

BRIDGE – BEGINNER’S LESSONS I - 10

OPENING LEADS

1. The Opponents’ bidding gives you a blueprint as to their holdings. Use that information to help you choose the suit that offers the best chance for an effective opening lead. From their auctions you can learn the size and shape of their respective hands, their combined strength, and how well they match, or do not match, in certain suits.

2. In addition, their bidding reveals a lot about your Partner’s hand. To figure out Partner’s point-count add your points to the Opponent’s combined count and subtract the total from 40. To figure out Partner’s length in a particular suit add your length there to what they have promised and subtract the total from 13.

3. Any bid that Partner makes can also help your selection of the opening lead. As a general rule, always give the highest priority to a suit that Partner has mentioned, unless you hold specific self interest in leading a suit of your own preference.

4. Against a no-trump contract the normal lead is from a long suit, trying to establish low-card winners. There are three exceptional circumstances, however, to avoid leading your own long suit: (1) the Opponents have bid it, (2) your Partner has bid another suit, or (3) you have a very weak suit in an entry-less hand.

5. Against a trump contract the normal lead is also from a long suit, looking for fast defensive tricks. Short-suit leads in a suit which Partner has bid, and trump leads, however, do have their place.

a) Singleton leads are enticing, but to be effective they must offer a very good chance for a defensive ruff. Ideally, Partner should have a strong hand with a fast entry to give you the ruff, and you should have at least one trump stopper, such as the A or K of trumps to prevent Declarer from drawing all of yours quickly. A word of caution: leading a singleton can be dangerous, since it often helps the Opponents to develop one of their long side-suits by giving Declarer a free finesse.

b) Trump leads work best whenever Declarer might try for a cross-ruff, whenever the Dummy has ruffing power, but not many trump cards, or whenever you have winners in one of Declarer’s side suits that might be trumped away. Never lead trump from any of the following trump sequences as doing so, statistically, is likely to give up a trump trick to which your side would otherwise be entitled. (X, JX, JXX, QX, or QXX)

Opening Leads – Choosing the Suit

The Opponents’ bidding gives you a blueprint of their holdings. That information can be used to help one choose the suit that offers the best chance for an effective opening lead. From the Opponent’s auction you can learn the size and shape of their respective hands, their combined strength, and how well they match in certain suits. Choosing the specific card to lead within the suit chosen is mostly a matter of applying standardized rules, as summarized within the next Lesson.

In addition, the Opponent’s bidding reveals a lot about your Partner’s hand. To figure out Partner’s point count add your points to their combined count and subtract the total from forty. Any bid that Partner makes can also help your selection of the opening lead. As a general rule, unless an alternative excellent lead exists, always give the highest priority to a suit that Partner has mentioned.

How the Bidding Suggests Which Suit to Lead or Not to Lead

Information Available From the Opponents:

1. Size – The high-card point count from their levels of bidding describes holdings
2. Shape – The suits they bid, or fail to bid, describe their length
3. Their Final Contract and the Suits Bid During their Auction Process – Foretells their combined strength and how they match in certain suits

Information Available From Partner:

1. Any bid that Partner makes gives specific details about his/her size and shape
2. Any suit that Partner mentions should be given top priority

Leads Against No-Trump Contracts

Against a No-Trump contract, the normal lead is from your long suit, (4th best), trying to establish long-card winners. There are three exceptional circumstances, however, for avoiding leading your own long suit:

- 1) The Opponents have bid your long suit, or
- 2) Your Partner has bid another suit, or
- 3) You have a very weak suit and/or an entry-less hand diminishing chances of success.

Leads Against Suit Contracts

Against a trump contract the normal lead is also from a long suit, looking for fast defensive tricks. Short-suit leads and trump leads, however, do have their place.

Singleton leads are enticing, but to be effective they must offer a very good chance for a defensive ruff. Ideally, Partner should have a strong hand with a fast entry to give you the ruff, and you should have the Ace or King of trumps to prevent Declarer from drawing all of yours quickly.

A Word of Caution: A singleton leads, or a lead from a worthless doubleton, especially of a suit not bid by Partner, can be dangerous, since they often help the Opponents to develop one of their long side-suits and offer Declarer the likelihood of a free finesse. Trump leads work best whenever Declarer might try for a cross-ruff, whenever the Dummy has ruffing power but not many trump cards, or whenever you have winners in one of Declarer's side suits that might be trumped away.

Possible Favored Leads

(Not Necessarily in Priority Order)

A. Against Suit Contracts

- **Your Suit**
- **Partner's Suit (Having been bid)**
- **Partner's suit (Reflected by Partner's "Lead-Directing" Double of any artificial bid)**
- **Any Un-Bid Suit**
- **Through Dummy's Strength**

- **Top of any High Sequence (e.g., KQJ)**
- **Top of any Low Sequence (e.g., JT9)**
- **Low from three or more to any honor (Hoping)**
- **Top of Nothing (Hoping)**
- **A Singleton or a Doubleton – Looking for a ruff**
- **An Ace(King) from an Ace-King combination to see Dummy and get an attitude signal from Partner while retaining the lead for trick #2 (Both of the above are best if Partner had bid the suit, and/or you hold a trump control)**
- **A Long Suit looking to give Partner a ruff**
- **A Trump – Led in order to reduce the ruffing power of Dummy – Works best if you or Partner has Declarer’s 2nd suit covered**
- **A Trump from a strong sequence (e.g., KQJT) – To pull Declarer’s trumps and, effectively, convert the contract to one played in No-Trump.**

B. Against No-Trump Contracts

- **Your Suit (4th from the top of longest and strongest suit – Entries Needed)**
- **Partner’s Suit (Having been bid)**
- **The 2nd suit bid by the Dummy on the way towards the Opponent’s final No-Trump contract**
- **Any Un-Bid Suit**
- **Through Dummy’s Strength**
- **Any Safe Lead – (Especially against a Slam or a HCP RHO)**
- **Top of any High Sequence (e.g., KQJ)**
- **Top of any Low Sequence (e.g., JT9) or Top of Nothing (Hoping)**
- **Low from three or more to any honor (Hoping)**

Opening Leads – Choosing the Card

Once you have chosen the suit to lead based upon the Opponent’s and Partner’s bidding, coupled with your own specific hand, there is a specific card to lead from the chosen suit. The specific card chosen is standardized for your particular collection of cards and from which specific contract is being played; i.e., a Suit contract or a No-Trump contract.

Cards Selected for Lead Against a No-Trump Contract

The normal lead Against a No-Trump contract is from a long suit, hoping to establish the lesser cards in your holdings of that suit.

(1) When the suit is headed by a sequence of three or more cards that include one or more honors, lead an honor from the sequential part, as follows:

- a) Lead the **A** from **AKQ**. b) Lead the **Q** from **QJ10**; etc.

(2) From a broken sequence - not quite as safe but still very good - again lead the top card as follows:

- a) Lead the **A** from **A**KJx. b) Lead the **Q** from **Q**J9xx; etc.

(3) From an interior sequence – carries the highest risk amongst the sequential holdings – lead the highest card of the touching honors as follows:

- a) Lead the Q from A**Q**J. c) Lead the J from K**J**T
 b) Lead the T from A**T**9. d) Lead the T from **Q**T9; etc.

The purpose of the sequence lead is two-fold:

- a) To facilitate setting up the long cards in the suit by driving out Declarer’s stoppers and preventing him/her from winning the first trick cheaply.
 b) To give Partner an explanation of the possible cards you hold at the top of your suit.

(4) Without the proper sequence of honors at the top of the suit, normally lead fourth-best (i.e., the fourth highest card). For example, choose the five from KJ8**5**, AK9**5**3, or 876**5**2.

The purposes of leading 4th best, absent a three or more card sequence are:

- a) Ordinarily the 4th best will be a small card, which by definition says that you like the suit that you are leading. Doing so encourages Partner to assist you in the development of the suit.
 b) From the next card played by you in the suit, Partner can usually ascertain just how long your actual suit is.
 c) All 4th best suit leads allow you to utilize the “**Rule of 11.**”

(5) Typically, a small spot-card lead suggests something of value in the suit; i.e., a suit of three or more cards headed by an Ace, King, or Queen. A high spot-card, on the other hand, suggests a doubleton lead or 2nd highest from three or more pieces without a high honor.

Opening Leads – Choosing the Card

Cards Selected for Lead Against a Suit Contract

Against a suit contract there are two important differences from No-Trump leads.

- (1) The lead of an honor promises only two or more cards in sequence, rather than three. The principal concern is usually only the first two tricks in the suit, since typically someone is likely to be void by the third trick played in the suit.
 a) Lead the **K** from **K**Q75. b) Lead the **Q** from **Q**J63; etc.
- (2) From Ace-high suits, the lead is not 4th best. Under-leading from an Ace runs the risk that the Opponents might win the first trick in one hand and have a singleton in the other. Therefore, if you must lead from an A-high suit, such as **A**xxxx, start with the Ace. (It might be trumped if you save it for later).

Cards Selected for Lead in a Suit Bid by Partner

Failure to lead a card in the suit bid by Partner implies that:

- 1) You are void in Partner’s bid suit

2) You have a better alternative – (not) “I hope it is better, but it is better!”

When you lead a suit bid by Partner, there are no significant variations in choosing the card. Thus, it is usually incorrect to lead an honor, unless it is from a singleton, a doubleton, or a sequence of honors. Against a NT contract assuming you hold an honor in Partner’s bid suit (not a doubleton or singleton), it is important to lead a low card from three or more cards headed by an Ace, King or a Queen,

- a. To announce something of value in the suit.
- b. To keep that value behind Declarer on a subsequent lead from Partner.

How Partner Interprets a Spot-Card Led Against a Suit Contract

- a) A spot-card lead could be from a singleton or doubleton, looking for a Ruff. Partner will have to judge from the visible cards in his/her hand and from the Dummy, whether the lead is likely to be from a short suit or a long one.
- b) A low spot card, by Partnership agreement, shows something of value in the suit (a King or a Queen), but denies both the Ace and a 2-honor sequence at the top.
- c) A high spot-card, (2nd from the top), led from three or more cards in a suit, is generally “**top-of-nothing**”. From three spot-cards it is probably best to lead (Middle – Up – Down) (“MUD”) so that Partner will not be misled that you have either led from an honor or from a doubleton.

Summation

The card that you select as your opening lead is, oft times, perhaps the most important card you are going to play during the entire defense. More often than not, it is the determining factor in whether or not Declarer makes his/her contract, or at the very least, whether or not it affords the Declarer an extra trick.

Consider the likely distribution around the table (easier determined when there is plenty of bidding), Declarer’s likely strength, and the degree of trump fit that the bidding indicates, and whether you should make an aggressive or a passive opening lead.

After Having Listened To the Auction, Consider the Following:

1. Does the Dummy figure to have a long side suit?
2. If there is a long side suit, how is it breaking?
3. Should I be looking to ruff?
4. Should I be looking to give Partner a ruff?
5. Should I be trying to shorten the Declarer of his/her Trumps?
6. Should I just be sitting back and waiting for tricks rather than attacking?
7. Was there a very strong bid by Declarer sitting to my right (tends to imply that a passive lead be best)?
8. Should I be leading a Trump in order to cut down on the ruffing power in the Dummy?
9. Did Partner make an opening bid, overcall or double (lead directing or otherwise) which indicates a suit to lead?