

# OPENING LEADS

## Against No Trump Contracts

I must start this paper by giving credit where it is due. The content is largely thanks to the late great Bob Baker who gave me his seminar material a few years ago when I was working with him on a bridge holiday.

**POSITIVE THINKING AND GOOD PLANNING**  
**ALWAYS THINK OF THE OPENING LEAD AS AN INVESTMENT FOR LATER REWARD**

Choosing the opening lead is a problem with two parts:

- Which suit to lead
- What card to play from the selected suit

## WHICH SUIT TO LEAD

The play at no-trumps often develops into a race to establish tricks. The declarer will usually have the resources to develop (eventually) the number of tricks required for success in his contract. That being the case, it is the task of the defenders to try to develop tricks of their own in sufficient quantity to defeat the contract whilst this is still possible.

Usually the opening leader will choose to lead from his “longest and strongest” suit. After a round or two of this suit has been played, the hope (of the defenders) is that the remaining cards in their original long suit will be established. All that remains then is to gain the lead and make the tricks.

This is only part of the story however as the player on lead should be trying to establish tricks in the longest and strongest suit held by the partnership (partner may have a better suit). Thus it will nearly always be correct to lead a suit in which partner has overcalled, especially if the style is that overcalls are usually indicative of a good suit.

There are considerations that may steer you away from the lead of the “longest and strongest”:

- Partner has bid
- Opponents have bid something
- Partner may have doubled an artificial bid
- You have two suits of about equal strength
- You have two suits and one is headed by the Ace
- Opponents bidding suggests that they are about to run a long suit against you
- Your hand is weak and your long suit pitiful
- Your strongest suit contains split honours

## Partner has bid

Whenever partner bids a suit you have to give serious consideration to leading that suit – especially if it was a suit in which partner made an overcall.

Overcalled suits tend to be reasonably strong five or six card suits. Indeed, many overcalls are made with one thought in mind – to direct partner’s opening lead.

If partner has opened the bidding with one of a suit and the opponents end up in no trumps you should still give consideration to leading that suit. A reason not to lead it may be that you have a singleton in that suit and are therefore likely to be developing tricks for the declarer as he is sat in sequence of play over your partner - in this circumstance try to find another lead.

## Opponents must have bid something

The opponents' auction is often helpful as it can tell you:

- How many points they hold. If the opening bid in 1NT and everybody passes, dummy will have no more than about 10 HCPs
- The suits to avoid leading. If a suit is bid and rebid, or bid and supported, it is rarely correct to lead that suit as this is more likely to help declarer.
- What opponents don't have? If North raises 1NT straight to 3NT without bidding Stayman, he usually does not have a 4-card major. Neither North nor South is likely to hold a 5-card major although the tendency nowadays is to bid all balanced hands as NT even with 5-3-3-2 where the 5 is a major.
- What opponents don't bid? If South responds 1NT to an opening bid of 1♦ he is unlikely to hold a 4-card major.

## Partner could have doubled an artificial bid

Before ending up in their no trump contract the opponents may have used a conventional bid like Stayman, a transfer bid, fourth suit forcing or a Blackwood response. You should be on the lookout to double such an artificial bid to give partner a lead indication for him to lead that suit.

## You have two suits of about equal strength

When you have two suits roughly equal in length and strength the general rule is to lead an unbid major suit. You have to take note of the auction and draw appropriate inferences. Generally:

- Lead the suit with the most honours
- If the suits have an equal number of honours, choose with one with better undergrowth – cards such as 9, 8 or 7 are better than 2 3 or 4
- With an equal number on honours choose to lead from a sequence like Q,J,10,x rather than A,Q 10, x
- If each suit has an honour, lead from a Queen or King rather than an Ace or Jack.
- Give preference to an unbid Major suit rather than an unbid Minor suit.

## You have two equal length suits and one is headed by the Ace

Suppose opponents bid:      1♦ - 2NT  
   3NT

And you are on lead with:

♠ K 10 5 4 3  
♥ A 9 7 4 2  
♦ 10 4  
♣ 3

Lead from the suit **without** the Ace. Here you lead 4♠ because you are hoping to set up tricks in the suit knowing that if you do manage to establish the suit you have the A♥ as an entry.

## Opponents bidding suggests they are about to run a long suit against you

Suppose the opponents bidding sequence is

1♦	-	1♥
3♦	-	3NT

♠ J 7 6 4 3  
♥ 9 8 7  
♦ Q 4  
♣ K Q 8

After this auction you are expecting declarer to run long Diamonds and so you need an active/attacking lead. When declarer is likely to run a long suit then strong short suits (such as AKx, KQx or even AQx) take precedence over longer, weaker suits. Here you should lead K♣.

## Your hand is weak and your long suit is pitiful

When your hand is weak it is a good policy to try to find partner's strengths. When the bidding goes 1NT – 2NT – 3NT and you have to find a lead from

♠ K 7 4  
♥ 10 5  
♦ 8 7 3  
♣ 9 6 5 4 2

Your opponents have not got a lot to spare in this auction so your partner will probably hold quite a decent hand. The chances of you developing tricks in the weak Club suit and then gaining the lead to enjoy them is remote or more likely impossible. So a Club lead is futile and defeatist.

It is much more sensible to try to find a suit in which partner has some strength/length and gain a tempo in defence by leading it. Here a Spade or a Heart is likely to help partner. My choice is 10♥ because if opponents are 3/3 in Hearts my partner has 5. My reasoning is that the fewer cards I have in a suit the more my partner is likely to have. The ten is unlikely to make but it could help to drive out opponents high cards early on and set up partner's suit. I made this lead recently and astounded my partner who is not used to getting help with his own suit in these situations but here he was able to establish his Heart suit and get a good score. I would have done the same with a doubleton Queen or Jack.

## Your strongest suit in AQxx (as opposed to AQxxx)

Whenever you lead from an Ace-Queen combination there is a danger that you will allow the player on your right to win a trick with the King which otherwise he could not make. If you are going to give up a trick you want to get a good return for your investment.

When you lead from AQxx the most you can win in the suit, after the opening lead, is three tricks – and that is doubtful, as an opponent may well have four cards in the suit too.

However, when you lead from AQxxx there is a realistic chance of building four tricks in the suit – partner may produce the Jack, forcing the King, or partner may get in later to lead through the King sitting on your right. Unless the opponents have bid the suit there is less chance of one of them holding four cards in the suit when you hold five as opposed to when you hold only four.

Leading from AQxxx against a NT contract is one of the better leads whereas from AQxx is a poor one.

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## Active and Passive Leads

There are two basic types of lead – **Active** and **Passive**. The decision as to which type of lead to make is often critical (both at no trumps and in suit contracts).

An **Active** lead is one that seeks to establish tricks for your side as quickly as possible. It may risk presenting declarer with a trick (or tricks) that he could not make left to his own devices, but this risk is considered worthwhile because of the chance it give to the defence to set the contract should it succeed.

A **Passive** lead aims to give nothing away. The hope is that, without being given extra “free” tricks by the defence, declarer will have insufficient resources to make his contract.

## WHICH CARD TO LEAD

Having decided on a suit to lead the next question is “which card of that suit”?

It is wise to adhere to the long established conventions.

When you have a strong sequence of honours it would be wrong to lead a small card and give declarer a chance to make a cheap trick. For example from **KQJxx** you would lead **K** because to lead a small card may permit the declarer to win two tricks from a holding of **A10x**.

The general rule is to lead the **top of a sequence** or the **higher of touching honours**. This means that when you lead the Queen against a NT contract partner will expect:

- You have the Jack and probably also the 10 and 9. This is because from **QJxxx** you should prefer to lead the fourth best.
- The Queen might be from an interior sequence such as **AQJxx** where the Queen is the top of the honour cards in the sequence.
- You do not have the King.

Lead the **fourth highest small card from a suit with AKxxx** to give you the best chance that partner will have a card remaining in the suit so that, when he gains the lead he can return it.

With weaker suits the convention is to lead the fourth highest from a suit, unless it is so weak that it seems more important to inform partner of the poor quality, in which case lead the second highest. Leading highest from “top of nothing” used to be the convention but this is a mistake as a high card like a 9 may come to a trick

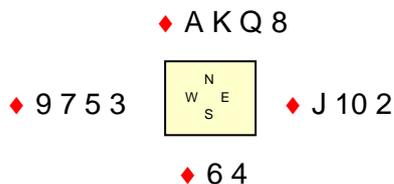
If you choose to lead a suit that contains no honour cards – perhaps because it was indicated by the auction or the alternatives look unappetising:

- With a singleton there is no choice
- With a doubleton, you lead the higher card
- With 3 or more cards lead the middle card from three small ones. Then on the next round you play the higher one and partner knows you didn’t lead from a doubleton. This style is known as MUD (middle up down).
- With 4 or more small cards lead the second highest, e.g. the 6 from 9653. The next time that suit is played you intend to play the original fourth highest. This helps partner to distinguish between a 3-card suit (when you employ MUD) and holding 4 (or more). Partner should be able to tell if have led from a doubleton or 4 (or more).

Consider leading this suit at no trumps:

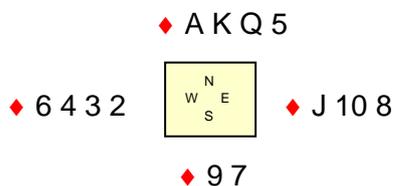
♦ 9 7 5 3 (perhaps all other suits are unattractive to lead)

Surely it cannot matter whether you lead the 9 (top of nothing) or the 7 (second highest)?



If this is how the cards lie, leading the 9♦ would allow declarer to make four tricks in the suit. After he has cashed the AKQ, he will have the 8♦ in dummy to beat your 7♦.

Of course it should be clear that the 9♦ in this example may prove to be valuable. But what about leading from 6432 (again, only when all of the other suits are unattractive to lead). Surely now it cannot matter whether you lead the 6♦ (top of nothing) or the 4♦ (second best)?



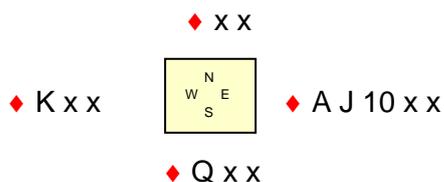
After declarer has won his three tricks with dummy's AKQ the 5♦ remains in dummy. Would you rather have the 6♦ or 4♦ at this point?

**Unless you wish to present tricks to the opponent try to remember that “top of nothing” has gone out of fashion and been replaced with “second from a poor suit for a reason**

## Leading Partner's Suit – which card?

There is a widely held belief that you should lead the highest card in partner's suit. This is wrong! With one major exception (i.e. do not under-lead an Ace against a suit contract) the rule is simple:

You should lead the same card as you would normally (**standard leads**), especially low from 3 or more cards headed by an honour. This principle extends to lower honour cards, including the Ten. Do not waste the power of your jack or 10 which may be critical. In the following cases leading the honour card will present declarer with undeserved tricks:



**Declarer gets an undeserved trick**



This principle extends to lower honour cards too. Again the effect of leading the honour card is to improve declarer's position in the suit.



The correct lead of the low card restricts him to a single stopper and two stoppers respectively

Here is another situation where leading the honour card in partner's suit can prove costly:



If West leads a low card, East can finesse against dummy's Queen by inserting his Jack, restricting declarer to a single trick in the suit. Of course it would not help declarer to go up with the Queen on the opening lead (although it is probably the best play) as once again the declarer is restricted to a single trick in the suit.

However, if West incorrectly leads the 10 then the first trick will comprise 10, Q, K, A. Declarer's remaining 98 is now worth a second undeserved trick.

**REMEMBER**  
**When you are leading partner's suit in No-Trumps and you have three or more cards headed by an honour then you should lead LOW**

## Leading a suit bid by the opponents

When a suit is bid by an opponent (excluding artificial bids such as Stayman) it is usually a sign that he holds four or more cards in the suit.

The general rule is that you should think very carefully before leading a suit bid against you. Only when you have decided that it is the right suit to lead should you then think about leading the right card.

Particularly if the suit is bid on your right (i.e. by declarer) you should often lead fourth highest even from some very strong holdings where, in the absence of an opponent's bid, you would have chosen to lead an honour.

It is only correct to lead an honour from a sequence in a suit bid by an opponent when your fourth highest card is very likely (or certain) to be higher than the opponent's fourth highest card in the suit (e.g. KQJ95, QJ10 9 3, AKQ103)

From suits such as AKQ42, KQJ53, J10932 it will usually work out best to lead a fourth highest – if you decide that this is the suit to lead despite the opponent's bid in the suit (you may be better off looking elsewhere)

## Against Slams

Finally, remember your objectives on any given hand. If you hold the following hand and the opponents have bid a Slam.

♠ 8 6  
♥ A 7 3  
♦ K Q 5 4 2  
♣ 9 7 4

You only need two tricks to get declarer off. The correct lead is K♦ . If declarer needs only one trick from Hearts you will then be able to swoop in with your A♥ and then cash the Q♦

4♦ might be a sound choice against a 3NT contract (barring evidence to the contrary, such as Diamonds bid and rebid by an opponent) but against 6NT you only need 2 tricks to defeat the contract. If you hope to establish your Diamond suit you are being too optimistic and risk declarer making his contract by presenting him with an underserved extra Diamond trick.

**Andrew Simmons**  
**with a little help from the late great Bob Baker**  
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