

Opening Leads Part II



In the last magazine we discussed which card to lead from any given suit. This time we will try to decide which suit to lead.

Choosing the Suit

Always have a very good reason if you do not lead a suit bid (or suggested) by partner.

The simplest reason for leading his suit is that then you cannot lose the post-mortem! If it was wrong to lead his suit, then it was his fault for bidding . . .

However, there is a large difference between an opening suit-bid and an overcall.

The quality of the suit has no bearing on whether you open it or not: if it is your longest suit, you bid it. However, when you make an overcall you should be expecting partner to lead the suit, and should therefore have good suit quality.

Hand 1	Hand 2
♠ 9 7 6 5 4	♠ A K 9 8 7
♥ A J 4 3	♥ 5 4 3
♦ A K 3	♦ J 6 5 2
♣ 2	♣ 2

Look at these two hands. *Hand 1* would open the bidding 1♠, but if there was a 1♣ call before, it should double for take out rather than overcall. Conversely *Hand 2*, although weak, should overcall a 1♣ opening with 1♠. Why bid with just 8 points? To tell your partner what to lead! If you have a hand with such a strong suit that it would certainly make a good lead, then try to bid it if you can do so safely, since it makes your partner's choice of lead so much simpler.

So if your partner's bid is an overcall, then you should almost always lead the suit, but when it is an opening bid or a response, then there are occasions when you might choose something else.

Reasons for not leading your partner's suit are:

- A dangerous holding in the suit such as A-x-x (see Leads to Avoid, page 20).
- An especially inviting other lead, like a singleton or solid suit.
- When a trump lead seems correct.

Basic Leads Against No-trumps

Lead your *longest* and *strongest* suit. When you have a five-card suit (or longer), it makes sense to lead away from honours, because although you might give an early trick away, you are likely to make up for it by establishing your suit later in the play.

However, with just a weak four-card suit, it can be safer to choose a different lead. This is because with just four cards it is less likely that you will establish any tricks to make up for the possible trick you will give away on the lead.

The reasons for not leading your longest and strongest suit are:

- Partner has bid a suit.
- You are very weak. Although you might establish your suit, you are unlikely to get in to cash your winners. On such occasions you should perhaps try to lead your partner's suit, even when he has not bid! (See page 19.)
- Your opponents have bid your suit. Try leading an *unbid* suit (see page 19).
- Your longest suit has just four cards, and is headed by a solitary king or queen.

A lead from 10-9-8-4 is preferable over K-8-3-2 because the former suit is unlikely to give a trick away.

Basic Leads Against Suit Contracts

There are three basic leads against suit contracts as opposed to just one against no-trump contracts; this is because there is a trump suit to think about.

- A short suit in the hope of a ruff.
- Your longest and strongest suit.
- Trumps.

(A) SHORT SUIT LEADS

A singleton is often a good lead against a trump contract because there is a fair chance of getting a ruff. Your partner might hold the ace of the suit, or he can gain the lead before all the trumps are drawn. However, a doubleton lead is very much a shot in the dark, especially if it is an honour doubleton. You should generally avoid doubleton leads unless they are in an *unbid* suit, in which case there is a fair chance that you might hit some strength in your partner's hand and thus establish tricks in different ways, with high cards or through ruffs. Avoid at all costs leading a doubleton in a suit bid by your opponents: you are likely to establish tricks for them and destroy any holding your partner might have there.

(B) YOUR LONGEST AND STRONGEST SUIT

It is not unreasonable to lead a long suit against a suit contract, but be wary of leading away from honours because, unlike in no-trumps, there will be no pay-back later as declarer will be able to ruff the suit.

(C) LEADING TRUMPS

There are two main reasons for leading trumps:

- To cut down on the ruffs available in the short hand. If the bidding suggests that one hand is short in trumps, then declarer may well aim

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to use those short trumps for ruffing in order to gain tricks. By leading trumps and continuing them when you regain the lead, you can frequently ruin declarer's plans.

- (ii) For safety, in order to avoid giving a trick away.

When both opponents are bidding a suit, very often they will have most of the high cards in it, and therefore you can lead the trump suit without giving anything away. At first, you might wonder, "Well, what's the use?" but when you think about all the leads you have made that have given a trick away, then you might indeed see the point. In fact, half the battle when leading is not so much to gain a great victory, but to avoid a great calamity. After all, remember that the very first lead is blind, whereas for the rest of the play you have the advantage of seeing dummy.

An expert player will lead trumps many more times than an average player, one reason being that average club players will sometimes not even consider that lead. However, you should be very wary of leading a singleton trump, for this can be very unsafe (see page 20).

Here is an example. You hold as West:

♠	6 4
♥	Q 7 5 4
♦	K J 10 6 4
♣	8 2

And you are on lead after the following auction:

North	South
	1♠
2♣	2NT
3♠	4♠
End	

How do you work out what to lead?

Basically you have to listen to the auction, so before you make your decision, see if you can understand the conversation that your opponents have had.

The 1♠ bid showed at least four spades and 12+ points; North showed 9+ points and usually five (or more) clubs. What does South's 2NT rebid show?

You are not sure because you do not know their system. You had no interest in the auction at the time, so you did not ask, but as opening leader you can ask now. North tells you that the 2NT rebid showed 15-17 points. Then North called 3♠; what does that mean?

Think about it; you can work it out. North cannot have four spades because, if so, he would have supported straight away. So he will have three-card spade support and must have some ruffing values, otherwise he would have simply raised to 3NT. And finally 4♠ suggests that South started with a five-card (or longer) spade suit.

The bidding is telling you what to lead; can you hear it?

North has short trumps and is suggesting that he might be able to ruff. The way to stop this is, of course, to lead a trump.

♠	Q J 3			♠	A 7 5
♥	8 3 2			♥	10 9 6
♦	9 5			♦	Q 8 3
♣	A K 10 4 3			♣	Q J 6 5
♠	6 4			♠	A 7 5
♥	Q 7 5 4			♥	10 9 6
♦	K J 10 6 4			♦	Q 8 3
♣	8 2			♣	Q J 6 5
				♠	K 10 9 8 2
				♥	A K J
				♦	A 7 2
				♣	9 7

When leading trumps one generally leads the smallest one (here the four), but any small one will do on this deal. Declarer has nine tricks: four trumps, the ace and king of hearts, the ace of diamonds, the ace and king of clubs. As suggested by the bidding, he could easily make a tenth trick by ruffing a diamond in dummy but your excellent trump lead will enable you to draw dummy's trumps before declarer has a chance to use them. Partner will let South win trick one, and then whichever defender wins the diamond trick can lead a trump to the ace and then a third trump. Declarer is stuck and, with the heart finesse failing, he is kept to nine tricks.

What Else Should Guide Your Choice Of Lead?

You should consider the following:

- (1) The unbid suit.
- (2) Why did they not use Stayman?
- (3) Partner's suit (when he hasn't bid).
- (4) Active or Passive?

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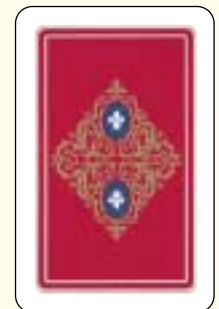
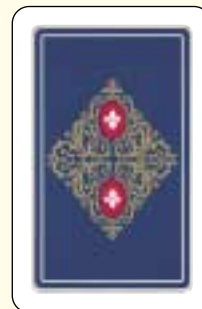
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(1) THE UNBID SUIT

This is perhaps the most important lead available, especially in a no-trump contract. When the opponents have bid three suits on the way to a contract, they are most likely to be weakest in the unbid suit (by no means always, but quite often). Always contemplate leading the unbid suit, however short you are.

You are West, holding the hand below, and it is your lead:

♠ Q J 9 6 5
♥ J 2
♦ 7 6
♣ Q 7 3 2

North	South
	1♠
2♣	2♦
3♦	3NT
End	

You might contemplate one of your two long suits, but both have been bid. There is something to be said for leading a spade since ♠Q will not give much away, but the auction has suggested that South has a five-card suit. Much better is to lead the unbid suit, hearts. It might seem like a shot in the dark, but surely both North and South would have shown four hearts if they had them; and if they only have three each, that leaves your partner with five! The jack of hearts, top of a doubleton, attacks declarer's weakness.

♠ 10 2
♥ 10 8 7
♦ K 10 8 4
♣ A K J 4

♠ Q J 9 6 5
♥ J 2
♦ 7 6
♣ Q 7 3 2

♠ 3
♥ K Q 9 4 3
♦ A 9 3
♣ 10 9 8 6

♠ A K 8 7 4
♥ A 6 5
♦ Q J 5 2
♣ 5

Leading the unbid suit might not turn out as wonderfully as it does here, but it rarely does much damage. The unbid suit is often the defence's most powerful

weapon. As you can see, your heart lead establishes the suit; declarer has to knock out the ace of diamonds to have any chance in this contract, but East can then cash his hearts taking the contract off.

(2) WHY DID THEY NOT USE STAYMAN?

Compare the auctions 1NT – 3NT and 1NT – 2♣ – 2♥ – 3NT. Responding to 1NT you tend to use Stayman when you hold a four-card major; thus, in the first auction, responder is unlikely to have four hearts or four spades. In this situation, if you have a choice between two four-card suits, one of which is a major, then lead the major.

(3) PARTNER'S SUIT (WHEN HE HAS NOT BID)

Leading the unbid suit is an example of this principle, as we saw in (1) above. When you have a very weak hand, and thus a lack of entries, the invariable consequence of leading your longest suit is that although you can establish it, you can never get in to cash it. However if you are weak, then your partner is likely to be stronger – he will have the entries, so if you can establish his long suit, then he will be able to enjoy the fruits of your action.

♠ 9 5 4 3 2
♥ J 9
♦ J 10 4
♣ J 10 5

What do you lead as West with the hand above after this auction?

North	South
	1♥
2♣	2NT
3NT	End

There is surely little hope of establishing tricks in spades and then, even if you do establish the suit, how on earth do you expect to be able to cash your winners?

Best is to try to find partner's suit, and your thinking should be straightforward: "I have spades, South has hearts and North has clubs, so my partner's likely suit is diamonds."

There is no doubt that the deal might

not turn out as favourably as this one, but your partner will be very pleased to see a diamond lead rather than a spade. It is great for partnership confidence if you sometimes lead your partner's suit. All too often we lead our partner's singleton when, with a little thought, we can get off to a better start.

♠ Q 10 8
♥ Q 4
♦ 7 5
♣ A K 7 6 4 2

♠ 9 5 4 3 2
♥ J 9
♦ J 10 4
♣ J 10 5

♠ A 6
♥ 8 7 6 5
♦ K Q 9 8 2
♣ Q 9

♠ K J 7
♥ A K 10 3 2
♦ A 6 3
♣ 8 3

Having decided to lead a diamond, you should lead the jack. With just a three-card suit, and two touching honours, you must lead the top honour in order to avoid blocking the suit – that is, you keep a low card in the suit to reach your partner's hand easily. The diamond lead knocks out declarer's ace and it is no surprise to see that your partner does indeed have an entry, the ace of spades, which will enable him to cash his remaining diamonds and thus defeat the contract.

(4) ACTIVE OR PASSIVE?

Finally, we come to a very important aspect of leading. Do you want to be *active* or *passive*?

Active means trying to establish tricks and taking risks to do so.

Passive means playing safe and letting declarer go wrong.

When playing duplicate pairs you should almost always strive to be *passive*, because every trick matters and your aim is usually to avoid giving tricks away.

However, when playing rubber bridge or teams of four, then you should choose your strategy carefully:

When declarer is in a tight contract, you should try to be *passive*, e.g.

Declarer	Dummy
1NT	2♣
2♠	3♠
4♠	End

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This auction suggests that opponents will have just 25 points or so, and declarer will therefore be borderline for making; try not to give a trick away on the lead, for this might be crucial.

When declarer is in an 'easy' contract, you need to be active. For example, the auction 1♠ – 3♥ – 3♠ – 4♠ suggests that the opponents will have plenty of strength: at least 28 points. You expect their contract to make easily, so you will need a bit of luck to defeat them and playing rubber or teams you would try to find an aggressive lead, perhaps an honour doubleton, on the small chance that you might get a ruff.

Passive leads involve low risks – avoid leading from (non-touching) honour combinations, prefer solid suits or trump leads.

Active leads involve taking risks to establish quick tricks, aiming for ruffs – an honour doubleton leads fall into this category.

Here is an example. You are West, leading after the following auction, with the hand below:

♠ Q 9 5 2
♥ 10 3
♦ K 8 5 4
♣ Q 7 6

North	South
	1♥
2♥	3♥
4♥	End

This is a pretty ropy auction at the best of times. It seems that your opponents will struggle to make their game, so you must avoid giving away a trick. It should be clear that the safest lead is a trump. You are not aiming to cut down on the ruffing, but simply to avoid giving away a trick.

♠ K 10 3					
♥ Q 9 8 4					
♦ A 3 2					
♣ 9 8 4					
♠ Q 9 5 2				♠ J 7 6	
♥ 10 3				♥ J 5	
♦ K 8 5 4				♦ J 10 9	
♣ Q 7 6				♣ K J 10 5 3	
				♠ A 8 4	
				♥ A K 7 6 2	
				♦ Q 7 6	
				♣ A 2	

As it happens a club lead would work equally well, but as the layout in the other suits shows, it could easily have given away a trick. Leads in spades and diamonds would be disastrous. Declarer has nine tricks, and is thus struggling to make his contract – as the auction suggested. A diamond lead gives a tenth trick immediately, running to declarer's queen. A spade lead forces the jack from partner and leaves your queen stuck between the jaws of North's king-ten, allowing declarer a finesse for his tenth trick.

Opening Leads to Avoid

- Underleading an ace against a suit contract (*never* do that!).
- Leading an ace without holding the king.
- Leading away from a king against a suit contract.
- Leading a singleton trump.

(a) NEVER UNDERLEAD AN ACE AGAINST A SUIT CONTRACT

We discussed this in the last issue of BRIDGE. It is a rule that is broken very rarely by expert players – and in my view it is best *never* to break it if you are a non-expert one!

(b) DON'T LEAD AN ACE WITHOUT HOLDING THE KING

You should almost never lead a lonely ace. An ace's job is to kill a king but, if you lead it, then your opponents can simply play low. However, if you hold the king as well, then the lead of an ace is one of the best you can make.

The two guidelines above should make you try to avoid leading any suit with an ace in it against a suit contract. That is, you cannot lead the ace and you cannot underlead it! Unless desperate, find another suit.

(c) DON'T LEAD AWAY FROM A KING AGAINST A SUIT CONTRACT.

A lead away from any high honour against a suit contract is very risky, but leading away from a king is especially dangerous, except if your partner has bid that suit. As under (b) above, where I stated that aces should kill other high cards, kings too should kill high cards and in a suit contract, where only two rounds of a suit are likely to stand up before ruffing, you need your king to wield its power. If you lead away from it and allow declarer to make his queen on the first round and his ace on the second, your king will have been wasted.

(4) DON'T LEAD A SINGLETON TRUMP

A trump lead, as we have discussed, can be an excellent lead; however, when you hold a singleton trump, it can be risky, because your partner will often hold four trumps and your lead will ruin holdings such as Q-x-x-x and J-x-x-x. Only make such a lead if you are trying to attack dummy's trumps: a singleton trump is more of an active lead than a passive one.

Conclusions

Defence is tremendously difficult even when dummy is in sight, but having to play a card without even seeing dummy is most difficult of all. Do not always aim for a great success; try instead to avoid calamity.

When leading, try to understand the auction, find the strengths in your hand and think about the strengths in your partner's. Remember that bridge is a partnership game; if your hand is worth very little, then you need to think about your partner's, for if you can make the right lead for him, not only might you defeat the contract, but you will have a very happy partner. ■

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