

Opening Leads

It's your turn to make the Opening Lead – you're supposed to be searching for *the killer lead*, but it is at this exact moment in the play of this hand that you have the least amount of information. You have listened attentively to the bidding but, in most cases you have nothing but a guess as to what the dummy looks like, which in turn helps you decide what Declarer's hand contains. After you make the lead the dummy comes down – but it's too late. Hmmmm.

Opening leads are tough; that's probably the reason there are more books on defense devoted to Opening leads. What all these books tell us is: Choose the suit first, then choose which card in that suit. They also tell us that there are passive leads and active or “aggressive” leads. Aggressive might be a bit too strong an antonym to passive so let's translate passive to cautious and active to forward-going. Before we delve too deeply into this part of it let's remember one of the first things we are told about Opening leads: “We should strive to lead Partner's suit – the one she bid, unless, of course we have a suit of our own that we think has a better chance of being developed into tricks.” Thanks for that. Does that really help us figure out “what to lead? For sure, **there is one thing that is certainly a must!** Partner must know what information we are trying to convey with our lead. So **make sure** you and your Partner discuss Opening leads and their meanings. The lower part of the left side of the convention card is the place to notate Opening leads, the cards marked by bold type are the standard recommended forward-going leads.

A quick survey of these *standard leads* reveals that the standard follows the following formulas:

- a) Top of a honor sequence (3-Card sequence for NoTrump, 2-Card sequence for Trump contracts)
- b) Top of Interior Sequence (ex.: KJT) where the interior card is lead
- c) The famous length lead: 4th from longest and strongest (caveat: top card should be Q or better)

What is not shown here is often referred to as BOSTON; Bottom Of Something; Top Of Nothing which should be choice

- o d) BOSTON

We want, here, to clear some confusion about leading Partner's suit. Some folks are under the misguided notion that if you hold the Ace in Partner's suit you should lead it. Not true, the **A** is definitely Something – BOSTON tells us we should lead low (the bottom). On the other hand if we lead the 9, Partner knows that is the highest Card we have in her suit (Top of Nothing). Let's see how that works. Partner bid ♥'s holding ♥QT987. You hold ♥A45; if you lead the A you automatically give the Declarer a winner, his ♥K. His holding has 2♥ honors and he *knows* where the ♥Q is and can likely make both his ♥J a winner as well. You have given Declarer two tricks in your suit – not good! If you lead low (♥5), Partner can guess that you have at least 1 honor and based on the dummy and his hand and what is played on the trick might be able to figure out what it is. If the Declarer has the K he definitely makes it good, it's in the dummy he might make the right guess and play it, winning the trick. But it is likely to be his only ♥ winner. .

The Convention Card shows the K in bold against NoTrump contracts. There are two points to be made here. The first: Some Partners (and experts) suggest leading the 4th best even from a suit headed by AK. That is something you should discuss with Partner. 2nd and in general the *American* preference is that the K should be lead from AK (also from KQxx) whereas the *European* preference is to lead the A from AK. The European method leaves little doubt what the leader holds in terms of AK. In the American way, if the Q or the A is visible to the other two participants the location of the other is unambiguous. In Europe if the Q is not visible it's location is unclear, i.e. if it is not in your hand or the dummy it could be in either of the other two hands. Choosing A or K from AK is a personal and partnership preference. Discuss it!!

Passive vs Active leads

We generally choose a passive lead when we are trying to “not give away anything” Ex. It's your

lead after a simple 1N – P – 3N auction and you hold AQ65 in a suit. We all know (don't we) it is not a good idea to lead from a Tenace so we would like to avoid leading from the suit headed by AQ. Your hand is such that you don't really have a good second choice (a sequence or another 4 card suit for a length lead). You choose to lead the ♣9 from ♣942 holding. Generally Top of Nothing leads are Passive leads. Here's another example: You hold ♥A98745 and your Partner had Opened the bidding with 1♥ Overcalled with a preemptive 3♠. The Opponents end up in a ♠ contract. It's your lead. You are not suppose to lead an "empty" Ace, but there is a strong possibility that one of the Opponents has a singleton ♥ so you want to make sure you can at least collect that trick. You lead the ♥A. This is a Active lead, you are doing it because you are afraid that the trick might go away if we give the declarer early control. Once the dummy comes down and you have won the trick it is the declarer who might have had the singleton ♥. So you lead another ♥ forcing declarer to Trump in his hand (recall that trumping in the long trump hand ususally doesn't gain a trick). You have just executed a forcing defensive lead.

Forcing defensive leads are ones that attempt to force declarer to ruff early so that he might lose control of the trump suit. If you hadn't held the ♥A but suspected Partner might have a singleton, a ♥ lead by you might also be done as a forcing defensive lead.

Another Active lead occurs when we lead Trump to cut down on Declarer's ability to Trump. There are several instances where we should look for just such an opportunity. (a) The Opponent's end up in a Contract in what is clearly a "second choice suit" and (b) The opponents are clearly in a 4-4 fit.

There is a particular circumstance one should be aware of. There are times when you are short in Trump but suspect Partner has some Trump and is short in Declarer's second suit. If you have length in that second suit you can create trump trick for your side by leading that second suit.

Many beginners think it is a good idea to lead a singleton, hoping be able to Trump later leads in that suit. This is a good strategy only when you have extra length in the Trump suit or your Trump holding is extremely weak. Ex. You hold ♠Qxx ♥Kxx ♦x ♣Kxxxx and the contract is 4♠. You choose to open with the ♦x. There are two considerations: Most important is that you likely have a natural Trump trick with the protected ♠Q, so little is gained if Declarer gains immediate control and draws Trump. A ♥ or ♣ lead is more likely to create a later trick than the singleton lead (unless that was Partner's suit).

Special leads

Sometimes Partner can help you "find" a lead by doubling an artificial bid, for example a Stayman, Transfer or Cue bids should be considered lead directing. There are also doubles that ask you to make an unusual lead, the Lightner Double being the most well known. Less well known is a variation of the Lightner and that is an unexpected Double of 3NT. Both ask for an Unusual lead. We'll explain, and in discussing the Lightner Double we can get closer to understand the lead Partner is asking for in the 3N Doubled case.

The basis for the Lightner Double is found in the fact that most slam bids are not frivolous bids and the slam bidders have usually worked their way up the bidding ladder providing many clues to the defense. Generally the bidders know what weaknesses they might have exposed, and have taken that into account in their final bid. Hence the need for an unusual lead – one that the bidders didn't suggest. In this vein here are what leads are not requested by the Lightner Double. This Double is not made by the expected Opening leader and is not:

- a) asking for a Trump lead
- b) asking for a suit bid by the Offense
- c) necessarily excluding any unbid suit, but this is conditional

and may be asking for the Dummy's first bid suit, or for the highest suit not bid by Opponents. Leader must figure out what Doubler is asking for!

The Doubler is expected to either be able to Trump the Opening lead or take the first two tricks in the suit lead.

Now we can see that the Doubler of 3N can't be expected to Trump the Opening lead so the Doubler must be ready to take the 1st two tricks in the suit lead. That suit has to be either the suit bid by Doubler or Dummy's first bid suit or the highest unbid suit. That might seem like a real puzzler, but the person Doubling a 3N Contract obviously has a special hand and is expecting to set the contract, if the Opening lead is of a particular sort.