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This Week in Bridge

(346) Opening Leads vs. NT Opening Bids

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Level: 6 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

When Right-Hand Opponent (RHO) opens the bidding with 1NT (or 2NT), we have a lot of valuable information about their hand. We know that they have a good hand and some length in every suit. We may have less specific information about their hand (like we do not know their better minor, since they did not open 1♣ or 1♦), but we have more holistic information about their hand. The rest of the auction is likely to give us more specific information (for example, Opener's answer to Stayman). If this 1NT (or 2NT) Opener becomes the declarer (which they usually will), then we will need to use this information to help us select our opening lead. Here we look at how to do that in a variety of different auctions, but the bottom line is that leading into strong balanced hands has more risk than almost any other opening lead situation.

1NT Opening that Ends the Auction

When we are leading into 1NT in an auction where that has been the only bid, we expect that our side has about half the HCP. The opponents have a range of 15 total points (15 opposite 0) up to 24 total points (17 opposite 7). That gives an average of about half the deck for them and about half the deck for us.

When we have a good hand (most of our side's values) then we want to lead one of our long suits and try to set it up. But leading away from an honor has risk. Leading away from an Ace has the most risk of giving the declarer a trick they are not entitled to (of any single honor). Leading away from a King, slightly less risk. Away from a Queen even less. When we have most of the values, leading away from honors has even more risk, and broken honors (tenaces) have even more risk than single ones. In this case we try to lead with a balanced of developing tricks and safety. This may mean leading from a sequence, or a long suit with no honors.

In a similar situation, but when we have fewer values, we expect partner to have more. Partner having points allows us to take more risk. That means leading away from an honor (or even a tenace) becomes more attractive. But if we have very few values, then we know that partner has a good hand. When they have a good hand and did not compete, then they are likely balanced. Trying to find our side's fit is



often right. We should not lead shortness (trying to hit partner's suit) as they are unlikely to have a good 5-card suit.

Responder Invites Game

When the Responder invites game, then we know better than any other time the opponents' combined values. If Opener declines the invite then they have about 23-25 pts (and are in a part score), and if they accept then they have about 24-26 pts (and are in game). In either case, they do not have a significant amount of extra points for the contract that they are in and they are likely to struggle to make the contract. So how does that information help us make a decision about our opening lead?

We should strive not to help them. We want to be more passive in this situation than most others. Here, we want to try to develop tricks for our side, but we do not want to help declarer – we want to make them earn all their tricks.

Responder Bids Game

When the Responder bids game, they often give us information about their Major suit holding along the way (did they use a transfer, Stayman, Puppet Stayman, etc.?) The fact that they bid game has given us good information about their values as well (though they do have a wider range, 10-15 pts). We can use this information to help predict how the play is likely to go. For example, if dummy has a 4-card ♠ suit and we have ♠Qxx, then we expect that good things are happening for the opponents. In general, we use this information and our hand to help us decide how active or passive to be with our lead. When the opponents have bid game, we do tend to be more active in our opening leads – hoping to set up our long suit and defeat the contract. But there are times where we may choose to be more passive.

Example

♠ KJ8
♥ 93
♦ KJ83
♣ KJ95

If the auction goes 1NT – 3NT. Then we do not want to be too aggressive with this hand, because we have tenaces and most of our side's HCP. We should be passive and lead the ♥9.



Conclusion

The bottom line is that leading into a strong balanced hand requires much more consideration than blindly leading 4th from your longest and strongest. You must look at your holdings in each of the suits and consider the level of risk and amount of reward for choosing each suit. You also must listen to the auction and try to determine how many values your partner has and if they are likely to be helpful on the defense. There is much more to consider, and it varies on every hand, but the key thing to keep in mind is that leading away from honors here is dangerous and that is it often right to look for safer actions that still give you a chance of developing some tricks than to blindly attack.