

Don't Drop the Ball!

Your partner has put the opening lead on the table, but the work is not over. It is your job to read the clues provided by that opening lead and continue the defense of the hand. First, determine whether your partner has made an *attacking lead* or a *protecting lead*. Then, analyze what partner's card tells you about the suit led and determine partner's probable plan for the defense. If your partner made an *attacking lead*, it is usually right to continue attacking the same suit. If your partner made a *protecting lead*, however, you may need to choose whether to attack or continue partner's passive defense. The auction and/or dummy may suggest that partner wants you to attack a suit he or she could not lead safely. Frequently, though, your side's best defense may be the *passive defense* begun by your partner. If that is the case, continue the suit, defend passively, and don't let declarer take any tricks to which he, or she, is not entitled.

(Unless otherwise indicated, assume all leads and signals in this presentation are standard.)

YOU – OR YOUR PARTNER – BID A SUIT

You bid a suit, and *partner led that suit*.

Especially if it's an overcall, your bid suggests that your side's best defense lies in attacking your suit. If defending a no trump contract, your suit is probably the longest and strongest suit in your two hands combined. If defending a suit contract, your suit may contain the most quick tricks. The card partner has led will indicate both the length and strength of partner's holding in your suit – and that information will allow you to visualize declarer's holding, too.

- ♠ A high spot card will tell you partner holds no honor cards in your suit.
 - ♥ *Suit contract*: This lead also indicates shortness – a singleton or the top card in a doubleton – *unless* partner has shown three or more cards in your suit in the bidding.
 - ♥ *No trump contract*: Partner may hold a doubleton in your suit or may be leading in accordance with your partnership agreement. Do you know what that agreement is?
 - ♥ *No trump contract*: Partner is unlikely to lead a singleton, even in your bid suit, when defending a no trump contract. In this case, your suit is probably not the longest suit in the partnership's holding.
- ♠ A low spot card should guarantee at least three cards in your suit.
 - ♥ *Suit contract*: If your partner raised your suit, a low spot card also indicates an honor in the suit.
 - ♥ *Suit contract*: If partner *did not* raise your suit, this low spot card simply indicates length; partner may not hold an honor.
 - ♥ *No trump contract*: If your partnership agreement is to always lead the *top of nothing* against a no trump contract, regardless of length, a low spot card lead will also guarantee an honor card in the suit.
- ♠ The lead of an honor card shows either an honor doubleton or the top card of two or more touching honors. Partner's play at trick two will confirm the exact holding.
 - ♥ *Suit contract*: If partner did not lead the Ace in your suit, partner (usually) doesn't have it.

You bid a suit, but *partner did not lead your suit*.

A good attacking lead, if it exists, is always preferable to a protecting lead. Your suit bid indicated a likely attacking lead. If partner leads a different suit, assume this is also an *attacking lead*. Your

partner may have a strong suit of his own and a singleton in your suit, or a strong suit and enough entries to set the contract on his own.

- ♠ An honor card lead should guarantee an *honor card sequence*.¹
 - ♥ **Suit contract:** If partner is leading his suit in preference to yours, this sequence is probably headed by the ace or king. Partner doesn't need an attitude signal, but may be hoping to give you a ruff. *Give partner count in the suit*, but don't forget to unblock if necessary.
 - ♥ **No trump contract:** Partner should hold a long suit headed by an honor card sequence. If partner is leading a suit bid by dummy or declarer, this should be a solid sequence. Don't forget to unblock your holding in partner's suit!
- ♠ Spot card leads against a **no trump contract**:
 - ♥ A low spot card lead should indicate a long suit. In fact, partner thinks the partnership's holding in his suit is probably longer than the partnership's holding in your suit. Try to win the trick and return partner's suit.
 - ♥ A high spot card lead is normally a *protecting lead*. If partner makes this lead, rather than leading your suit, the reasonable assumption is that he has no cards in your suit and cannot safely lead his own long suit, so was forced into making this *protecting lead*.
- ♠ Spot card leads against a **suit contract**:
 - ♥ Any spot card lead is likely to be a singleton. Partner has spare trumps and a sure entry, and he will lead your suit at the first opportunity. *Return the original suit to give partner a ruff*. Don't forget to give partner a suit preference signal.
 - ♥ The possibility always exists that partner has no cards in your suit and no good attacking lead to make. Does the bidding and the dummy support this conclusion?
- ♠ Of course, there is always the possibility that partner was sleeping during the bidding and has no idea that you bid a suit. *If you value this partnership, do not defend with this assumption in mind.*

Partner bid a suit *and* led that suit.

Because partner has length in this suit, this is an *attacking lead*. Unless you have a better idea, continue leading this suit. The cards you play should show your length and honor card holding. Play the lowest of equal honors when attempting to win the suit; otherwise, show attitude or count, as appropriate.

- ♠ Partner led an honor card, showing a long suit headed by an honor card sequence. Don't forget to unblock if necessary!
- ♠ Partner led low spot card in the suit, indicating length in the suit, but denying an honor card sequence. What is your partnership agreement when leading from a long suit?
 - ♥ You should be able to determine partner's exact length in this suit from the bidding, dummy's holding, and your partnership agreements.
 - ♥ **Suit contract:** This might not be partner's best lead, *unless you have supported partner's suit* and/or the bidding suggests you may hold one of partner's missing honors.

¹ There are three types of *honor card sequences*: a **solid sequence** contains three or more cards in sequence headed by an honor card; e.g., **KQJ, QJT, T98**. An **interrupted** or **broken sequence** contains three cards headed by an honor, the top two being in sequence, a gap separating them from the third card; e.g., **KQT, QJ9, JT8**. An **intermediate sequence** contains three cards, the two lower being in sequence with a gap between them and the top card. The middle card must be an honor; e.g., **AQJ, AJT, KJT, QT9**.

- ♥ **No trump contract:** Try to win the trick and return partner's suit. If you win this trick, the card you return shows your present count.

Partner bid a suit, but *did not lead that suit.*

It is likely that partner's suit is headed by a high *tenace*² and he wishes to protect that suit. In other words, partner is probably making a *protecting lead*. Unless dummy and the bidding indicate a different point of attack, remember to lead partner's bid suit when you win a trick.

- ♠ A high spot card lead denies honor cards in that suit and is usually a protecting lead.
 - ♥ **Suit contract:** This could be a protecting lead. Partner holds no honors in this suit and wants you to lead **his bid suit** if you take a trick; *but*, consider the possibility that this card is a singleton. The bidding and dummy's holding should help you reach the correct conclusion.
 - ♥ **No trump contract:** This is definitely a protecting lead. Partner wants you to lead his bid suit if you take a trick. You do remember what that was, don't you?
- ♠ An honor card lead is probably the top of a sequence, but may be the top of touching honors in a three- or four-card holding. Unless this lead sets up sufficient tricks in your hand to set the contract, it is usually correct to lead **partner's bid suit** when you win a trick.
- ♠ A low spot card lead is probably from a second suit headed by an honor, usually three or four cards in length.
 - ♥ **Suit contract:** Consider the possibility that it is a singleton or is led from a second suit headed by only one honor. The bidding and cards in dummy should help you decide whether to return this suit or partner's bid suit when you are on lead.
 - ♥ **No trump contract:** This could be a second point of attack, depending on your holding and dummy's holding in this second suit. Keep in mind that it could also be a protecting lead from a three-card suit headed by one honor. If you win a trick, think carefully before choosing to return this suit or partner's bid suit.

YOU AND YOUR PARTNER PASSED

Neither you nor your partner bid, and *partner leads an honor card.*

Honor card leads in unbid suits should always indicate an honor card sequence. These are great leads! They attack, protect, and inform. Dummy, the bidding, and your own holding in the suit should help you tell whether or not continuing the suit is the best defense.

- ♠ If partner's honor sequence heads a long suit, this is an *attacking lead*. Continue the suit, *unless* you know a different course of action is better. Don't forget to unblock, if necessary.
- ♠ Partner may be leading from a three card suit headed by an honor sequence or two touching honors. This is a *protecting lead*. Dummy, the bidding, and your own holding in the suit should help you tell the difference.
 - ♥ Return this suit if all indications say that *passive defense* is the best chance to set the contract.
 - ♥ Return this suit if your own holding makes this lead an attacking lead.

Neither you nor your partner bid, and *partner leads a low spot card.*

- ♠ A low spot card lead is usually some form of *attacking lead*. Rely on the bidding to help you decide what type of holding partner has in the suit he is leading.

² An honor holding headed by the **AQ, KJ, QT**, etc.

- ♥ **Suit contract:** Partner may be leading from a three-card or longer holding, usually headed by an honor. The suit should be an unbid suit, and partner is hoping you have an honor card that will take a trick. Try to win the trick and return partner's suit, but don't forget that you may need to guard an honor card in dummy.
- ♥ **Suit contract:** Partner may be leading a singleton. Consider your holding in the suit, dummy's holding, and the bidding to see if this is likely.
- ♥ **Suit contract:** Partner may be leading the top card of a small doubleton. Again, **look closely at all visible cards** to see if this is likely. If partner's card was the 2, *he or she is not leading a doubleton.*
- ♥ **No trump contract:** In all probability, partner is leading from a long suit, usually headed by one honor or a non-sequential honor holding. This is an *attacking lead*. Try to win the trick and return partner's suit, but don't forget that you may need to guard an honor card in dummy.

Neither you nor your partner bid, and partner leads a high spot card.

- ♠ Partner is making a *protecting lead*. Think about the bidding, study the dummy, and try to find the suit partner would like to have **you** attack. Partner will not be pleased if you return the suit he led – unless his protecting lead is your attacking lead.
 - ♥ **Suit contract:** Partner may be leading the top card of a doubleton. Although this lead is a protecting lead, if you hold the right cards, it may be turned into an *attacking lead*. Hopefully, partner will have the trump holding necessary to make this a great lead.
 - ♥ **Suit contract:** Partner may be leading a singleton. Look at your holding in the suit, dummy's holding, and the bidding to see if this is likely.
 - ♥ **No trump contract:** Partner may be leading the top card of a worthless three-card suit or doubleton. *Partner does not want you to return this suit.*

Neither you nor your partner bid, and partner leads a trump.

- ♠ If the bidding has indicated that declarer will be crossruffing the hand or ruffing a side suit in dummy, partner has made an *attacking lead*. Both you and partner should plan to lead trumps at every opportunity.
- ♠ If the bidding has not called for a trump lead, partner is probably making a *protecting lead*.
 - ♥ Examine the dummy and review the bidding to determine the suit partner would like you to attack.
 - ♥ If dummy is short in a side suit in which you hold good cards, leading trumps when you win a trick is probably a good idea. Partner's protecting lead may have been the best attacking lead for your side.

Neither you nor partner bid, and partner leads an ace.

Partner may have led an ace from several holdings and for many reasons, but you will expect partner to hold this trick. The card you play should give partner information about your hand.

- ♠ When partner will win trick one, your card should show *attitude*: play a high card if you want partner to continue the suit and a low card if you want partner *to make the obvious switch*.
- ♠ If dummy has a singleton in partner's suit, your card should show *suit preference*. Play a low card to tell partner to switch to the lower of the outside suits. Play a high card to tell partner to consider switching to the higher of the outside suits or continue the suit despite the fact that dummy will be able to ruff.

- ♠ If the auction showed that declarer holds a weak hand with long trumps, partner may be looking for information on possible quick tricks in your hand. You will be giving an *attitude signal*, but consider the tricks in dummy when you choose your card.
- ♠ Partner may be leading a singleton. The bidding should tell you if this is possible. Your card should be a *suit preference signal* if you think this is the case.
- ♠ Leading an *unsupported ace* is usually a very bad idea. If this was your partner's lead, he or she might have been desperate.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Analyzing partner's long suit lead

If partner is making an attacking lead from a long suit *not headed by an honor card sequence*, he or she will lead a low spot card. Depending on your partnership agreements, that spot card may give you additional information about partner's suit.

The most common spot card lead from a long suit is the *fourth best*. When you and your partner have agreed to lead fourth best from long suits not headed by an honor sequence, use the **Rule of 11** to find out more about your partner's suit.

- ♠ Subtract your partner's spot card from 11. The resulting number is the number of cards left which are higher than partner's spot card. Examples:
 1. Partner leads the ♠3. $11-3 = 8$ spades left *higher* than partner's ♠3. You hold the ♠8, 4, 2; dummy holds the ♠Q, T, 7, 5. *How many spades does declarer hold higher than partner's ♠3?* You can see six cards higher and know that there are eight; therefore, declarer holds two spades higher than the ♠3.
 2. Partner leads the ♥7. $11-7 = 4$ hearts left higher than partner's ♥7. Your hearts are the ♥Q, J, 5, 3; dummy's hearts are the ♥K, 9, 8, 4. You can see **five hearts higher** than partner's ♥7. *Partner is not leading his fourth best heart. The ♥7 is a protecting lead.*
- ♠ Some partnerships lead the third or fifth card from a long suit. The third card is led from an even number of cards; the fifth from an odd number of cards. Partnerships using this lead use a **Rule of 10** or **Rule of 12** as their equivalent to the Rule of 11. Do you see why?
- ♠ Some partnerships make *attitude leads* against no trump. The lower the card they lead, the more they want that suit returned.

You believe that partner has led a singleton or doubleton.

Determining whether partner's suit is a singleton or doubleton may be critical to the defense. There are no easy rules when making this determination. Analyzing the auction is essential, but even this will not guarantee that you will always find the correct answer.

- ♠ If you have the ace in the suit and *no outside entry*:
 - ♥ Win this first trick and return the suit, **if you think partner's card is a singleton**.
 - ♥ Duck this first trick, **if you think partner's card is the top of a doubleton**. Hopefully, partner will win a trump trick and continue the suit to you. Win the second lead of the suit and return the suit for partner to ruff.

- ♠ If you have the ace in the suit *and you have an outside entry*:
 - ♥ Win this first trick and return the suit **if you think partner's card is a singleton**. The card you lead should be a *suit preference signal*. Lead a high card if your entry is in the higher of the two outside suits; lead a low card if the entry is in the lower of those suits.
 - ♥ It may still be best to duck this first trick, if you think partner's card is the top of a doubleton. However, you now have more flexibility. If you take the first trick, make sure that the card you return is a *suit preference signal*. You are counting on partner winning a trump trick and leading to your outside entry. The outside entry had better be a sure thing.
- ♠ When returning a suit you believe partner will ruff, lead a high card if you want partner to lead the higher of the two outside suits. Lead a low card to tell partner to lead the lower of those suits; lead a middle card to tell partner you have no outside entry.

Partner led an Ace or King against a no trump contract.

You have a special responsibility if partner leads an ace or king at trick one against a no trump contract.

- ♠ The lead of the ace at trick one asks you to *give count* in the suit led or to unblock your highest honor. Partner should have a long suit headed by at least the ace and king, or a nearly solid suit missing only one honor. If you have an even number of cards in the suit, play your highest card, followed by a lower card. If you have an odd number of cards in the suit, play your lowest card and follow it with a higher card. Rarely, you will hold an honor in this suit. If you do, play it at trick one, regardless of your length in the suit.
- ♠ Playing the king at trick one asks partner to *give attitude on the ace or queen* in the suit led. If you hold the ace or queen, play the highest card you can afford in the suit. If not, play the lowest card you hold, regardless of length.

Before you return partner's opening lead suit, review the bidding, study the dummy, and visualize your partner's hand. The defense doesn't get the chance to win many tricks, so make them count. Your next play should be based on careful thought, not on adages or memorization of even the best rules.

Think before you act!

Bibliography

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EXAMPLES AND EXERCISES

Hand 1.

	♠J82	
	♥KQT6	
	♦AKJ5	
	♣43	
♠		♠94
♥		♥84
♦		♦T643
♣J		♣A8752

Auction (South dealer):

1H – 1S – 2S – Pass
4H – Pass – Pass – Pass

Partner bid spades, but led the ♣J. 1) Do you win this trick? 2) If you win this trick, what do you return?

Think before you act!

Hand 1. Partner had some reason for not leading his own suit. There could be two reasons: Partner could have a singleton club and want to ruff clubs; or, partner cannot lead his own suit safely and is making a protecting lead.

If partner had a singleton club, South would have five clubs – headed by the ♣KQ! (How do you know this?) That's not likely in this auction, so partner's ♣J is not a singleton. Therefore, partner is making a protecting lead and wants you to lead his suit for him. What is partner's club holding?

Win this trick and return your ♠9. Hopefully, partner holds five spades to the ♠AQ, and you will be able to ruff a spade for the setting trick.

Hand 2.

	♠AJ97	
	♥T97	
	♦K52	
	♣QT8	
♠		♠K64
♥4		♥83
♦		♦T98
♣		♣A9632

Auction (South dealer):

1NT – Pass – 2C – Pass
2D – Pass – 3NT – Pass

Partner has led a low spot card against a no trump contract. What heart will you play on this trick? What will you play when you win the ♣A?

Think before you act!

Hand 2. This is a no trump auction, and you know quite a bit about your partner's hand: He holds 6-8 HCPs (high card points), and he holds at least five hearts and at least three spades. His heart suit is *not* headed by an honor card sequence. How do you know these things?

Although you don't need this clue on this hand, partner's ♥4 fits the *Rule of Eleven*. Since you can't win this trick, partner needs to know how many cards you hold in his suit. Your play on this trick, regardless of dummy's play, should show count.

When you win a trick with the ♠K or ♣A, return your remaining heart. Hopefully, partner's heart suit will now run, and your sided will take four (or five) hearts and the ♣A. *If* you win your first trick with the ♠K, return your heart and signal for club lead with your first discard.

Hand 3.

	♠AJ85	
	♥AQ4	
	♦T52	
	♣632	
♠		♠632
♥J		♥72
♦		♦QJ973
♣		♣JT9

Auction (South dealer):

1H – Pass – 1S – Pass

2C – Pass – 3H – Pass

4H – Pass – Pass – Pass

Partner led a trump, despite the fact that this auction does not scream for a trump lead. Why?

Think before you act!

Hand 3. It's possible that partner may have club length and want to cut down dummy's ruffing power, but that's not obvious from the bidding or dummy. Why else would partner pick a trump lead?

You hold only 4 HCPs, and with dummy's 11, that leaves 25 HCPs outstanding. Partner probably holds at least ten of those, but his honor cards are scattered. He made a *protecting lead* because he could not lead another suit safely. Be prepared to grab any trick you can, and do your best to help partner avoid being endplayed. You can make safe leads – partner cannot.

Hand 4.

	♠KQT8	
	♥KJ	
	♦T73	
	♣KJ72	
♠		♠2
♥		♥98763
♦5		♦A974
♣		♣A93

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2C – Pass

2D – Pass – 3S – Pass

4S – Pass – Pass – Pass

Why isn't partner leading the unbid suit?

Think before you act!

Hand 4. You expected partner to lead a heart, the unbid suit. Instead, partner led a diamond, declarer's second bid suit. If this is a protecting lead, it seems like an unusual one.

How many HCPs does partner hold? You can see 21 points in your hand and dummy, and declarer opened the bidding. Partner holds about six points, and if those six points are in hearts, the ♥Q is a wasted value.

How many diamonds does partner hold? Declarer's 2D rebid should show at least four cards in that suit; therefore, partner's ♦5 is a singleton or the top of the ♦52 diamond doubleton. The doubleton holding may be more likely, but with the ♣A as an outside entry, you can play partner for the singleton. Win this trick, and return the ♦4, showing an entry in clubs, the lowest outside suit.

If he started with two diamonds, partner should have a quick trump entry. Otherwise, this was not a very good lead on his part!

1

♠ AQ964
♥ Q4
♦ 976
♣ AJ8

♠ 87
♥ J1092
♦ AQ43
♣ 1096

♠ KJ1032
♥ 63
♦ 852
♣ Q72

♠ 5
♥ AK875
♦ KJ10
♣ K543

Dealer: North
Neither Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
	1 ♠	Pass	2 ♥
Pass	2 NT	Pass	3 ♣
Pass	3 NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Opening Lead: ♦ 8

Partner's lead is a protecting lead, and your suit is neither long enough nor strong enough to return it. Partner holds about 6 HCPs and five spades. His values aren't in diamonds or hearts. Return a high spade.

2

♠ J10962
♥ 1064
♦ K105
♣ 76

♠ Q5
♥ AK5
♦ Q62
♣ 109853

♠ A83
♥ QJ93
♦ J9
♣ AQJ2

♠ K74
♥ 872
♦ A8743
♣ K4

Dealer: East
N-S Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
		1 NT	Pass
3 NT	Pass	Pass	Pass

Opening Lead: ♦ 4

Partner's low spot card lead suggests length in diamonds. If you guard dummy's DQ, and continue to attack diamonds, declarer can't make this contract.

3

♠ J82
♥ KQ106
♦ AKJ5
♣ 43

♠ AQ1053
♥ 93
♦ Q92
♣ J106

♠ 94
♥ 84
♦ 10643
♣ A8752

♠ K76
♥ AJ752
♦ 87
♣ KQ9

Dealer: South
E-W Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
			1 ♥
1 ♠	2 ♠	Pass	4 ♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Opening Lead: ♣ J

Partner made a protecting lead, instead of leading his bid suit. Win this trick and return the S9. You hope to get a ruff for the setting trick.

4

♠ K92
♥ 98652
♦ 7
♣ 10853

♠ AJ654
♥ K7
♦ QJ1086
♣ J

♠ Q107
♥ AQ104
♦ A95
♣ 764

♠ 83
♥ J3
♦ K432
♣ AKQ92

Dealer: West
Both Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
1 ♠	Pass	1 NT	2 ♣
2 ♦	Pass	3 ♠	Pass
4 ♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

Opening Lead: ♦ 7

Partner didn't lead a club - and you have this beautiful suit! Don't lose your cool. Give partner a ruff to set the contract.