

Improve your opening leads, part 2

Getting better results on defense

By Karen Walker

Trump leads

In the first part of this series, we looked at the types of auctions that provide clues about whether to make a passive or aggressive opening lead. You have a different type of decision when considering a trump lead, which, depending on the auction and your hand, may be an aggressive *or* a passive choice.

Aggressive trump leads

In some situations, a trump lead can actually be your strongest attack because it shortens declarer's or dummy's trump length. You will get your strongest clue that a trump lead is correct from an auction that indicates declarer has a two-suited hand, especially if you have strength in one of declarer's suits.

Many players consider it virtually mandatory to lead a trump after an auction such as:

West	East
	1♦
1♥	2♣
2♦	Pass

If you're South holding:

♠1098 ♥KQJ ♦643 ♣AJ96,

lead the ♦3. There's a strong possibility that dummy will be relatively short in declarer's second suit (clubs), and you expect declarer to try to use dummy's diamonds to ruff his club losers. Both opponents have shown minimum values, so they may not have enough in high-card power alone to make their contract.

A trump lead can also be an effective attack in situations where the weaker hand shows limited trump support. These include auctions where responder takes a preference after opener makes a two-suited bid (Flannery 2♦, for example, showing four spades and five hearts) or a

three-suited bid (Roman 2♦ opener, showing a 4-4-1 pattern). The same principle applies to two-suited overcalls:

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
1♠	2NT ⁽¹⁾	Dbl	3♦
Pass	Pass	Dbl	All Pass

(1) Both minors.

You don't even need to see your hand to know that a trump lead must be right. Partner's first double showed values (around 10-plus high-card points), and his second double showed a desire to defend. Even if you don't have a strong holding in the other minor, it's likely that partner does, so you want to prevent the short-trump hand (declarer) from using his diamonds to ruff dummy's club losers.

Another occasion that calls for a trump lead is when the short-trump hand (usually dummy) is marked with shortness in another suit. You can almost see dummy's singleton club after this auction:

West	East
1♦	1♥
1♠	1NT
2♥	4♥

Opener's sequence typically shows some extra values with three-card heart support. Opener pulled out of 1NT, so he should have an unbalanced pattern — probably 4=3=5=1. If you hold:

♠109 ♥865 ♦QJ76 ♣AK82,

resist the temptation to cash a high club, which may give declarer the tempo to eventually ruff two club losers in dummy. You want to lead trumps as many times as possible, so start with the ♥5. If declarer wants to set up ruffs in dummy, he'll have

to lead clubs himself, and you'll be in again for a second trump lead.

When you have a clear advantage in overall power, a trump lead can cut down on tricks made by ruffing. This may be especially important if you've doubled the contract.

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
1NT	Pass	2♣	2♠
Pass	Pass	Dbl	All Pass

After this auction, a trump lead is a good idea, even if you have an unattractive holding such as:

♠Q84 ♥QJ10 ♦KQ102 ♣AJ6.

Although partner should have moderate spade length and strength, his double may be partially based on knowledge that your side owns significantly more than half the high-card strength. In this case, declarer's only prayer may be to score tricks with a few of dummy's trumps. Every trump lead you can make could cost him a trick.

When you have a clear advantage in trump length and strength, it's a good idea to start pulling trumps, just as you would if you were declarer.

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
1♦	Dbl	Pass	Pass
Pass			

After this auction, holding:

♠QJ102 ♥KJ76 ♦8 ♣AK63,

lead the ♦8. Partner rates to have better trumps than declarer, so start attacking declarer's suit. Partner may even be able to draw all of declarer's and dummy's trumps. This is one of the rare exceptions to the "rule" about never leading a singleton trump.

Passive trump leads

“When in doubt, lead a trump” is an old guideline that players tend to invoke too often. Ideally, you’ll have a good reason and a clear purpose when you choose a trump lead.

Sometimes, however, the good reason will be that no other lead is safe.

If you find yourself on lead with:

♠754 ♥A1082 ♦KJ32 ♣J4

after a 1♠ – Pass – 2♠ – All Pass by your opponents, your lead choices are unappealing.

You have dangerous honor holdings in the unbid suits, so try the ♠4. You don’t necessarily expect this to hurt declarer, but you hope it won’t help. Partner has only one or two trumps, so probably the worst that can happen is that you’ll locate his doubleton queen — and that’s something declarer may have found for himself anyway.

A few caveats

You should *avoid* leading a trump when:

Declarer has shown a long suit and dummy hasn’t raised. A trump lead into a one-suited hand isn’t an effective attack (dummy’s shortest suit is probably trumps) and it’s not always safe.

Your trump is a singleton. Your trump shortness is a clue that partner has length, and this lead will often pick up his honors. It’s better to lead a long suit and try to force declarer to ruff himself down to the same or shorter length than your partner.

You have a dangerous honor holding such as J-x-x, J-x, K-10-x, A-10-x or A-x. These will be safe only if partner holds no trump honors. If he has the jack or queen, a lead from one of these combinations can make one of your natural trump tricks disappear immediately. Or, more likely, it may give declarer a finessing position that picks up your honor on the next lead.

Third, fourth, fifth, MUD?

Choosing the suit for your opening lead is an individual judgment. The specific card you lead from that suit, however, is a partnership decision,

and it’s an important one. With so many different lead conventions available, how do you determine which work best? Here’s a quick run-down of popular methods, with some pluses and minuses for each:

Fourth-best

Plus: Familiarity (it’s what most of us learned first) and conservation of spot cards. The rule of 11 tells you how many higher cards are in declarer’s hand.

Minus: The same card is led from a three-card or a four-card suit, making it difficult for partner to determine leader’s length and rely on the Rule of 11.

Note: Most pairs lead second-highest from an honorless suit of four cards or more (the 6 from 8-6-4-3). The 10 is commonly treated as an honor.

Third and fifth

Third-highest from three or four cards, fifth-highest from five or more cards. A variation is third from an even number, low from an odd number. Both are used mainly for leads to suit contracts. The rules of 10 and 12 are used to count higher cards in declarer’s hand. If you think the lead is third-best, use the rule of 12 as you would the rule of 11. If you think it’s fifth-best, use the rule of 10.

Plus: The same card is led from a three-card or a five-card suit, and the disparity makes it easier for partner to determine leader’s length and choose the rule of 10 or 12.

Minus: Third-highest may be a relatively high spot, which can cost a trick (the 8 is led from Q-10-8-2). Some pairs try to fix this problem by agreeing to lead fourth-best if the third-best card is an 8 or higher (some agree 7 or higher), but the more exceptions you build in, the less reliable the spot-card leads will be.

Coded 10s and 9s

A 10 or 9 shows zero or two higher honors — if two, the card led is the bottom of an interior sequence (10 from K-J-10-x, 9 from Q-10-9-x). A jack shows the 10 and denies a higher honor. This convention is

sometimes called Journalist or “jack denies, 10 or 9 implies” (erroneously: the 10 or 9 *promises* zero or two higher honors).

Plus: The coded card gives a clearer picture of leader’s honor holding, which can help partner make a better decision about which card to play to the first trick and whether to continue the suit later.

Minus: Declarer has the same information and can use it to his advantage.

Attitude leads

The lower the spot card, the more interest leader has in partner returning the suit. Used mainly for leads to notrump.

Plus: The spot card communicates honor strength and the potential for running the suit. It also avoids the ambiguity of a length lead that happens to be a high spot card (playing attitude, you would lead the 2 from K-J-9-7-3-2 instead of the fourth-best 7).

Minus: The lead tells partner little or nothing about length in the suit. Leader sometimes has to make a subjective evaluation of a suit’s potential, which can be misread by partner.

Rusinow

Second highest from touching honors (queen from K-Q, king from A-K, etc.). Generally used only on the first trick to suit contracts, in a suit partner has not bid.

Plus: On an ace or king lead, there’s no guessing about the location of the other high honor, which makes it easier for third hand to choose the correct signal.

Minus: Not recommended for casual partnerships, as there are many exceptions to discuss.

Ace from A-K to suit contracts

The standard used to be to lead the king from A-K.

Plus: A king lead always shows the queen, so third hand can make an encouraging signal when he holds the jack.

Minus: An ace lead doesn’t guarantee the king, so third hand has to guess which attitude signal to make

when he holds the queen.

Note: Regardless of your agreement, you should lead the king from A-K if partner has bid the suit or if you're defending a contract at the five level or higher. In these situations, an ace lead asks partner for attitude regarding the king.

MUD leads

MUD stands for "Middle-Up-Down" from a holding such as 8-6-4 (middle card first, then follow high and low) of a suit partner has not bid.

Plus: The middle spot may be high enough that partner won't read the lead as low from an honor.

Minus: The middle spot may be high enough that partner mistakes it for a doubleton, but he won't know for sure until you follow to the second trick.

Note: MUD is aptly named, but the two alternatives — leading high or low from three low cards — are also easily misread. Look for another suit to lead whenever possible.

Note: If partner has bid the suit

and you haven't raised, always lead low from three low cards. If you've raised, lead high.

Honor leads against notrump

There are several different schemes for communicating your exact strength. Here's one that covers most possibilities:

The ace asks for attitude regarding the queen. It's usually a suit such as A-K-4-3.

The king asks for the unblock of the queen or jack (first priority) or count. This lead is always from a very strong suit (headed by A-K-J-10 or A-K-Q-10).

The queen asks for the unblock of the jack or attitude regarding the ace or king. Lead the queen from K-Q-10-9-2 or Q-J-9-5.

Still can't decide?

There's a story from the Sixties about an expert who published an article in a major bridge magazine titled, "Why Third and Fifth Leads Are Better." It featured many examples of the problems with standard fourth-best leads and showed how they could be solved by leading third and fifth from length. The writer was regaled with praise from enlightened readers who said they had always known standard leads were inferior, and now they had proof.

The following month, the expert published another article titled, "Why Fourth-Best Leads Are Better." It offered the same number of examples and equally compelling evidence that third and fifth leads were confusing and ineffective.

This story is probably a bridge urban legend, as the articles can't be located, but it's easy to understand how they could have been written. Many players will offer fervent arguments about the merits of their favorite lead conventions, but don't believe anyone who claims one method is clearly superior to all others. Whatever leading scheme you choose, the only critical issues are that you and partner feel comfortable with it and have clear agreements about which card you'll lead from all possible holdings. □

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