back the *third* best of your remaining cards – your original fourth-best card when you happen to have length in partner's suit.)

These guidelines usually work, but be sure to consider declarer's likely holding, your own holding, dummy's holding and whether there is a chance that you could *block* the suit by following the guidelines. Warning – even spot cards can sometimes block a suit.

WHEN THE OPENING LEADER SWITCHES TO A NEW SUIT

There are two reasons for the opening leader to switch:

- (1) It might not be safe for the person who led to continue the original suit. It might be necessary to get to partner in order to have the original suit led *through* declarer's strength.
- (2) Opening leader sees no future in continuing that suit and decides to work on a new suit.

When you switch to a new suit, how does your partner know which suit you want returned? By the size of the card you switch to. Think **BosTon (Bottom of something, Top of nothing)** where:

- A **Low** switch **L**ikes and suggests abandoning the first suit to return the second suit instead.
- A **High** switch **H**ates and shows no interest in having that suit returned. Opening leader might need her original suit returned through strength.

Caution: Do not confuse BosTon leads with either opening leads or attitude signals.

MAKE A PLAN

Declarer plans the play before calling the first card from dummy. The defenders can utilize the same time to make their plan. Declarer counts winners in NT and losers in a suit contract. The defenders always try to count the tricks they expect to win and the tricks they expect declarer to win. Both declarer and defenders have several clues to help them plan:

- **The auction** – *The bidding and play are not separate entities.* The auction provides information about the strength and distribution of the unseen hands.
- **The opening lead** – Both declarer and opening leader's partner should ***analyze the opening lead*** to figure out opening leader's holding in the led suit and in other suits.
- **The dummy** – The strength and distribution of dummy can suggest a line of play for declarer as well as the best defense for the defenders. For example, a long fairly strong side suit in dummy can provide discards for declarer's losers. It is a clue to declarer to try to use that suit for discards and a clue to the defenders to set up and take their tricks quickly. (See LSD chart.) ***Don't set up tricks in dummy!*** A common defensive error is to cash winners, making cards in dummy good. When this is done too early, declarer will use those good cards to discard losers from his hand. Don't set up tricks for dummy until you've set up and taken all the tricks your side has coming.
- **The played cards** – Every card played provides more information about the unseen hands as the play progresses. *Watch the cards played by partner and your opponents* and consider what cards those plays tend to show or deny. You'll never remember what was played if you don't look at the played cards.
- **Partner's leads and signals** throughout the hand.

DEFENSIVE TIPS

SECOND HAND LOW

When you are second to play to a trick, your opponent has led the suit and your partner still has a chance to win the trick. You usually don't have to be a hero and playing high often costs a trick. However, be ready to violate this saying if common sense indicates or when:

- Covering an honor with an honor (cover the last of touching honors).
- You can take what you believe will be the setting trick.
- You need to get in to lead through strength to let partner retain her entry to run her suit.
- Splitting honors to ensure a defensive trick.

THIRD HAND ONLY AS HIGH AS NECESSARY

Unless partner's lead or dummy's play is winning the trick, it's your job to do your best to win the trick. This means playing your highest card except when:

- You have two or more touching high cards. Play the lowest of touching cards – only as high as necessary.
- Finessing against a high card in dummy. Just as declarer finesses hoping a certain card is in a specific defender's hand, a defender finesses hoping a certain card is in her partner's hand.
- You want to maintain an entry to your long suit and duck (refuse to win) the trick.