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(69) Defense: Leads in Partner's Suit

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Level: Intermediate / Advanced

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General

One of the most frequent defensive situations is to lead partner's suit. It makes sense for us to have lots of agreements (discussions) about the meaning of these leads in different situations. So we will spend some time discussing this in detail.

First Things First

The first thing we need to make clear is when partner has shown a suit. We will treat the following situations as if partner "has the suit" –

- Partner has opened the suit (showing at least 3-cards.)
- Partner has overcalled the suit.
- Partner has made a lead directing double (doubled an artificial bid.)

Basic Agreements

When we are leading partner's suit the meaning of our lead changes based on what we have done during the auction. If we have not supported partner then we lead a count signal:

- Low from an odd number (usually three).
- High from an even number (usually two).

We have this agreement because this is usually the most useful information for partner – it allows them to visualize the distribution of the suit around the table at trick 1.

If we do support partner then partner knows we have length (at least 3-cards) so it is more important for us to communicate the quality of our support (attitude) to partner. Thus, our leads in partner's suit will be attitude oriented:

- Low from an honor.
- Top of a bad holding.



Example – “Three Small”

So when we are leading from three small cards in Partner’s suit (common) we lead low (count) if we have not supported. We lead high (attitude) if we have supported.

Example – “Common Holdings”

We will give both the count and attitude leads from these holdings:

- 97
 - Count – Lead the 9. High from a doubleton.
 - Attitude – Lead the 9. Top of nothing.
- Q9
 - Count – Lead the Q. High from a doubleton.
 - Attitude – Lead the Q. We do not lead low from a doubleton honor because it will block the suit and partner will never work out what is going on.
- 975
 - Count – Lead the 5. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 9. Top of nothing.
- Q95
 - Count – Lead the 5. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 5. Low from an honor.
- 9753
 - Count – Lead the 7 (or 9.) High from an even number of cards. The 9 is the clearest card, but it might cost a trick later. We must use our judgment about balancing clarity in count with protecting our holding. The 7 seems high enough for partner to be able to read as a high card.
 - Attitude – Lead the 7 (or 9.) High from a bad holding. Similar discussion as above, so the 7 seems high enough.
- Q975
 - Count – Lead the 9. High from an even number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 5. Low from an honor.
- 97532
 - Count – Lead the 2. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 7. Top of nothing. We must use our judgment about balancing clarity in count with protecting our holding. The 7 seems high enough for partner to be able to read as a high card.
- Q9753
 - Count – Lead the 3. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 3. Low from an honor.



Exceptions To The Rules

Touching Honors

When we have a holding like QJx and have not raised partner we usually still lead the Queen. We want to communicate with Partner and this may confuse them, but it is most important to “play bridge” and not give up a trick first.

Notrump Unblocks

Following this idea that “playing bridge” is more important than specific agreements to its end brings us to some three and four card holdings where leading low can potentially block the suit against a Notrump contract. Here are some examples:

- Q92
- Q1082

In these cases we want to unblock the suit by leading something other than our 2. We don't want to win the final round (3rd / 4th round) in our hand. Even in Attitude situations (when we have supported partner) the accepted play is to lead the 9 from Q92 and the 8 from Q1082. This is how we unblock the suit - save our 2 until the end and force partner to win the later tricks.

Conclusion

Though this is a very specific topic it is one that arises frequently and has significant complexity. Spending time discussing these details with your partners is a good use of your bridge time!