

Leading against suit contracts



Sandra Landy

STANDARD ENGLISH

WHAT is a good lead against a no trump contract may be a very poor lead against a suit contract. For example, you hold:

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

If your right-hand opponent opens 1NT which is raised to 3NT, you would lead the six of diamonds without hesitation. You may well give declarer a diamond trick, but you

hope to set up four diamond winners in your hand. You hope partner will gain the lead and return a diamond, so you can cash your four diamond winners and beat 3NT.

But if the opening bid is 1♠ and the opponents reach 4♠, the six of diamonds is a very poor lead as it may well give a trick away. Partner will return a diamond when on lead, but you won't be able to cash four diamond tricks as declarer will be able to ruff your winning diamonds.

If someone held a gun to your head and said you must lead a diamond, you would lead the ace to make sure you got at least one diamond trick. But it would be better to choose another suit, a heart or a club, and wait for someone else to play diamonds.

Let's see how a heart lead works.

South wins the ace of hearts and plays the king of spades. Your partner wins the ace of spades and leads the nine of diamonds, South plays the jack and you win with the queen. Now you can cash your ace of diamonds and give your partner a diamond ruff. You would know partner only had a doubleton diamond because the switch to the nine denied a higher card, so declarer must have the king, jack and ten of diamonds. By not leading a diamond you actually made both your ace and queen in the suit, and partner made the setting trick with the two of spades. In suit contracts little cards can win big tricks.

Actually South could and should have made 4♠ even on a heart lead; can you see how? (Answer at the bottom of the page.)

A different scenario

Hand B
 ♠ 4 3 2
 ♥ 9 8
 ♦ K Q J 10 5
 ♣ 8 6 4

Now suppose you had held Hand B. The diamond king is a very good lead, just as it would be against 3NT. You want to drive out declarer's ace of diamonds and set up diamond winners for your side to cash before declarer can discard his diamond losers on a side suit. Of course, because there is a trump suit you do not expect to take four diamond tricks, but you want to take as many tricks as are available in the diamond suit – maybe just one, perhaps two if both declarer and dummy have three diamonds.

Our main aim when leading to a suit contract is not to give away tricks to declarer. This is why that diamond king, or any three honour card sequence (A-K-Q, K-Q-J, Q-J-10) is always a good lead.

Sometimes no suit is attractive to lead and we have to resort to a fourth highest lead. On Hand C, the

Hand C
 ♠ Q 3 2
 ♥ Q 8
 ♦ Q 10 8 5 3
 ♣ Q 6 4

five of diamonds is probably the best chance, hoping that partner can produce a useful card and help set up a diamond winner.

What if you don't have a sequence?

Of course we don't always have nice solid sequences to lead. Nor may you have a long suit with honours. With Hand A, I suggested that you might lead a heart. The actual heart you should choose is the eight. We lead MUD, the middle card from three cards without an honour. If you had decided to lead a club from the eight, six and four, you would have chosen the six. On the next round you would have played the eight of clubs, since MUD stands for Middle Up Down.

Also on the deal above, I said East would switch to the nine of diamonds and play the diamond three on the next round. This shows a doubleton because you have not made a MUD lead.

People used to play 'Top of Nothing' – the highest card in a suit with no honour – whether they held two or three or four cards. This made it very hard to defend well, which is why most people now play MUD. □

Answer

South must play three rounds of clubs throwing a diamond away from hand before touching trumps. Now West can make win the ace and queen of diamonds but South will overruff the third diamond and draw all the trumps. The heart loser can be ruffed in dummy.

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|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| ♠ 4 3 | ♠ J 8 7 6 | ♠ A 2 |
| ♥ 9 8 2 | ♥ 7 6 | ♥ Q J 10 5 4 |
| ♦ A Q 7 6 5 | ♦ 8 4 2 | ♦ 9 3 |
| ♣ 8 6 4 | ♣ A K Q 5 | ♣ 9 7 3 2 |
| | ♠ K Q 10 9 5 | |
| | ♥ A K 3 | |
| | ♦ K J 10 | |
| | ♣ J 10 | |

| West | North | East | South |
|----------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | 3♠ | Pass | 1♠ |
| All Pass | | | 4♠ |