

## Defending Against No-Trump Contracts

In order for the defense to possibly defeat most no-trump contracts, or, at the very least, hold Declarer to the feasible, minimum number of tricks possible, Defenders need to make both high-card tricks *and* tricks established through length. The first three winning rounds of each suit played are usually tricks won by means of high-cards played for either team. All four suits are usually led at some stage of play, and, therefore, the side with the greatest high-card strength will usually win the earlier played tricks. **The key to successful no-trump defense, therefore, is to establish tricks through length as early as possible during the play of the hand.** It is the tricks from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> rounds of any suit played that usually maximize the defensive play against any no-trump contract.

### Establishing Defensive Tricks through Length

The suit chosen to be led by the Defense should be the suit that has the best potential for making tricks through length. This is usually, but not necessarily, a suit *not* bid by either opponent. It is usually unwise to lead a suit bid by an Opponent, for in doing so, you are likely to be helping Declarer, to establish additional tricks through length. Never do the work of the Opponents.

**1. Leading a Suit Bid by Partner:** Partner has shown length by bidding. The best lead is often any suit bid by your Partner. Your assistance in leading that suit is likely to be helpful in establishing tricks through length. If, and/or when, the lead is lost to Declarer, Partner is likely to have an entry card to regain the lead in order to continue to establish his/her long suit.

**Example:** North, your Partner, opens "1H", East overcalls "1-NT" and you are South, holding K9632 83 632 Q94. After you "Pass," West "Passes," North "Passes," and "1-NT," then, becomes the final contract. You should lead the H8, **not the S3**. Even if you were to establish your Spade suit, you hold no entries with which to re-enter your hand in order to use it.

**The Specific Card of Partner's Suit Chosen to be Led:** The specific card led depends upon the length you hold in Partner's suit. It is important to show your length in Partner's suit so that Partner can judge the combined length your Partnership holds in the suit in question. Failure to subscribe to this standardization eliminates Partner's ability to identify the combined number of cards held by the Partnership.

- a. From a doubleton – lead the top card
- b. From three or four cards, lacking an honor card – lead the second highest from three, or the 4<sup>th</sup> highest from four
- c. From a sequence of honors in Partner's suit – lead the top card in the sequence
- d. From three or four cards headed by an honor, A, K, or Q – lead the lowest card

**2. Leading Your Longest Suit Not Bid By Your Opponents:** If your Partner did not show a suit, and you hold at least one outside entry honor, you should lead a suit of four or more cards which your Opponents have not bid. The fourth round of a suit is often won by an 8 or a 9. If you have a choice of long suits to lead, then try the suit in which you hold the 8 or 9. If an Opponent also has four cards in that suit, you are more likely to make the fourth round trick if you hold better spot cards than the Opponent.

- a. From a four-card suit – lead your fourth highest; i.e., your lowest card
- b. From a five-card, or longer, suit – lead your fourth highest card
- c. From three or more cards in sequence – lead top of the sequence

**Example:** You hold: 976 A532 K943 82. Lead the D3.

### **3. Leading a Major Suit When the Opponents Have Failed to Use Stayman**

**Following any No-Trump Opening:** When the Opponents open with a NT call and fail to investigate for a Major suit trump fit, using “**Stayman**,” you should prefer to lead a Major suit. With failure to invoke Stayman, the Opponents will usually have length in one or both of the Minor suits. You should, therefore, avoid leading a Minor suit and try a Major suit, even if you have better strength in your Minor.

**Example:** North opens “1-NT.” You are East, holding: 9762 A32 KJ43 92. After you “Pass,” South bids “2-NT,” West “Passes,” and North raises to “3-NT.” South has shown no interest in a Major suit, so lead the S2, rather than the D3 from your stronger Diamond suit.

**4. Leading From a 3-Card Suit:** If you, on lead, do not have a 4-card or longer suit that has not been bid by the Opponents, then you should lead a suit of three cards that your Opponents haven’t bid. You look to find a suit where your Partner, rather than you, is likely to hold length. When you have three cards in the suit you can lead the suit three times and hopefully establish Partner’s fourth-round trick.

a. From a suit with three cards headed by an honor – lead your lowest card. Your partner will later return the suit that you have led, assuming you have length in the suit. When you later win the honor in the suit, you can then decide whether or not you are helping establish a length trick in Partner’s hand or whether you should switch suits as you may be in danger of establishing a length trick for the Declarer.

**Example:** North opens “1C,” East “Passes,” South bids “1D,” and you are West, holding: KJ86 A73 J8 Q942. You “Pass,” North re-bids “1S,” East “Passes,” and South bids “1-NT.” This becomes the final contract. You should lead the H3

b. From a suit with just three small cards – lead the top card. This is sometimes called a “**Top-of-Nothing**” lead. Some Players like to lead a middle card – “**MUD**,” this stands for “**Middle-Up-Down**.” The lead of a “high-ish” spot card will alert Partner that you haven’t led a long suit, so Partner may wish to switch suits later in the play. The higher your spot card, the easier it will be for Partner to assess your lead was **not** made from length, so “**Top-of-Nothing**” is usually a lot clearer than “**MUD**.”

**Example:** North opens “1C” and you are East, with KJ96 973 J8 Q942. After you “Pass,” South bids “1S” and West “Passes.” North then re-bids “1-NT”. This becomes the final contract. Your Opponents have bid both Clubs and Spades. You should lead H9. A high spot card in your longest un-bid suit indicates the suit is **not** your long suit and you have no strength in that suit.

### **5. Leading an Un-Bid 2- or 3-Card Suit When Holding a Very Poor Hand:**

When you have a very poor hand with very little chance of making a trick, you may choose *not* to lead your long suit, but rather lead a 2-card or 3-card suit where your Partner may hold length and possible outside entry strength. If you, holding no high-card strength, are not going to regain the lead, then it is best to try and help establish length tricks in Partner's hand, rather than in yours. If your partner has the only winning high-card tricks for your side then your Partner will, hopefully, gain the lead during the hand, and may eventually be able to make a length trick. You can help by leading Partner's presumed long suit with your opening lead. Partner's long suit is likely to be an un-bid suit where you don't hold length.

**Example:** North opens "1C" and you are East, with 97642 973 843 J7. After you "Pass," South bids "1H," and West "Passes." North then re-bids "1-NT" which is raised to "3-NT" by South. Your Opponents have bid Clubs and Hearts. You should lead D8 and hope that Partner has length in Diamonds. If you lead a Spade, your Partner will continue Spades. Even if you, hypothetically, were to establish your 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Spades as length winners, you have no entry cards to take these tricks.

If you lose the lead to an Opponent when playing your long suit you will need an entry card to regain the lead so your length tricks can be won at a later stage of the hand. It is certainly disheartening to have a number of winning length tricks left in your hand with no way of winning the lead to make those tricks.

**6. Continuing the Defense:** When you are defending against a no-trump contract, it is often best for the defense to continue leading the suit first led by your side on the opening lead. Many players live by the old saying "*never leave a suit until it leaves you,*" and it is true that on most hands, you should keep leading the suit led on the first trick so that your Partnership will develop a 4<sup>th</sup>-round length trick in that suit. Generally speaking, it is often true that every time you, on defense, switch to a new suit, you, on average, lose ½ a trick. Both Partners should remember the suit led to the first trick and should work together to try to establish the 4<sup>th</sup> round of the suit. This may mean giving up high-card tricks to the Dummy or to the Declarer. Hopefully one Defender will eventually be able to take an extra trick through having greater length in that suit than the Declarer or Dummy – the vital 4<sup>th</sup>-round trick.

To enable the defense to make a 4<sup>th</sup>-round trick you usually play on a suit where your Partnership holds more cards than your Opponents. When you and your Partner have a suit of **seven or more cards** together, you may be able to establish a 4<sup>th</sup>-round trick by leading the suit three times. When your Partnership holds just six cards, you should often look to switch suits. It is also important to switch suits if you see that continuing the suit led is fruitless and will result in helping the Declarer make a 4<sup>th</sup>-round trick.

**Analyzing Partner's Opening Lead:** The level of the card led will usually reveal Partner's length in the suit that has been led.

- a. When a high spot card is led, or an honor card is led, it may indicate a doubleton. With a doubleton in your suit your Partner should lead his/her top card.
- b. The lead of a low spot card will show three or more cards in your suit.

- c. Occasionally Partner will lead a singleton in the suit that you bid. This may be an honor, a low spot card, or a high spot card. This is sometimes difficult to assess, although if the dummy has length in your suit you may be able to assume Partner has a singleton.
- d. When you haven't bid, Partner will likely lead his/her own long suit. **Usually Partner will have four or five cards in the suit led.** Sometimes Partner will lead a three-card suit. The level of the card led will usually reveal Partner's length in the suit.
- e. If the lead is the lowest card in the suit, then the lead is likely from a 4-card suit. You will know Partner has led his/her lowest card if there are no lower cards missing after the first trick. For example, if partner leads the 4, the dummy plays the 2, and you have the 3, you will know that Partner has no lower cards in the suit.
- f. If there is a lower spot card not played to the first trick, then the lead may have been made from a 5-card suit. You can often tell Partner has led his/her second-lowest card because there is a lower card missing after the play to the first trick. For example, if Partner leads the 4, the Dummy plays the 3, you play the Ace, and the Declarer plays the 5. You can now clearly see that the 2 is missing. Partner is likely to have the 2, and so Partner has thus led from a 5-card suit.
- g. The lead of a high spot card indicates that Partner has not led from length. Partner has probably led "*Top-of-Nothing*" and has just three cards in the suit led. Partner, then, is likely to have length in a suit that the Opponents have bid.
- h. An honor card lead does not necessarily show Partner's length. Rather Partner is showing a very strong sequence in the suit led. Partner has excellent strength in the suit led. You should return Partner's suit, if possible.

**7. Suit Preference Signals on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-Round of Your Long Suit:** Often when you are working to establish length tricks when defending against a no-trump contract, you have to lose the lead to a high card in Declarer's hand or in Dummy's hand. When you lose the lead on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-round of the suit, you may find that your Partner will have no cards left in the suit to return the suit to you when Partner re-gains the lead later in the hand. In these situations you must play a suit preference signal to indicate where you have an entry card to your length tricks.

If the 3<sup>rd</sup>-round of the suit will be won by an Opponent, you must signal your entry card to the 4<sup>th</sup>- and 5<sup>th</sup>-round tricks in the suit by the level of the card you play to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-round. This suit preference signal applies when you are leading to the third round of your long suit or when partner is leading to the third round of the suit. If your partner later gains the lead your Partner will then know the suit to lead to you so you can win your established length tricks.

- a. If you play a high card on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-round of your suit, you indicate an entry in the higher-ranking suit, other than the Declarer's long suit.
- b. If you play a low card on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-round of your suit, you indicate an entry in the lower-ranking suit, other than the Declarer's long suit.

**8. Ducking to Preserve Entries to Length Tricks:** When you are defending with potential length tricks and you have no entry cards in any other suit, you may consider ducking tricks in your long suit. You let the Declarer win in your suit early in the play. If you duck a trick early your Partner may well have another card in your suit to lead to you later in the play.

When your Partner regains the lead your Partner can then continue your suit. For example, you may have the Ace and the King in your suit but no Queen. If you can see that the Partnership will have to lose a trick to an Opponent's queen, anyway, you should try to duck a round of the suit and allow your Opponents to win an early trick in the suit. You can then later regain the lead and play the Ace and King in order to establish the remaining cards as length tricks.

**9. Switching Suits in Defense Against No-Trump Contracts:** On many hands, in defense, it is vital to switch suits rather than continuing the suit originally led.

a. When the Opponents are likely to win the 4<sup>th</sup>-round trick in the suit led by your defending Partnership.

b. When the card led reveals that the Opponents have greater length in the suit than the combination of you and your Partner. If your side holds six or fewer cards you should usually look to switch to a different suit in order to create length tricks.

c. When the Dummy or the Declarer is revealed to have four or more cards in the led suit and, therefore, the potential to win the 4<sup>th</sup> lead of the suit.

**Lesson Exercises:**

**Choose East's Likely Best Lead!**

	<u>Bidding</u>				<u>East Holds</u>
(1)	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	876 <u>3</u>
	1-NT	Pass	3-NT	Pass	A97
	Pass	Pass			AK4
					832
(2)	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	<u>8</u> 42
	1H	Pass	2D	Pass	AT64
	2-NT	Pass	3-NT	Pass	JT63
	Pass	Pass			97
(3)	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	K97 <u>5</u> 2
	1-NT	Pass	3-NT	Pass	AT4
	Pass	Pass			863
					62
(4)	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	976
				1H	<u>9</u> 2
	1-NT	Pass	Pass	Pass	A9432
					652
(5)	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	K <u>Q</u> T76
	1-NT	Pass	3-NT	Pass	975
	Pass	Pass			A76
					82