

# Opening Leads

There are 2 considerations to opening leads:

- which suit (more important)
- which card

## Which Suit to Lead (in order of preference)

1. partner's suit – one of my cardinal rules is always lead your partner's suit. You never lose the post mortem by leading partner's suit. There are occasional exceptions, but they are very rare such that if you always lead your partner's suit, you will come out way ahead. Plus, just as importantly, you will build partnership trust. If I do not lead partner's suit, partner can assume I have a void.
2. unbid suit
3. longest suit (against NT contracts)
4. suits with an honor sequence (see below for details on honor sequence leads)
5. trump (see below)
6. singleton – you should either have a trump trick or good reason to believe partner may have the ace or a trump trick

## Which Suit Leads to Avoid

- opponents' suits (if you lead an opponent's suit, partner should assume you have a singleton)
- away from an unprotected honor (except for longest suit in no trump). An unprotected honor is defined as an honor that is not part of a sequence. For example, if you have Kxxx or Qxxx or even Q10xxx, those are all "unprotected" honors. A protected honor is one that is part of a sequence, such as KQJx or QJ10x. Protected honors are very safe, as they establish tricks, whereas unprotected honor leads are not safe, as they often give away tricks.
- never lead away from an ace in a suit contract
  - ◆ It is almost never right to lead an unprotected ace. As noted above, an unprotected honor is one that is not part of a sequence, so an unprotected ace is an ace in a suit where you do not hold the king. If you never lead an unprotected ace, you will come out way ahead in the long run. There will be 5 instances where it will be wrong for every instance where it might be right. See below for a further explanation.
  - ◆ In the rare case where you decide you must lead the suit, you should lead the ace.
  - ◆ if you lead low, partner should assume you don't have the ace
  - ◆ in no trump, it is often right to lead away from an ace, and that is perfectly acceptable. The idea in no trump is to establish your suit by getting rid of the stoppers that declarer has. By picking a long suit, it is more likely that declarer is short in that suit, and has fewer stoppers.
- doubletons (except in partner's suit or trump)

## Why You Should Avoid Leading Unprotected Aces

Let me give a few examples of why it is wrong to lead an unprotected ace. Assume the spade suit is distributed as follows:

♠ Q 8 7

♠ A 6 5 4                      ♠ J 10 9

♠ K 3 2

If you lead the ace of spades, declarer will take 2 spade tricks. But if anyone else makes the first spade lead, declarer will take only one spade trick.

Well, you might say, if partner has the King, it probably does not make any difference. Let's look at a different example:

♠ Q 8 7

♠ A 6 5 4                      ♠ K 10 9

♠ J 3 2

If you lead the ace of spades, declarer will end up with a spade trick. He will be able to force out the King with the Q and win the J. However, if you force declarer to lead this suit, he will not be able to take any spade tricks.

The bottom line is aces are best used to capture other honors. If you lead an unprotected ace, it will not capture another honor, and its value to your side will be greatly diminished.

## When to Lead Trumps

You should lead a trump when you have reason to believe dummy (or declarer) is short in one of their partner's suits, particularly if you are long in that suit.

If declarer bids 2 suits, and dummy shows a preference, it is likely that dummy is short in the other of declarer's suits. On those sorts of auctions, a trump lead should be seriously considered.

For example, assume the following auction:

1H-P-1S-P-2C-P-3C-P-P-P

A club lead might very well be your best lead, particularly if you are long in hearts or spades.

Here is another auction where a trump lead might be desirable:

1S-P-2C-P-2H-P-2N-P-3H-P-4H-P-P-P

In this auction, declarer showed at least 5 hearts and 5 spades. And responder showed a preference for hearts over spades (if responder preferred spades, he would have bid 3S over 3 hearts). Therefore, responder is shorter in spades than in hearts, and also has no more than 3 hearts (if responder had 4 hearts, he would have raised 2H to 3H immediately). A heart lead rates to work well, because you are trying to get rid of as many of responder's trumps as possible and prevent declarer from using them to trump his spade losers.

## Which Card to Lead (in order of preference)

- top of an honor sequence
  - ◆ In suits, you can lead from a 2 card honor sequence – A from AK, K from KQ, Q from QJ, J from J10
  - ◆ In no trump, you should only lead top from a 3 card honor sequence or broken honor sequence (K from KQJ or KQ10, Q from QJ10 or QJ9, J from J109 or J108)
  - ◆ never lead an honor that is not the top of a sequence (for example, if you hold J 7 6, lead the 6, not the J). Some people think you should lead J if it is partner's suit, but that is incorrect.
  - ◆ some people lead K from AK, but that is not common practice any more
- 4th best
- 3 card suit (see discussion below for which card to lead)
- high from doubleton (avoid doubletons except in partner's suit or trump)

## What to Lead from 3 Small

Everyone agrees that if you have a 3 card suit with an honor, you should lead low.

There is no universal agreement on what to lead from 3 small. Each of the 3 choices has its advocates.

- Many experts prefer to lead low from 3 small. That gives partner count (“count” here means how many cards you have in the suit) and allows him to differentiate between the leader having a doubleton or three.
- On BBO, the most popular treatment is to lead high from 3 small. That tells partner you have no honor in the suit.
- A few people advocate leading the middle card (for example, they lead the 6 from 8 6 4). The second time the suit is played, you play the high card (the 8 in this example). This is known as “Middle Up Down” or MUD for short. As far as I am concerned, this is the worst choice of the 3, as your opening lead is often ambiguous. You need to take a stand, leading low if you think count is more important, and leading high if you think denying an honor is more important.

The above discussion assumes you are not leading partner's suit. When leading partner's suit, the rules are somewhat different:

- If you have not supported partner's suit, lead low from 3 small. It is almost always more important for partner to know your count (how many cards you have in the suit) rather than whether or not you have an honor. Partner can often work out where all the honors are, but it is harder for him to determine whether or not you have a doubleton if you lead high from 3 small.
- If you have supported partner's suit, then he knows you have at least 3. Therefore, you should lead low from 3 to an honor, and high from 3 small. Since he already knows you don't have a doubleton, you might as well provide the additional information about whether or not you have an honor.
- When you have the Ace in partner's suit, the situation is a bit ambiguous in a suit contract. It is still dangerous to lead a suit in which you have an unprotected ace, but less so than in a suit which partner has not bid. If you have another attractive lead, I would think about leading that suit, rather than leading an unprotected ace, even in partner's suit. In a no trump contract, you should still lead the suit, as leading away from an unprotected ace is not as dangerous, because your ace will not get trumped.

If you choose to lead the suit and have Ax, always lead the ace to show two. If you have three or more to the ace and choose to lead the suit, do the following. In a suit contract, lead the ace (remember, you never lead away from an ace in a suit contract). In a no trump contract, lead low when you hold 3 or more to the ace in partner's suit.

## Quiz

Your hand is:

S A1086

H 83

D QJ9

C Q954

You are the dealer

What should you lead for each of the following auctions

### Auction 1

P-P-P-1NT-P-3NT-3 passes

My preference is the 6 of spades. This is your longest and strongest suit, and the opponents made no attempt to find a major suit fit.

Other reasonable alternatives are the 4 of clubs and Q of diamonds.

### Auction 2

P-P-P-1H-P-3H-P-4H-3 passes

My preference is the Q of diamonds. Leading top of an honor sequence against suit contracts is always a strong opening lead.

### Auction 3

P-1S-2C-2H-P-4H-3 passes

The 4 of clubs. You never lose the post-mortem if you lead your partner's suit.

### Auction 4

P-P-P-1H-P-1S-P-1NT-P-2NT-3 passes

The 4 of clubs, your longest suit that was not bid. Unlike hand 1, a spade lead will not tend to work out because your opponents bid spades.

The Q of diamonds is a reasonable alternative.

### Auction 5

P-P-1H-1S-P-2S-3 passes

The 8 of hearts. It's fine to lead a doubleton if your partner bid the suit.

## **Auction 6**

P-1C-P-1H-P-1S-P-1NT-P-2H-3 passes

The 8 of hearts. This is the type of auction where a trump lead will often work out very well. Your left hand opponent is short in diamonds (since he bid the other 3 suits), and since you are long in 2 of the suits bid, your right hand opponent is likely to be short in at least one black suit. A cross ruff is a strong possibility.

## **Auction 7**

P-P-P-1C-P-1D-P-1H-P-3H-3 passes

My preference would be the 8 of hearts. It seems like the most passive lead, the lead least likely to give away a trick.

Some people would want to lead a spade. It is the only unbid suit, and the opponents did avoid bidding no trump. If you lead a spade, you have to lead the ace, since you cannot lead away from an ace in a suit contract. As I said above, leading unprotected aces is rarely right, which is what steered me away from a spade lead.

The Q of diamonds is not likely to be right, since your opponent bid diamonds. Some people think that leading through dummy's strength is a good opening lead, but my experience has been that it usually doesn't work out well to lead a suit that the opponents have bid.