Bridge Theory for the Practitioners

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16.   Simulations of Opening Leads

An opening lead problem is more like a bidding problem than a play problem except that the opponents have done most of the bidding. As Danny Kleninman pointed out in his book *365 Winning Bridge Tips,* opening lead problems involve listening to the whole auction and then drawing intelligent inferences from them.

In this week's column I will limit us to a small subset of opening lead problems where the auction goes 1N – 3N by the opponents. As you know, notrump contracts are often a race between the declarer and the defenders. In a 3N contract, declarer is trying to have 9 tricks before the defense can have their 5. In this situation, *the winning opening lead is what allows the partnership to establish their long-suit winners early.* Thus you will not necessarily lead from your longest suit but will try to hit the long-suit winners of the partnership by your opening lead.

In the specific subset of 1N – 3N auction, we are quite confident that the declaring side has less major suit cards than the defensive side. Hence, leading a major suit should be our first objective. You might ask, is that true even if I have a longer minor suit to lead from? Let's consider a set of specific examples.

Hand 1.   ♠ Q J T 4   ♥ 8 3   ♦ A T 8 5 3   ♣ J 6

Hand 2.   ♠ A T 8 5 3   ♥ 8 3   ♦ Q J T 4   ♣ J 6

In hand 1, the real choices are either ♠ Q from the top of the sequence or the 4th best ♦ 5. In hand 2 where the ♦ and the ♠ suits are switched, the real choices are ♦ Q from the top of the sequence or the 4th best ♠ 5. How would we know which one is a better lead? Well, that question depends on the format of the game we are playing. In IMP, we should look for leads that beat the contract as uptricks are not that important. In MP, however, our goal is to create the maximum number of tricks for the defense.

Enter David Bird and Taf Anthias and a sophisticated computer simulation program to sample 5,000 random hands of the type described above. Many of their results are presented in their new book *Winning Notrump Leads*. What did they find for the two example hands I have shown above?

Hand 1.

	Chance of beating the contract (IMP)	Creates number of Tricks for the Defense (MP)
♠ Q	24.3% of the time	3.57
♦ 5	18.7 of the time	3.10

Hand 2.

♠ 5	28.7 of the time	3.44
♦ Q	23.2% of the time	3.53

Two quick observations. Leading major suit has the best chance of beating the contract at IMPs while the safe lead of ♦ Q gives us the best chance at Matchpoints.

Another example.
Hand 3.

♠ 4 3   ♥ 5 4   ♦ 9 6 4 2   ♣ K Q 8 3 2

	Chance of beating the contract (IMP)	Creates number of Tricks for the Defense (MP)
♠ 4	10.2 %	2.67
♥ 5	10.2 %	2.67
♣ K	10.1 %	2.58
♣ 3	6.6%	2.37

With a weak entry-less hand, trying to hit partner's long suit is a good strategy and the computer simulations reveal that too. ♣ K lead however comes pretty close in IMP while ♣ 3 is a poor lead from this holding as expected.

I guess now you are ready for a quiz. The auction is still 1N – 3N and you are on lead holding the hands shown below. I will present 4 hands from David Bird and Taf Anthias' new book *Winning Notrump Leads*. Mark your answers and wait for my next column to compare.

Quiz 1.	♠ A 7	♥ J 8 7 6 3	♦ Q J 5 4	♣ 9 3
Quiz 2.	♠ J 6 4	♥ Q J	♦ A T 8 2	♣ K 9 7 3
Quiz 3.	♠ T 7	♥ Q T 9	♦ J 9 6 4	♣ Q J T 4
Quiz 4.	♠ Q 8 6 5	♥ Q J 3	♦ K T 8 5 2	♣ 9