



BridgeHands eMag Newsletter

Notrump Leads

February 2006

Dear Michael,

For the last few months, we featured two of declarer's favorite play strategies – the finesse and the promotion play. This month in our first of a two part article, we will explore considerations for the defender to make the best lead when opponents are playing a Notrump contract. There's more to this game beyond leading your fourth-best card: find out why.

With our focus on leads this month, let's review the Laws when something goes awry on the opening lead.

Everyone loves to open a hand for bidding. Last month we learned how the "Rule of 15" gives us another hand evaluation criterion when partner is a passed hand. Now let's explore the "Rule of 20" - a third hand evaluation method, useful even when partner hasn't bid.

My, partner, you have great shape – referring to your hand distribution, of course! Some hands have cute colloquial names associated with them to describe the shape: Swan, Rattlesnake, Two/Three Suiter, Pancake, (Ugly) Duckling, Freak, and Stiff. Regardless of how you play the cards, use these clichés and you'll sound like you really know your stuff after you have finished this month's newsletter.

Note: Viewing the hands below requires your EMAIL reader to use "fixed fonts" (not proportional). If you have problems reading this document, please view our online [web-based copy](#) or [Adobe Acrobat PDF file](#) suitable for printing at the BridgeHands website

Leads: Trading a promotion for a finesse

Last month we investigated scenarios where declarer promoted long suits to establish extra tricks. They say imitation is the most sincere form of flattery – and so when the opening leader makes a fourth-best lead, indeed the defenders are attempting to promote their suit. Leading a long suit helps your side get a step ahead in winning the promotion race. However, since the powerful declarer holds honors, we may finesse ourself or our partner when trying to promote our suit. So it's occasionally a game of give and take, trading a promotion attempt for a possible finesse. But it's the best offer the opponents give us so we might as well make the best of it. While fourth best leads are often a sound practice,

we should consider other environmental factors such as the bidding, the final contract, and hand attributes when choosing our most profitable lead.

Before we get down to the nitty-gritty, a quick review of sequence leads will provide us a sound foundation. Often, sequences of 3 or more connected honor combinations can be powerful forces to setup a longer suit to win the promotion race. When we lead the top of our honor sequence, our partner should immediately understand we have a long suit. It would not make sense to lead an "unprotected" honor (not adjoining other honors), so normally an honor lead shows a sequence of 3+ connected cards (ore nearly so).

Remember, this lesson focuses on Notrump contracts so our lead criteria will change when opponents are playing a suit contracts. For instance, it's usually unwise to "underlead" a fourth best lead when holding an Ace. For suit contracts, should we mistakenly lead a low card away from our Ace and opponent holds a singleton King, we probably lose at least one trick. Declarer will ruff our Ace and perhaps promote their Queen or pitch a second card on a dummy winner in a side suit. Fortunately, our honor sequence leads are the same regardless of the final contract.

At any rate, this month we're focusing on Notrump contracts so leading away from an Ace is usually fine and dandy. When the suit is replayed, we hope to win our Ace and many more on our long suit. Aces make unbeatable entries in Notrump contracts to help us promote our long suit – that's an important reason why we don't lead our Aces in a Notrump contract; otherwise we many not have an entry later when we most need it. Okay, let's begin looking at sequence leads.

<u>K</u> Q J 9 2	Lead the King
<u>Q</u> J 10 9 4 2	Lead the Queen
<u>J</u> 10 9 7	Lead the Jack

When you hold a honor sequence with the top 2 honors connected:

<u>K</u> Q 10 4	Lead the King (adjoining top)
<u>Q</u> J 9 4 2	Lead the Queen (adjoining top)
10 9 7 4 2	Best suit? Optimists lead the 10

When you hold a honor sequence with the top 2 broken honors (interior sequence):

K <u>J</u> 10 4	Lead the Jack (adjoining top)
Q <u>10</u> 9 4 2	Lead the 10 (adjoining top)
10 8 7 4 2	Not worthy of promotion
A <u>Q</u> J 10 5	Lead Queen (adjoining top)

Without a connected honor sequence – perhaps only one, we normally lead our fourth best card. In addition to helping promote a long suit with strength, we advise partner of our long suit. Even better, our fourth best lead signals partner to use the "Rule of 11" to calculate how many outstanding honors are held by the opponents. Here's the formula: 11 – lead card value = remaining cards above the lead card spot value. Let's try a few lead examples – you can remove a suit from a deck of cards to prove this formula really works:

Lead Cards outstanding

1. $11 - 8 = 3$ **Three remaining above the 8**
2. $11 - 7 = 4$ **Four remaining above the 7**
3. $11 - 6 = 5$ **Five remaining above the 6**
4. $11 - 2 = 9$ **Nine remaining above the 2**

Incidentally, if partner leads their fourth best, the lead of a 2 shows they have exactly four cards (assuming they are not leading a 3 card suit for some reason).

Why is the Rule of 11 significant, you ask? Of course, we always want to cooperate with our partner so it helps to know where the remaining high cards are held. This helps us understand the declarer's assets when promoting the opening leader's long suit. After partner leads and the dummy is exposed, you not only see two hands (yours and dummy's), you can now calculate the declarer's remaining high cards in partner's led suit.

On #2 above, $11 - 7 = 4$. If dummy exposes one card above partner's 7 and you hold two cards above the 7, then only one card remains above the 7 in the declarer's hand, as:

9 3 2

A J 8 7 5 K 10

Q 6 4

When the play comes around to us (East), without knowing declarer's cards we can deduce declarer's honor must be an Ace, Queen, or the Jack (we can see our King, 10, and dummy's 9). Being a good partner, we go up with our King, normally playing third hand high. When declarer does not win the trick, we realize we should return the 10 so partner can pin South's Queen to take the first 5 tricks.

Now let's look at a hand where the Rule of 11 really pays off. Partner leads the 3, so: $11 - 3 = 8$. Here are the hands:

Q 9 5 4

A 10 6 3 K J 8 7

2

Play begins with partner's 3, dummy's 5 and it's our play. Do we automatically play third hand high? Hopefully not for several reasons! First, we should never play the King – if we decide to play "high", the Jack would be a more efficient play. Declarer South cannot hold the Queen so if we play the Jack, our King remains to pin the dummy's Queen on a subsequent play. This concept is known as playing from "lowest equals", meaning third hand player should hold "cover cards" over the dummy's potential winners.

Yet before jumping up with a high card in third seat, let's see if we can learn more about the declarer's hand using the Rule of 11. $11 - 3 = 8$. Dummy exposes four cards above leader's 3. Well, small wonder – we have four cards above the 3 in our hand as well! Interesting - the declarer cannot beat the lead

of the 3! If we don't use the Rule of 11, we go up with the Jack, win the King, play to partner's Ace, giving dummy the fourth trick with the remaining Queen. But if you play the lowly 7 on the first trick which smartly wins (etiquette says we should try not to look smug), return to partner's Ace, your remaining King-Jack have the dummy's Queen pinned. Ah, the joys of nicely executed promotion and a finesse – well done!

The subject of which card to lead from an honor-less suit has two schools of thought. While some still advocate leading their fourth best card, others insist the lead should promise honor values; the lead from honor cohorts recommend leading the top card or second from top to warn partner you do not wish to see the suit continued. This tactic works well when making a neutral, passive lead as dictated by bidding, contract, and the leader's holding. When the leader's partner tries the Rule of 11, the result is a negative number – warning partner the leader has no interest in the suit. Example $11 - 8 = 3$. Yet if you have two cards above the 8 and the dummy holds three, then the declarer would have less than zero. Forget "the rule" in that situation and begin looking for another suit.

Next we will explore which suit to lead against opponents' Notrump contract. Earlier we mentioned the importance of the bidding, the final contract, and the leader's holding. Let's say the bidding goes:

W	N	E	S
P	(P)	P	(1N);
P	(2N)	P	(3N);

As West, here's what we have learned from this auction:

- 1. North did not open: less than 13 points**
- 2. Partner (East) also has less than 13 points**
- 3. South shows a balanced Notrump hand**
- 4. North has invitational values. If opponents would normally bid conventions (Stayman, Jacoby Transfers) to find a major suit fit, the responder's lack to do so here implies responder probably has a 4 or 5 card minor suit.**
- 5. South accepts the game invite, showing the upper end of the Notrump opening values.**

Now let's look at various hands to determine our opening lead:

S A Q 10 7 2
H 7
D 9 6 3 2
C 8 7 6

Leading the Spade 7 is ideal, especially if partner has the Spade King – perhaps making 5 quick tricks. Even if partner holds the Spade Jack, if partner can get in and return a Spade, there is a good chance to win 4 tricks. Actually, a nice attribute of this hand is not having too many honors. Since opponents bidding shows they barely have enough to bid game (25-26 points) and we hold 6 points, partner rates to hold around 8 points. Maybe partner has an Ace and a King – on this hand, we'd love to see partner win and return a Spade. Hopefully partner is awake and using the "Rule of 11", $11 - 7 = 4$ outstanding cards above your Spade 7. By the way, leading away from double tenaces is best with a five card suit; with a four card suit, consider a different lead. With the same auction, consider your lead with this hand :

S A 7
H K J 7 3
D 3 2
C K 10 9 6 4

While our Heart honors are better than those in our Club suit, we normally lead our five card suit with a primary honor. If the four card suit has an extra honor, three versus two, then we should lead the honor bound suit. Speaking of triple honor suits, here's our next hand:

S Q J 9
H K Q 10 8 7
D A 3
C 10 9 8

A Heart lead works well on this hand and since we do have touching honors, we lead the King – the top of our adjacent sequence. We appreciate our outside entry, the Diamond Ace, which provides a helpful entry later when opponents try to promote their long Diamond suit. Note that if we led our fourth best lead of the Heart 8, opponents might have two winners: the Jack and Ace. Leading the King may hold them to one trick, especially if an opponent holds a Jack doubleton. Incidentally, don't expect help from partner on this hand. With opponent's 25- 26 points and our 12 points, partner does not hold the Heart Ace. Yet we would be happy if partner held only the precious Heart Jack on this hand. Did you consider leading the Spades or Club suit? While they are sequence suits, your best bet is to promote the powerful Heart suit with three honors. Here's a hand almost devoid of points (same auction):

S J 10
H 9 3
D 10 8 6 5
C 9 8 7 3 2

It's highly unlikely this hand will get on lead again so choose your lead wisely. First off, remember that Bridge is not a solo venture – you do have a partner with a lovely hand! This is a good time to forget those funky minors and focus on your partner's majors with lots of entries! After all, since opponents didn't try to find a major suit game, partner must have a heap (we don't). Choosing among the majors, the Spade suit is far better so lead your Spade Jack – the best sequence you have to offer. If conditions are right, you might be a hero by pinning one of the dummy's honors.

This time we'll boost our hand to an Ace and a flat 4=3=3=3 shape:

S A 9 5 4
H 8 6 4
D 5 3 2
C 7 5 3

Okay, only 4 points here. Opponents 25-26 plus our 4 leaves 10-11 points for partner. Leading the Spade 4 seems reasonable but may cost your side tricks when declarer holds the King or Queen. Instead, consider leading the Heart 8 – a passive lead telling partner you do not have interest in that suit based on the "Rule of 11". Perhaps partner holds a Spade honor sequence (ideally Queen-Jack) and can pin declarer's Spade King. Regardless, your Ace is unlikely to go away – when you get in the lead, you can always cooperate with whichever suit pleases partner, considering partner's 10-11 points to establish a suit.

Let's keep the same hand but the bidding is quite different:

W N E S
P - (1D) – P – (1H);
P - (3D) – P – (3N);

This time the dummy promises a powerful Diamond suit with 6+ cards, which declarer will undoubtedly promote at the first opportunity. So forget the passive Heart lead, particularly since declarer bid the suit. With the threatening Diamond suit, make the aggressive lead of the Spade 4 and hope for the best. Okay, here's a new auction and hand:

W N E S
P - (P) - P - (1H);
P - (1S) - P - (1N);
P - (2N) - P - (3N);

S 1083
H 975
D Q1072
C A932

Actually, this auction is quite illuminating. The opponents did not find a major suit fit, slowly working their way into a 3 Notrump contract. So with the choice between the remaining suits, favor the Aceless suit. Why? The Ace always gives you an entry to promote partner's favorite suit. If partner holds the Diamond King-Jack, all is well – even better holding the Diamond Ace. So lead the fourth best Diamond 2; partner will know you hold four (you do lead fourth best, after all) and have an honor.

Normally it's not a good idea to lead a suit bid by the opponents, particularly when the bidding indicates the suit is 5+ cards in length. Yet when opponents began with a "convenient minor", perhaps 3 or 4 cards in length, your lead from a long minor suit with accompanying honors may generate extra tricks.

W N E S
P - (1C) - P - (1S);
P - (1N) - P - (2N);
P - (3N) - AP;

S A86
H 73
D 1042
C QJ1053

Lead the Club Queen, a nice top of sequence play. If partner has either the Ace or King, your side may take 4 Clubs and the Spade Ace to set the contract. On the next auction, South jumps up with a 2 Notrump opener:

W N E S
 P - (P) - P - (2N);
 P - (3N) - AP;

S Q J 9 8 4 3
 H K 6 2
 D Q 7 3
 C 10

Recall we lead the top of adjacent honors, here it's the Spade Queen. The hands might look like this:

	2
	J 10 5
	Q J 4 2
	Q 9 7 6 2
Q J 9 8 4 3	K 10
9 6 2	K 7 4 3
K 7 3	6 5
10	J 8 5 4 3
	A 7 6 5
	A Q 8
	A 10 9 8
	A K

Hopefully our partner East is awake and covers our Queen with the King. Leading our Queen promises the Jack and either the 10 or the 9. Since East holds the 10, it's clear West holds the 9 and more Spades – probably many more since dummy has a singleton and East only holds a doubleton. But what happens if East supposedly “saves” the King and plays the 10? Declarer South can see a problem with the suit and should hold back winning the trick (see Rule of 7). West continues the suit and East must now win with the King yet cannot continue the suit – how unfortunate! We can see South has only 5 quick tricks, needing 4 more to make the 3 Notrump contract. The dummy Club Queen and three Diamonds will do the trick, with South happily giving up the lead once to bring the contract home (still holding the Spade Ace). A thoughtful East will unblock the opening lead by covering with the Spade King and return the favor with the 10.

This play allows West to set the contract – the Spade suit is now established and when West wins the Diamond King, the party is over for declarer who also loses 5 Spade tricks. Last month we saw how the opener needs to be careful to unblock a long suit by playing the top card from the short suit side to provide a critical entry to the dummy hand. Notice the parallel here – West must play the top card from the short suit side to unblock the suit, providing partner a similar entry.

What should we lead when partner has bid and the opponents end up in a Notrump contract? Remember, Bridge is a partnership game – keep your partner happy by leading the bid suit unless you either have a stunning play or are prepared to apologize for not listening to partner's request for your help. Next hand, partner overcalls 1 Diamond showing 5 or more, opponents end up in Notrump and it's your lead:

S 9 3
H K 8 7 4 2
D K 8 5
C 8 4 3

Initially you hoped to lead your Heart 4, however you being a good partner, you lead your Diamond 5 to help the team effort. When holding a doubleton in partner's suit, initially lead the top card. Holding the King and 8 against a Notrump contract, lead the King to help partner promote the suit. But how about when partner makes a preemptive bid and you have a suit of your own:

W N E S
P - (P) - 3D - (3N);

S K Q J 9 7
H 10 6 5
D 9 6
C K 4 3

Apparently South has a Diamond stopper, but with our own honor sequence lead and the outside Club King entry, this time we have a reason to be disobedient and lead our Spade King. If all works well, we may get four Spades, one Club and perhaps a Diamond from partner.

Finally, let's consider leads against Notrump slam contracts. If we have a nice Queen high honor sequence or above, by all means lead the suit. If partner bids a suit or doubles opponents' artificial bid, our lead direction is also clear. But the majority of opponents' slam auctions are not quite so easy for us to discern our best lead. Unlike Notrump contracts beneath slam, when the opponents have 33+ points and we do not have an obvious lead direction, we should make a passive lead. In opponents' 3 Notrump contracts, we're assured to win several tricks so promotion is our mantra. In opponents' slam contract, it's a real challenge to grab two tricks. Of course, when you do not have any honors the lead is fairly easy – your only criteria is to avoid finessing partner's possible honors; leading an unbid suit often is a safe lead. When you hold an Ace, King or Queen without an assisting honor, consider leading another suit, unless of course they bid a grand slam contract and your Ace immediately sets the contract! Similarly, if the opponents had a bidding misunderstanding going too high and you have an inspired lead, go for it. In summary, the general idea when opponents bid slam is to make them earn all their tricks by making a passive lead (next month we will see the opposite is true when opponents bid slam in a suit contract).

Next month, we will delve into opening leads against suit contracts. Some leads such as the sequence card combinations will follow what we've already learned, yet we have quite a few new techniques to learn so stay tuned.

You can always review this promotion lesson at [*BridgeHands*](#)



Opening leads and the Law

Let's say you are declarer and your Right Hand Opponent leads out of turn in a social Rubber Bridge game. What are your rights according to the Bridge Laws? [Contract Bridge Law 54](#) makes the following provisions:

When a defender makes the opening lead out of turn,

(a) declarer may accept the irregular lead as provided in [Law 53](#). Dummy's hand is spread in accordance with [Law 41](#), and the second card to the trick is played from declarer's hand; but if declarer first plays to the trick from dummy's hand, dummy's card may not be withdrawn except to correct a revoke.

(b) declarer must accept the irregular lead if he could have seen any of dummy's cards (except cards exposed during the auction, subject to [Law 23](#)). He is deemed to have accepted the irregular lead if he begins to spread his hand as though he were dummy and in so doing exposes one or more cards; declarer must spread his entire hand, and dummy becomes declarer. *

(c) declarer may accept the irregular lead by spreading his hand and becoming dummy; his partner becomes the declarer.

(d) declarer may require the defender to retract his irregular lead (except as provided in (b) above), and then [Law 56](#) applies.

* If cards are so exposed from both declarer's and dummy's hands, the player who was regularly to become declarer remains declarer.

Duplicate players have similar options, with a few nuances: see Duplicate [Law 54](#)

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Hand Evaluation, part 2 – Enter the “Rule of 20”

Last month we found the “Rule of 15” provides a secondary hand evaluation methodology when a hand does not have sufficient strength to open the bidding using a traditional point count (and partner is a passed hand). The “Rule of 20” provides yet another tool to consider holding a marginal hand. Better yet, you can use this in any seat, even when partner isn’t a passed hand. Rule of 20 – add the sum of cards held in your two long suits to your high card points. If the total is 20 or greater and your honors are in the two longest suits, open the bidding. The idea here is that when you have a two-suited hand (5-4, 5-5, or longer), the hand may generate extra tricks based on the suit length – particularly when you have a suit fit with partner. Bridge author Marty Bergen is credited with inventing this handy tool in “Points Schmoints”. However, when some players complained the method didn’t always work well, Marty clarified the two long suits must contain the honors, published in “More Points Schmoints”. Here’s a few hands:

```
S   A K Q 3 2
H   J 10 9 2
D   5 4
C   3 2
```

10 HCP, 5 Spades and 4 Hearts = 19, not quite enough to open. But if you recall our Rule of 15 lesson last month, we could open the hand 1S in fourth seat (some play third seat as well).

```
S   K 10 8 4
H   A K J 3 2
D   5 4
C   3 2
```

11 HCP, 4 Spades and 5 Hearts = 20, so open 1 Heart.

```
S   10 8 3 4
H   A K J 3 2
D   5 4
C   K 2
```

Same 11 HCP, 4 Spades and 5 Hearts, but unfortunately the Club King is not “working” with our two long suits so we should pass for now. Incidentally, the reason we have this restriction is that outside honors do not carry their weight helping promote the long suits. Secondly, outside honors are often useful as defensive tricks.

Used correctly, the Rule of 20 is a fine hand analysis tool to evaluate minimal hands holding nine or more cards in two suits.

Rule of 20 summary



Just For Fun: Shape showing jargon

Did you know several suit hand patterns have cute names associated with them? Here are some fun colloquial terms you can use to describe the shape of your hand:

Freak: Wildly distributional, as 8-4-1, 7-6, 6-6-1, 6-5-2

Swan: 7-4-1-1

Rattlesnake: 4-4-4-1 (difficult to bid, aka three suiter)

(Ugly) Duckling: 5-3-3-2 (nothing spectacular, average shape)

Two-suiter: 6-5-1-1, 5-5-2-1, etc

Stiff: referring to a singleton

[Visit BridgeHands Jargon words in our Encyclopedia](#)

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Sincerely,



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