



March 2006 BridgeHands Newsletter

Leads against suit contracts: It's a ruff life

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Dear *BridgeHands* friend,

In our continuing saga of opening leads, this month our feature article shifts from leads against Notrump contracts to defending against opponents' suit contracts. Whether declarer or defender, playing a suit contract is often a "ruff" life.

Last month's article on Laws discussed the opening lead out of turn, but things could be worse – what about when partner exposes a card before the opening lead? Rubber Bridge players, check out [Law 23](#).

We've discussed the [Rule of 15](#) and [Rule of 20](#), so let's have some fun with the [Rule of Anticipation](#).

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.

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Leads against suit contracts: It's a ruff life

Last month we expanded our knowledge of promotion play, learning how opening leads can develop extra tricks when opponents play a Notrump contract. Among the tricks of the trade, we learned the benefit of leading [fourth-best](#), honor sequences, "[BOSTON](#)" ([Bottom Of Something](#) – [Top Of Nothing](#)), leads against part score, game, and [slam contracts](#). Many of these opening lead techniques are transferable when opponents play a suit contract; we will also add some new tricks of the trade.

[Promotion](#), [finesses](#), and ruffing – whether declarer or defender, these tactics are useful to gain extra tricks. [Last month we learned how short suits are bad news for declarer playing in a Notrump contract](#). In suit contracts, the converse is often true – the declarer turns the weakness into strength. Side suit shortness, particularly in the dummy, can help the declarer eliminate losers. The declarer plays the side suit, perhaps several times by regaining the lead in declarer’s hand, making good use of the dummy trumps to ruff losers. Another declarer ploy is to first run the trump suit until the defenders are depleted, then promote a long side suit using the promotion strategy. Our subscribers will recall our [previous BridgeHands newsletters detailing these tactics](#). With a long dummy side suit and entries, the declarer can pitch side suit losers on the long suit.

Good defenders are aware of various declarer strategies, looking for effective countermeasures to maximize their tricks. Additionally, the astute opening leader may have a few “tricks up their sleeve” to proactively develop extra winners. For this lesson, we will start off segmenting leads into two categories: hand attributes and environmental factors.

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. K Q J 9 2 | Lead the King |
| 2. Q J 10 9 4 2 | Lead the Queen |
| 3. J 10 9 7 | Lead the Jack |
| 4. K Q 10 4 | Lead the King (adjoining top) |
| 5. Q J 9 4 2 | Lead the Queen (adjoining top) |
| 6. 10 9 7 4 2 | Best suit? Optimists lead the 10 |
| 7. K J 10 4 | Lead the Jack (adjoining top) |
| 8. Q 10 9 4 2 | Lead the 10 (adjoining top) |
| 9. 10 8 7 4 2 | Not worthy of promotion |
| 10. A Q J 10 5 | Lead Queen (adjoining top) |

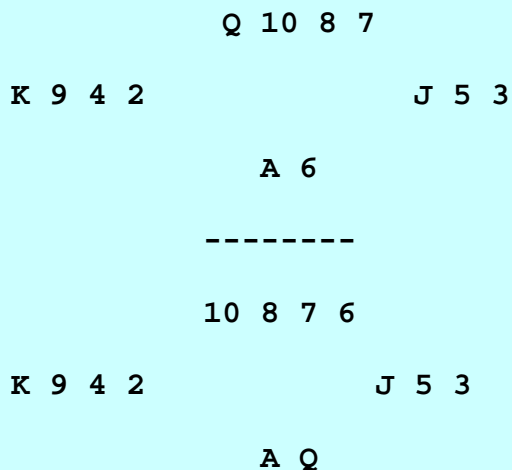
Other than #10, our opening lead tactics are essentially the same defending Notrump or suit contracts. Can you foresee why we would want to avoid leading away from an Ace? Should either opponent hold a **stiff** (singleton) King, your side will lose a trick underleading the Ace. Here’s another pitfall - perhaps declarer holds the King which would otherwise be pinned losing to your Ace; if you lead the Ace it only gathers small cards and promotes the declarer’s King. So unless you have an extra good reason to make a super aggressive lead, do not underlead the Ace or lead an unprotected Ace – find another suit. Save your irresistible urge to lead Aces against opponents' slam contract or dummy’s bidding threatens a long promotable side suit for declarer to pitch losers.

Later we will see how leading an Ace in those situations may work well. So, what is an unprotected King you ask? It simply means an Ace without an accompanying King. Actually, if you are blessed holding both the Ace and adjoining (protected) King, leading the top honor is usually the best of all possible leads. You win the first trick, get to view the dummy, and hopefully receive an encouraging or discouraging signal based on partner's high or low card played to your Ace.

Lacking a connected honor sequence, the principle of [fourth best leads and the Rule of 11](#) still hold true while defending against opponents' suit contract. Here's some examples, from best to worst:

1. K 9 4 2 Lead the 2
2. Q 10 5 3 Lead the 3
3. J 7 6 5 Lead the 5
4. A 8 5 4 Don't underlead Ace w/o protected King

In many circumstances when you lead away from an honor, leading away from a King is typically better than leading away from a Queen high suit. Leading away from a Queen is better than leading away from a Jack high suit. If you are going to lead away from an honor suit, generally it's true that the higher the honor, the more likely your side will win tricks. From prior lessons, we have seen how Queens and Jacks are "slow tricks" – we must wait for the opponents to play Aces and Kings before the secondary honors can take tricks. But if we lead away from a King and partner holds the Ace or Queen, we usually help set up our tricks before declarer can gain extra tricks. This is not to say the opening leader indiscriminately leads away from a King – certainly the Declarer may have the Ace and either opponent may have the Queen, causing us to lose our natural trick:



Shortly, we will turn our attention to aggressive and passive leads holding unprotected honors (non-sequential). Are you getting curious wondering when to lead away from a doubleton or singleton? What about trump leads? Good questions, so let's turn our attention to Environmental Factors.

Environmental Factors – Environmental factors provide defenders additional clues beyond static hand attributes to make the best opening lead. The “big three” environmental factors affecting opening leads include:

Bidding by the opponents
Possible bidding by your side
Final contract

While we will not address advanced concepts, be aware astute players excel at detecting obvious gestures (“tells” in poker parlance) by the opponents, obvious bidding misunderstanding, stretching to reach game, etc. Earlier we saw how the declarer can ruff side suit losers in dummy or promote dummy's long, strong side suit to pitch losers. In other circumstances, we noted an unfortunate opening lead might finesse our self or our partner. Using active or passive leads can help us maximize our tricks. As you might guess, it's easier to make your best opening lead with informative auctions by the opponents.

Active leads work best when environmental factors suggest the declarer will soon jettison losing tricks. The defender's countermeasure is to make an aggressive lead from strength, hoping to capitalize on quick tricks that might otherwise go away. Situations where active/aggressive leads include:

1. The most obvious lead is partner's bid suit – a great way to maintain partnership harmony and trust, particularly when partner's bid promises a 5+ card suit. With an opening hand and a long suit, partner likely has working honors to develop winning tricks.

2. Opponents have bid a game or slam contract and the dummy bidding suggests opener will draw trump and pitch losers on dummy's long side suit.

(1S) - (2H);

(3S) - (4N);

(5H) - (6S);

(1H) - (2C);

(2D) - (3C);

(3N) - (4H);

In the first auction, the responder promises 5+ Hearts and both opponents have strong hands. On the second auction, responder has a long Club suit – another prime candidate to develop extra tricks. On the first auction leading an unprotected Ace or away from a King might develop a setting trick. On the second auction, leading away from a King or Queen might also get our side off to a winning defense.

3. Opponents bidding lead you to believe your side may have a ruffing opportunity.

(1C) - (1H);

(2H) - (3C);

(4H) - All Pass;

Here the opponents have a double fit in major-minor suits. With their long Club side suit fit, the opening leader should actually consider leading the Club suit if the lead might provide partner a ruff on their side suit. Let's say the opening leader holds:

S J 7 5
H A 2
D J 10 9 4
C A 4 3 2

Solely using hand attribute, a Diamond lead seems best. But based on the auction above, we have useful information about the environment. A Club lead might scuttle the contract, since we hold:

- a. Four Clubs, opponents probably hold 8 Clubs
- b. The critical Aces in both the trump and Clubs

So lead the Club Ace, a low Club giving partner a ruff. When opponents gain the lead and play a trump, win the Heart Ace and immediately give partner another Club ruff. Isn't bridge exciting?

4. Opponents bidding suggest your partner may gain the lead to give you ruffs in your short suit.

(1H) - (1S);
(1N) - (2H);
(3H) - (4H);

Apparently the opponents struggled to get to game, with rebids suggesting near signoff values. Thus, the defenders should have near game values. Based on this auction, which of these hands provide opening leader the best ruffing opportunity?

S	9	2		J	10	9	8	
H	5	4	3	2	K	Q	J	10
D	5	4	3	2	A	K	3	2
C	4	3	2				2	

The first hand holds a doubleton with no points (Yarborough) while the second hand holds a full 14 High Card Points and a singleton. Actually the first hand provides the best ruffing opportunity – partner must hold an opening hand with nice honors, able to win the lead and give a Spade ruff even from a doubleton suit. However, even the most optimistic leader should realize the second hand will not benefit from a Club lead since partner cannot possibly win the lead and return the suit for a ruff. Secondly, examine the trump values of the second hand – the hand holds natural trump winners. While ruffing may *feel* great, this tactic does not gain extra tricks. All of these factors should be considered when leading a short suit. You'll be a better defender next time you hold an Ace doubleton with visions of playing the Ace and a small card to partner's envisioned King for an optimistic ruff on the third trick. Ah, visions of grandeur.

5. You have made a takeout double and partner unexpectedly passes, converting your takeout into a penalty double.

(1C) - P - (P) - X;
(P) - P! - (P);

Apparently partner has extra long and strong trump, so you should immediately attack the declarer's trump suit (Clubs here) to deprive them of ruffing opportunities. This is one of the few circumstances where it is correct to lead a singleton trump. You expect partner to exhaust the declarer's trump and then promote a side suit for extra tricks. A trump lead may also profit when opponent's bidding indicates a 4-3 trump fit; depleting opponents of trump may allow your side to promote a suit and prevent the dummy from ruffing declarer's losers. Shortly we will see where leading a trump is

normally considered a passive lead but here it's an aggressive action.

6. Singleton leads are akin to a boomerang, likely whacking the opponent - or you! Avoid singleton leads when:

- a. Partner cannot gain the lead, such as when you have the outstanding honors
- b. Opponents have bid the suit, thus you promote their suit and may finesse partner
- c. You have a safe honor sequence lead, lead the top honor unless you have an extra long suit that opponents will soon ruff
- d. You have four or more trump. Try looking for another suit; when declarer plays a second round of trump and partner shows out, the declarer usually cannot afford to draw trump. Perhaps you and partner can make declarer lose trump control by making the declarer ruff in hand, eventually promoting you or partner's long suit.

Incidentally, if you made a preemptive bid and lead another suit, you guarantee a singleton and are hoping for an immediate ruff. Otherwise, singleton leads may work nicely when you hold a trump Ace and a small trump or two. If the declarer gains the lead you can win the expected trump Ace return, hoping to get to partner's hand in a side suit.

Passive leads are appropriate when environmental factors insinuate the defenders have no urgency to quickly take tricks. When playing passively, you would be happy to forfeit the lead to the declarer and wait to win safe tricks slowly instead of making a risky lead that might finesse you or your partner.

1. The opponents struggled to find game.

1H - 1S;	1N - 2C;	P - 1H;
2D - 2N;	2H - 3H;	2H - All Pass;
3H - 4H;	4H - All Pass;	

In these auctions where opponents stretch to bid game or stop in partscore, try to avoid making a risky lead that may finesse you or partner. Let the declarer guess who has the missing honors by forcing declarer break new suits. Lacking an honor sequence, a trump lead is often superior to the fourth suit lead in these auctions. Let's say you hold:

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

We know leading or underleading the Ace in our Club suit is unwise and leading away from the unguarded Diamond King would be an aggressive lead. Leading away from a Queen is even less desirable so don't touch the Spade suit. That leaves trump, so lead you Heart 10, the top of touching broken honor sequence.

2. Sequence leads are generally passive plays, avoiding unnecessary risks. Sequence leads attempt to promote a long suit, initiating the race for each side to promote their respective long suit. If you hold a 4+ card honor sequence in an opponent's bid side suit, leading the suit provides a safe passive play. For instance, when the bidding goes:

1S - 2H;
2N - 3C;
3D - 3S;
4S - All Pass;

S 5
H Q J 10 9
D A 8 6 4
C J 7 5 3

Making a passive lead, we can immediately rule out leading a singleton trump Spade or a Diamond, knowing not to lead or underlead from an unprotected Ace. While less dangerous, leading away from an unguarded Jack is usually unwise. How about those Hearts - is it ever okay to lead a suit bid by the opponents? By all means, here it's fine to lead the Heart Queen - opponents might win two tricks but you are not giving away anything they don't already own. Playing passively, it's okay to "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar". Besides, on a good day the partner will hold the Ace over dummy's Heart King and your side wins two quick tricks.

3. The opponents' bidding does not show they hold a long side suit to promote or a short suit to ruff. When opponents appear to use finessing as a primary strategy, make them do their own work.

4. The opponents' bidding clearly shows a misfit. Assuming the opponents cannot employ a ruffing strategy, here's another instance where the defenders do well to "lay low and wait".

Here are some useful links on leads at ***BridgeHands***:

[Books](#)

[Opening Leads](#)

[Passive Lead](#)

[Trump Lead](#)

[Notrump Game Doubled](#)

[Lightner Double](#)

[Active Defense](#)

[Forcing Defense](#)

[Fourth Best leads](#)

[Obvious Suit Preference](#)

[Bottom Of Something Top Of Nothing \(BOSTON\)](#)

The prematurely faced card – a case of indecent exposure

So, a player faces a card before the auction is over – now what happens? First off, if the offender either faces the card on the table or holds it so partner could have seen the face, the card must remain faced until the completion of the auction. If it's a single non-honor card, everything continues normally. However, if the card was an honor or several cards were exposed, the offender's partner must pass at their next turn to bid. [See details](#)

While this may seem harsh, the Laws attempt to restore equity to the non-offending side. Let's say partner was sorting cards and accidentally dropped an honor face up; your Right Hand Opponent is first to call and decides to pass – what should you do, knowing partner must pass one time?

With an opening hand or better and lacking an extra long major, many better players simply bid 3 Notrump! While this approach obviously has a fair degree of guess work, the idea is that partner conceivably has enough support to get you to game with balanced values. One thing is certain – your Left Hand Opponent will usually be clueless whether you are very strong or simply making a gambling bid! Now let's consider a second scenario where partner has dropped a card during the auction and the opponents win the auction. In this case, see [Law 50](#) for the disposition of the faced card.

Correction from last month's newsletter – BridgeHands thanks reader Brian R. for pointing out the typo on [Law 54: Lead Out Of Turn](#). We should have referenced [Law 56](#) (not Law 57). The corrected newsletter is available at the [BridgeHands](#) archive.

Rule of Anticipation – looking beyond your 13 cards

The [Rule of Anticipation](#) denotes taking a pragmatic assessment for offsetting values of other players' strength and length to compensate for one's own holding. So if a player has a long suit or a strong hand, the player should initially expect that partner generally will not have length or strength. Conversely, when a player has a very poor hand, optimistically the partner may have a good hand or length in a short suit (possibly being bid by an opponent on a good day).

Using the Rule of Anticipation isn't meant to portray dismal pessimism perspective. Rather the concept is meant to provide the player a more holistic view of the aggregate ecosystem around the table. As players bid or pass, the view of the ecosystem should be updated based on deductions and inferences.

In a prior newsletter, we discussed the [Rule of 15](#) and learned that without the requisite Spades and additive High Card Points, we should pass. But thinking from a Rule of Anticipation perspective, we should not automatically pass with 11 points and a Spade singleton or void! However, as the late Bridge professional Rixi Markus noted, holding a singleton or void in Spades may actually provide exceptional opening values. Why open up a potential "can of worms" when the competition has most of the Spades? Rixi aptly pointed out that partner also has a long Spade suit, a real surprise if the opponents win the auction in Spades. For more examples, see [The Rule of Anticipation](#).

BridgeHands Archive

If you missed a back issue of a ***BridgeHands*** Newcomer-Novice eMag newsletters, here's the links:

[Issue 0 - Finesses](#)

[Issue 1 - Promotions](#)

[Issue 2 - Notrump Leads](#)

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