



Adventures in Bridge

Leaders in Bridge Entertainment and Education

www.advinbridge.com

This Week in Bridge

(351) Opening Leads vs. Partscore Contracts

© AiB

Level: 6 of 10 (2 of 6)

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

Opening leads against partscore contracts vary much more widely based on the auction, which opponent is the declarer (weaker or stronger hand), and what suits were bid. Of course, if our side bids then we have a good idea of what to lead. But if our side does not bid, then we need to think about the likely distribution of each of our hands, based on the expected values in partner's hand, and try to determine what is the best lead. Combining our best guess of partner's holdings (shape and total values) with our honor holds in the suits we are considering leading shapes our decision-making process.

Opener is Declarer – Stronger Hand

When the opponents play in the Opener's suit, we need to consider how aggressive to make our lead. That fact that the opponents have stopped in a partscore means that most of the opponents' values are in the declarer's hand. That means that opening leads away from honors like a King have more risk of giving up a trick.

Example 1

1♠ 2♠

Here if we lead away from a holding like ♦Kxxxx, we easily could be giving up a trick. For example,

```
      Qxx
Kxxxx      Jxx
      Ax
```

Here if we lead away from our King, declarer plays the Queen from the dummy and we do not get to take a trick in this suit.

Another time that the opening bidder may become the declarer is when they show two suits and the Responder chooses between the two of them.



Example 2

1♠ 1NT

2♦ Pass

Against a low-level partscore, we often do not lead trump. But here is a time when we expect that the dummy is putting down a significant amount of ruffing values. A trump lead in this auction is often best to protect our honors (or partner's honors) in the Opener's first bid suit.

Responder is Declarer – Weaker Hand

When the opponents stop in a partscore and we know (or suspect) that most of the opponent's HCP are in the dummy, we want to lead through strength. This makes leading away from an honor (like a King or a Queen) more attractive. Also when declarer is known to be weaker, there is less chance that leading away from an honor is going to cost our side a trick. This is a situation where we are more likely to attack.

Example 3

1♦ 1♠

2♠ All Pass

Here is an auction where we should lead a singleton if we have one in a non-trump suit. Otherwise, we should probably make an attacking opening lead. Responder could have a 4-card ♠ suit and a long ♣ suit, but they are less likely to have a 4-card ♥ suit (since they bypassed it to bid their ♠). This makes a ♥ lead more attractive than a ♣ lead if we are choosing from similar holdings.

Trump Leads

When the opponents are in a 5-3 fit and the dummy has made a simple raise (as in *Example 1* above), the chances that the dummy has significant ruffing values are pretty small. But when the opponents are in a likely 4-4 fit (as in *Example 3* above), ruffing values could exist in either hand. A trump lead in an auction like this might well be a good choice. This is particularly true if we think that partner may have long ♦ (dummy's suit) and that we may protect partner's tricks by leading trump. We do not like to lead trump as a default against these low-level contracts, but if it feels like a crossruff may be the line of play the declarer is planning, then a trump lead will surely be the winning action.

Singleton Leads

When we are defending against a partscore, then a singleton in an unbid suit is usually an excellent lead. This is true if it is an unbid suit, but also true if it is dummy's (or even declarer's) other suit. Leading a singleton against s suit contract can get us a ruff at trick 2 (if partner wins the first trick) or later, if partner can gain the lead before our side is out of trump. This makes a singleton a very attractive opening lead.



Invitational Auctions

When the opponents invite game and end up stopping in a partscore, they are often on the verge of being too high (2NT or 3-Major may be difficult contracts for them to make). When the opponents have an auction like this, we should strive to make them earn every trick. This auction calls for a passive opening lead and we want to defend the hand as carefully as possible because we know that this contract is likely to be a struggle for them.

Conclusion

It is hard to say what the right opening lead against a partscore contract should be. There are so many variants in bidding, inference, and card holdings that we could spend days going through all the different permutations. The keys to our thoughts in auctions like this are ruffs and strength. Ruffs are a consideration for us (leading a singleton) or for them (lead a trump). Strength is a consideration because we need to know if we are leading into strength or through it. When you are selecting your opening lead in an auction like this please keep in mind what your partner did (if they bid) and what they did not do (the suits they could have entered the auction with at the 1-level and choose not to). These inferences can help you do much better than blindly choosing your lead from just your cards.