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Leading from three low cards

This is an isolated theme that has nothing to do with bidding but everything to do with winning bridge.

You have the 8-5-3 of a suit and you decide to lead it. Which card should you lead?

In one school is the top-of-nothing crowd that leads the 8. They want to warn their partner that they don't have any high cards in the suit. The other main school is the lead-low bunch. They don't want to lead the high one and see their partner cash the ace and king, hoping that the opening leader has a doubleton. There is another group who can't make up their minds. We call them the procrastinators. They lead the middle card.

All three of these schools have good and bad things to be said for their choice and for their logic. Which one of these three groups has the correct attitude?

Lead something else if possible

I can tell you right now that leading from three low cards is a lousy way to make a living. If you have anything better to lead, you should lead that. If you lead from the suit altogether, but some of the time you have no choice.

Mike's Advice

It will happen now and then that the only choice you have is to lead from three low cards. It may be the suit your partner bid, it may be the only unbid suit or it may be that other leads are dangerous. Assuming you have to lead a card from three low ones, which card should you lead?

Don't MUD!

My first piece of advice is to give up leading the middle card. I wrote a book about opening leads. If you wish to see the complete reasoning for my recommendations, I suggest you get the book. The short version of my dislike for leading the middle card is that your partner won't know until the second round of the suit what your intentions are and by then, it may be too late. My dislike for MUD (Middle-Up-Down) is serious. I did play it for a while and it seemed to cause far more problems than the other choices.

There are variables that will influence your lead when you have three low cards. Some of the time you should lead the high card and some of the time you should lead the low one.

Case #1: Against notrump; Partner has bid the suit

A. *You did not raise.* Lead the low card. You hope the bidding has told your partner where the honors are. By leading low, you let partner know you have more than two cards in the suit. If he has five to the ace-king, knowing you have three cards will help him determine whether to continue the suit.

B. *You raised.* Lead the top card. Your partner knows you have three cards in the suit. Leading the high card tells him that you have no honor.

C. *You gave a preference in the auction.* If you have given a preference for partner's suit and they end up in notrump, you should lead your low card. Your partner does not know if you have two or three

cards for your preference. Lead the low one to let him know you have genuine length in the suit.

Summary: If you raised the suit, lead the top card from three low ones against notrump. Otherwise, lead low.

Note, however, that you should not lead the 9 from three low cards unless you also have the 8. There are some situations where leading an unsupported 9 can cost you a trick.

Case #2: Against notrump; Leading an unbid suit

If you are leading from three low cards against notrump and your side has not bid the suit, it is usually best to lead the top card. In this case, you are warning your partner that you don't like the suit. He should not spend any energy setting up this suit unless he has the cards in his own hand to do it. Your high-card lead will usually let him know that you have interest elsewhere.

Your partner still has to work out how to conduct the defense, but at least he will know what your interest is in the suit you led originally.

West	North	East	South
1♣	Pass	1♦	Pass
1♠	Pass	1NT	Pass
2NT	All Pass		

You are South and hold:

♠QJ63 ♥862 ♦AJ2 ♣J94.

Lead the ♥8. This is an unbid suit, the one your partner more or less expects you to lead. You are not happy with your holding in hearts but the auction has told you that the other suits are dangerous to lead, a fact that is confirmed by your holdings. If your partner gains the lead, he will know that you have no real interest in hearts and that will prompt him to look for an alternative.

Case #3: Against a suit contract

Leading from three low cards against a suit contract is something to be avoided. If you must, choose a card that your partner will understand the significance of.

A. *Leading an unbid suit.* I know goes against the grain for most players to do this, but I suggest you lead the low card from three. The reason that I like this choice is easy enough. I do not want to lead the top card and have my partner thinking I am looking for a ruff. If I lead the low card it is true that my partner will hope I have the high card in the suit, but that is a different danger. I feel that in the long run, having partner think I have shortness is a greater liability than having partner think I have an honor.

Obviously, no matter what I lead, my partner is going to have difficulties. At least if you follow my guidelines religiously, your partner will have a better chance of guessing what you are doing than if you lead random cards.

B. *If partner has bid the suit.* If you did not raise, you should lead your low card. Partner will hope you have an honor and when you don't, your side will sometimes lose the trick. At least your partner won't try to give you a third-round ruff. He will get some decisions right and some decisions wrong, which is better than having a constant headache. If you have raised your partner, promising three or more cards, you should lead your high card as long as it is not an unsupported 9 or 10. Leading the 10 from the 10-5-3 can cost a lot.

When you lead the 8 or 7, your partner will use the rule of 11 and can tell that you are not leading a fourth-best or third-best card. He will know that you deny an honor and will know what to do.

Finally, if you gave a preference in the auction, you should lead low.

Summary: Lead low from three cards against a suit contract except when your partner knows you have length. In that case, lead a high card knowing that partner will not try to give you a ruff.

Some players lead differently, I admit. At least, if you follow this plan, you will be a consistent opening leader and your partner will have a sensible clue about what is happening. □

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Test Your Play

Eddie Kantar

1. Dir: North ♠ A 5 3
 Vul: Both ♥ A Q
 IMPs ♦ A K 8 6 4 2
 ♣ 6 2
- ♠ J 10 6 2
 ♥ K 10
 ♦ 10 7
 ♣ K Q J 7 5

West	North	East	South
	1♦	Pass	1♠
Pass	3♦	Pass	3NT
All Pass			
West leads the ♥6. Plan the play.			

2. Dir: South ♠ K J 3
 Vul: Both ♥ J 10 4
 IMPs ♦ A 4
 ♣ 10 9 8 6 3
- ♠ A 7 2
 ♥ A
 ♦ K 10 7 3
 ♣ A Q J 4 2

West	North	East	South
			1♣
Pass	1NT	Pass	2♦
Pass	4♣	Pass	6♣ (!)
All Pass			
West leads the ♠5 (low from odd, third-best from even). Plan the play.			

(Solutions are on page 59.)

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