

Opening Leads

Part 1

The opening lead always seems to have a bearing on the outcome of a hand, especially in duplicate pairs where every overtrick and undertrick matters. This is why the traveller has a space on it for the lead; it can be quite enlightening to see the lead written down, for it will often explain a great success or disaster. Unfortunately most Norths omit to write in the lead and thus the mystery remains unsolved.

In a no-trump contract, if you pick the right suit, then you gain an important tempo, allowing your side to develop tricks before declarer. In a suit contract, you can develop tricks, search for ruffs and/or take away declarer's tricks. But perhaps the most commonly held feeling after the first trick is that you have given a trick away.

I am going to write this article in two parts; the first part will discuss which card to lead from a given suit; the second part, in the next issue, will discuss which suit to choose and why.

Which Card Should You Lead from a Given Suit

Let us start with a table:

K 9 8 4 2	4
K 9 8 4	4
K 9 4	4
K 9	K
9	9
9 8	9
9 8 4	8
9 8 4 2	8
9 8 4 3 2	8

I will deal with leads from honour sequences later, but this table shows all the types of holding you can have and which card you would lead if you had chosen to lead the suit.

Note: I am not suggesting that you will often lead away from a king, but if

you had chosen that suit to lead, then the card you would lead is shown on the right in the table.

4TH HIGHEST FROM AN HONOUR (e.g. K 9 8 4 2)

From a long suit headed by an honour (but with no honour sequence – see later) you should lead the fourth highest card.

It is important to note that this standard lead includes the specification 'from an honour'; this is of the utmost importance to your partner who will be playing his card in third position assuming that you hold at least one honour.

Too many players call their lead style 'fourth highest' and forget about the 'from an honour'.

This is the standard lead in no-trumps and if you choose to lead a long suit against a suit contract.

3RD HIGHEST FROM THREE TO AN HONOUR (e.g. K 9 4)

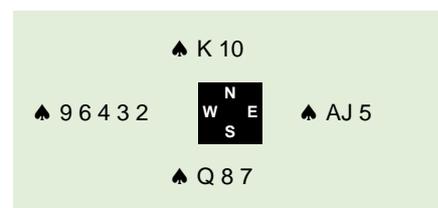
Again you lead a low card if you hold an honour, making things easier for your partner.

Not such a common lead, but it occurs most frequently when leading the unbid suit or your partner's suit.

2ND FROM 'NOTHING' (e.g. 9 8 4 3 2)

From a long suit without an honour, you should lead the second-highest card, in an effort to differentiate between leads from honours. Why the second highest and not the top? Because sometimes you need the top card to win a trick when all the honours have gone. Take a look at the suit in the following diagram; it is not surprising that the honours are all in the short holdings considering your length and this is why you should keep your highest 'little' card just in case.

Observe what happens on the first two tricks:



You lead ♠ 6; dummy's ten is covered by the jack and queen. Your partner's ace kills the king on the second round and that leaves your nine as the master. You would have looked rather silly had you wasted it on the first trick.

This is quite a common lead and can be used to try to establish a suit or simply as a safe lead.

MUD FROM THREE SMALL (e.g. 9 8 4)

Middle Up Down, from three small cards.

To differentiate between a doubleton and tripleton, it is important to play your highest card on the second round. So you lead the eight and then play the nine on the next round, otherwise if you followed the eight with the four, your partner would think you had led from a doubleton.

Not an ideal lead if you can avoid it, because it will often confuse partner early in the hand; however, if you have aces and kings in the other suits, or it is an unbid suit, then you might choose to lead from three small cards.

TOP OF A DOUBLETON (e.g. K 4, 9 4)

If you choose to make a lead from a doubleton it is important to play the highest card first. It achieves two things: it unblocks the suit if you have an honour and it gives a message to your partner. If he sees you play high-low, then he will know you have just two cards.

This is a very risky lead (especially an honour doubleton), but if it is an unbid

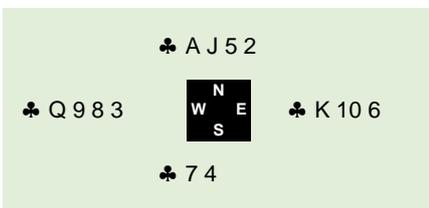
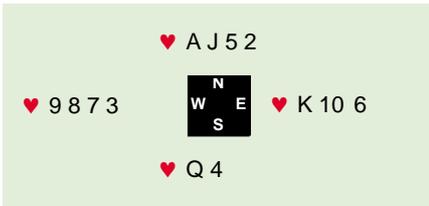
BETTER BRIDGE

suit you will often find success, or, of course, if it is your partner's suit.

LEADING LOW FROM HONOURS

You will have noticed that whenever you hold an honour you should be leading a low card, whilst without an honour you should lead a higher card.

Let us see why I make such a fuss about holding an honour:



Take a look at these two suits. You are playing against 4♠ by South, and partner leads the three of the suit and dummy plays the two. What should you play? If your partner led the same card from both holdings you would have to guess.

In hearts you must take your king on the first round, but in clubs your ten can win the first trick.

Let us work out the answer: if your partner leads the three of clubs, he is promising an honour; you can see the ace, king, jack and ten, so you know that he has the queen! Thus you know that your ten will win the first trick. However, in hearts your partner would lead the eight and now you would know that he did not hold the queen – hence you would leap up with the king.

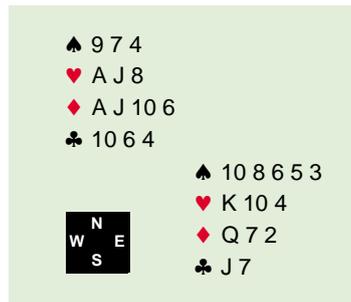
See what happens if you get this wrong: if you play the ten of hearts at trick one, declarer wins the queen, and can then play the ace of hearts and ruff your king away – not nice. But bad things can happen in the club suit too: if you play the king instead of the ten, then declarer can finesse your partner for the queen.

It is imperative to lead low from honours only.

This holds true throughout the play and not just at trick one. It is amazing how many players make mistakes such as these at trick one: either the wrong lead or the wrong card from the leader's partner.

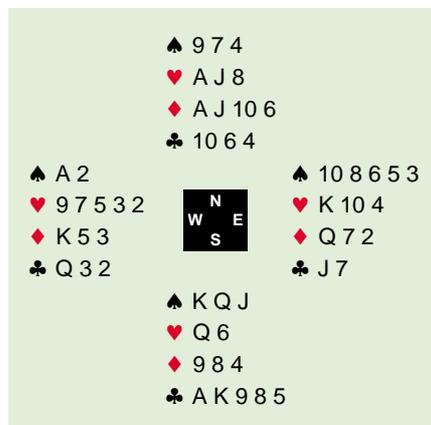
Here is another diagram that exhibits the difference; try it as a problem:

North	South
	1NT ¹
2NT	3NT
¹ (13-15 HCP)	



Partner leads the seven of hearts; dummy plays the eight. How do you defend?

Partner's lead is denying an honour, so rather than playing the 'obvious' ten, you should actually win the trick with the king and *return* the ten. This allows your side to establish the heart suit without difficulty. If instead you play the ten, losing to declarer's queen, then declarer will make sure he keeps you on lead, by running the nine of diamonds; what can you do when you win with your queen? Still holding the king and four of hearts, you cannot afford to lead hearts and thus your chance of defeating the contract has gone.



A lead of the second highest from a bad suit can also help you to decide whether to continue with the led suit or switch. If

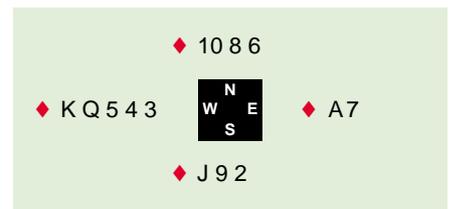
you hold no high card in the suit and your partner's lead suggests he doesn't, then it makes sense to look for a switch.

Honour Leads

	Suit	No-trumps
K Q J 4 3	K	K
K Q 5 4 3	K	4
K Q 10 4 3	K	K
Q J 5 4 3	Q	4
Q J 9 4 3	Q	Q
K J 10 4 3	J	J
A J 10 4 3	A	J
K J 9 4 3	4	4

When you hold a sequence of honours you should always contemplate leading the *top card*.

When you have three consecutive cards starting with an honour, you lead the *top card* against any contract. However, when you have just two cards the story is very different. You should lead the top card against a suit contract, but the 'normal' fourth-highest card against a no-trump contract. The reason for this is relatively straightforward: in suit contracts it is the first two tricks that are all important because usually the third round of a suit will be ruffed, hence there is no need to save your honours for later. In no-trump contracts, though, your aim is to establish your suit and therefore you take your time and by leading a small card you facilitate the running of the suit.

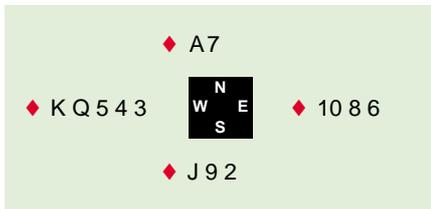


This is a simple example of these honour leads in action. Against 3NT you would lead the four of diamonds and partner could win the ace and return the suit allowing you to win the first five tricks. If, however, you had led the king, the suit would have been blocked – or more likely your partner would have played his ace on your king expecting you to hold the queen and jack, but in the end declarer's jack would make.

Against a suit contract, you would lead the king because the blockage is not so important and, on this layout, your partner would overtake and lead

BETTER BRIDGE

the suit back allowing you to give him a ruff. But if dummy's and partner's holding are swapped, you can see how important it is to lead high against a suit contract:



If you lead low, declarer will make the first trick with the jack and the second with the ace, ruffing any subsequent leads – a disaster.

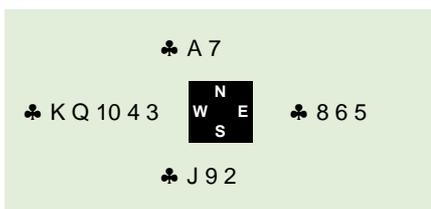
BROKEN SEQUENCES

In fact the rule for knowing when to lead high or low is this:

Against suits: with two or more touching high cards, lead high.

Against no-trumps: with more than two touching high cards, lead high.

Why 'more than two' for no-trumps rather than 'three or more'? Because with 'two and a half' you should lead high! By that I mean a broken sequence such as K-Q-10 or Q-J-9 where you have two touching high cards and one more just below. With these holdings you should lead high because you hope to be able to capture the missing honour in declarer's hand:

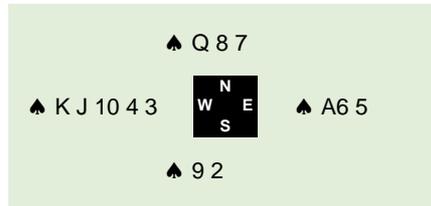


Here you lead the king of clubs against any contract and when the ace is knocked out you wait for partner to get the lead to play a club through declarer

allowing you to pick up declarer's jack.

INTERIOR SEQUENCES

When you hold three high cards with the lower two touching, then you should lead the higher of the touching cards, e.g. from K-J-10-5-4, you lead the jack.



Here is a simple example. If you lead the four of spades, dummy plays low and partner has to waste his ace on nothing. Instead, you should lead the jack: now dummy's queen is easily captured.

Finally, notice the unusual lead of the ace from A-J-10-4-3 against a suit contract. This is because of one of the golden rules of bridge:

Never lead away from an ace on the opening lead against a suit contract.

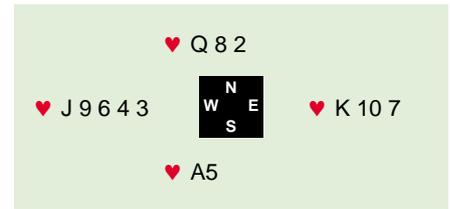
All rules have their exceptions but this has very few.

One reason is obvious: in case the declarer has a singleton – in which case he might make his king and never need to lose another trick in the suit. However, like your leads from honours which help partner to play in third position, this rule is essential, because the third player always assumes that declarer and not partner holds the ace:



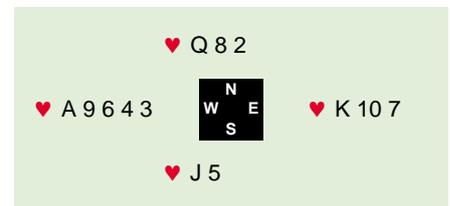
Here is the simplest case: against a suit contract partner leads the four of hearts.

What do you play? You know the lead is from an honour and you know it is not away from the ace. Thus partner's honour is the jack and the ten of hearts is the correct card to play.



Had you played the king, declarer would make an easy two tricks in the suit.

However, if the lead had been from the ace the result would be calamitous as a heart trick would disappear, declarer scoring the jack at trick one.



Against no-trumps there is no such worry: the loss of the first round is no particular problem as it establishes the suit to run. On the holding above, whether you take the ace-king on the first two rounds or not, you will have to lose one trick to declarer – and generally you do best to lose a trick early. Thus, once again, the ten is the right card to play, losing to the jack but allowing the suit to run. Furthermore the suit might have been divided:



And your ten would win the first trick.

Summing up

These are the rules of how to pick the right card to lead from any given suit. Most of them hold true throughout the game, especially leading low from honours. They also hold true when leading partner's suit: you should *not* always lead the highest of your partner's suit, but follow the rules given above. ■