

LEADING AGAINST NO-TRUMPS

On the opening lead you often have to make a decision between an active or passive defence. I start with some examples where the bidding has not been particularly helpful. Suppose South opens 1NT and North raises to 3NT. You don't know a great deal. Nobody has bid a suit and you have no idea how many points partner has. What would you lead from the hands below?

- (a) ♠ J 6 4 3 2 ♥ 9 8 7 ♦ 8 6 ♣ 9 5 3
- (b) ♠ J 6 4 3 2 ♥ 9 8 7 ♦ A 6 ♣ 9 5 3
- (c) ♠ J 6 4 3 2 ♥ 9 8 7 ♦ A 6 ♣ A 5 3
- (d) ♠ A 6 4 3 2 ♥ 9 8 7 ♦ 8 6 ♣ 9 5 3
- (e) ♠ A Q 3 2 ♥ 9 8 7 ♦ 8 6 2 ♣ 9 5 3

Suppose you lead a spade from (a). Your objective is presumably to establish some spade winners. Leading away from an unsupported jack is neither safe, nor is it particularly likely to hit the jackpot. You have no particular reason to believe that partner has a helpful holding, but suppose he has: ♠ K Q 3. If the opponent with the ♠ A has two other spades he will duck two rounds and you will never make your last two spades because you have no outside entry.

With (a) I would regard the chances of achieving my objective as very slim. I would lead a heart and hope to hit partner's suit. I might lead a spade in desperation if partner had passed before declarer opened 1NT.

With (b) my chance of achieving length tricks in spades is considerably improved. I would lead a spade, though it would by no means surprise me if declarer dislodged my ♦A before my length spades were established.

With (c) a spade lead is clear cut. With two side suit aces, the prospect of making spade tricks is far greater.

With (d) my chances of making spade length tricks are considerably better than with (b). This is because declarer cannot easily remove my entry. Suppose partner has three small spades and the missing five spades break 3-2. I will resolutely hold up my ♠A till the third round, and if partner has two entries declarer will be powerless. I would strongly advise against under-leading aces on the opening lead against a suit contract. That doesn't apply against no-trumps when you have considerable prospects of bringing in length tricks, indeed the ace can be the best honour to under-lead for reasons of control.

With (e) I would make a passive lead, maybe a heart. Suppose you can beat this contract with three spade tricks and two outside tricks in partner's hand. Maybe the spade suit is:

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

In that case you will not lose out by your failure to lead a spade as partner will have two opportunities to lead spades through declarer. As long as you duck a spade and leave yourself a spade entry on the third round all will be well.

Principle 1: **If you are trying to set up length tricks against no-trumps, you need as many entries to your hand as possible.**

Principle 2: An attacking lead from a 5-card suit is much more attractive than leading from a 4-card suit. From a 5-card suit you have good prospects of making two length tricks. From a 4-card suit your prospect of making even one length trick is considerably reduced.

If you do decide to lead from a worthless holding then a tripleton is much better than a doubleton. With the West hand below you rightly rule out a minor suit lead after your opponents have bid both minors.

West	South	North
♠ 9 7 6	1♣	1♦
♥ 7 5	1NT	3NT
♦ A 9 5 3		
♣ K 6 5 4		

A spade lead is clear cut. Firstly, it is more passive if your partner turns out to have an isolated honour in the suit, for the reasons seen. Secondly, if you do find a substantial spade holding in partner's hand the third spade increases your communications with partner. Suppose you lead the ♠ 7 and the spade suit layout is:

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

Declarer calls for dummy's ♠Q. East needs to think before automatically contributing the ♠A. Admittedly you could have led from ♠K J 9 7 but it is far more likely that you have led from a worthless holding. East should withhold his ♠Q. You might then score the ♣K at trick 2 and you continue with the ♠9 and East again keeps his ♠A. When you later win the ♦A you persevere with your third spade and partner has three spades to cash.

With hand (f) below you are West. South opens 1NT and North raises to 2NT.

(f)	♠ 9 7 5	♥ Q 3 2	♦ 9 7 5	♣ J 5 3 2
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You couldn't be blamed for leading a club, but if you are one of those persons like me who regards leading from J 5 3 2 as a long way down the list of priorities you might decide to go passive. With nothing else to guide you, prefer to lead the major. The hidden clue is that with four spades North might have chosen to use Stayman. This sort of negative inference (what the opponents haven't done) gives you a tiny edge that pays dividends in the long term.

How about those hands where every lead looks revolting. After the same 1NT: 3NT sequence you have to lead with (g), (h) and (i).

(g)	♠ K J 3 2	♥ Q 9 5 4	♦ K 5	♣ K 4 2
(h)	♠ K J 3 2	♥ J 6 5	♦ K 5 4	♣ K 4 2
(i)	♠ K J 3 2	♥ 7 6 5	♦ K 5 4	♣ K 4 2

With (g) you don't have the option of being passive. Any lead could prove fatal, particularly since partner is marked with no more than two or three points. Leading a minor is out of the question, and in deciding between the majors you should choose the stronger one. Lead the ♠2. If you are very lucky then partner will have the ♠Q. However you would equally happily settle for the spade layout below,

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

Here a spade lead gives nothing away and you have found a suit you can persevere with every time you get then lead.

Principle 3: When you have to make a difficult lead from a hand full of isolated honours, pick the suit that if successful will solve your defensive problems when you next gain the lead.

With (h), again a spade lead is best. Here I am only reinforcing the point that a lead from a suit like ♥J 6 5 should not be considered as passive.

Hand (i) is different in that you do have a genuinely passive heart lead available. Bearing in mind partner's known weakness, this time I would chose to lead a heart, though there are many strong players who would choose a spade. The thing that sways me towards a passive heart is that if setting up spade tricks is necessary to defeat the contract, I might have the chance to switch later. Five tricks are required to defeat 3NT. If they must come from three spades (partner having ♠Q) and two others then the defence will have a subsequent opportunity to lead spades and another entry to get in and cash them. This hand again demonstrates that opening leads are often not clear cut. Personal style and preference come into the calculation. Some players prefer to attack, others resolve close decisions in favour of the passive option.

Listening to the Bidding

If you look at the bidding you can pick up vibes. Look at the three auctions below. How would your does your approach to the opening lead differ, depending on which auction had taken place?

(j) South North	(k) South North	(l) South North
1NT 2NT	1NT 3NT	1NT 4NT
3NT		

After auction (j) I would expect a close struggle to develop between declarer and the defenders. Declarer clearly has at most 26 HCP, perhaps fewer. The outcome of this contract could depend on whether finesses work, and suits break for him. I would carefully consider a passive defence, letting declarer do his own work. There is a real risk here that a lead away from an unsupported honour might give declarer the vital ninth trick.

Auction (k) is not so clear cut. It is possible that South has 12 HCP and North just 13, making the situation very similar to (j). On the other hand it is quite possible that South has 14 HCP and North has 16, leaving the defence with few prospects of defeating 3NT

unless an aggressive attacking lead hits the jackpot. I certainly wouldn't rule out a passive lead, but I would be more inclined to an attacking lead than after auction (j). With auction (l) it seems that South has 12 HCP and North has about 19 HCP. Passive defence won't defeat 4NT this time. If you have an attacking lead, make it!

Principle 4: If the bidding suggests that your opponents have little to spare for their contract, consider defending passively.

Sometimes you can get positive or negative vibes by looking at your hand. Look at hand (m) after the auctions shown below.

(m) ♠ 7 ♥ 7 6 5 ♦ Q 10 9 6 5 ♣ A J 4 2

(n)	South	North	(o)	South	North
	1♦	1♠		1♦	1♠
	1NT	3NT		1NT	2NT
				3NT	

Both auctions give us positive vibes. The point is that if declarer is going to have to rely on diamond tricks or spade tricks for his contract he could be grievously disappointed. I have length in diamonds, and diamond honours sitting over declarer's diamond suit, and it is quite likely that partner has a similar nasty surprise in spades sitting over dummy. With auction (n) I don't know whether 3NT will make or not because declarer might well have 30 HCP and make it on brute force. With (o) declarer is clearly short of values, and I would feel confident enough to double 3NT. On a really good case I would get a very substantial penalty.

After either auction I would prefer a passive heart lead to an active, and dangerous, club.

Principle 5: If the bidding suggests that the cards are lying badly for declarer (for example badly placed honour cards or bad breaks) consider strongly defending passively.

Principle 6. If the bidding suggests that your opponents have little to spare and that the cards are lying badly, consider making a penalty double.

Now look at a different hand (p) with the same auctions:

(p) ♠ K 5 4 ♥ 6 3 2 ♦ 8 6 5 ♣ K J 4 2

(n)	South	North	(o)	South	North
	1♦	1♠		1♦	1♠
	1NT	3NT		1NT	2NT
				3NT	

Now our vibes are far more negative. Our 3-card holdings in spades and diamonds suggest that the suits will break well for declarer. Three small diamonds sitting after declarer's suit hardly suggests that I have an unpleasant surprise for him, and if dummy has the ♠A then our ♠K will be finessible. No double this time, and I would lead an active ♣2.

Specific leading problems

1) *Leading after a 2NT opening is passed out.*

Just remember that although declarer will be very strong, dummy will be very weak.

(q)	♠ 7 6 2	(r)	♠ 7 6 2
	♥ 8 6 5		♥ 8 6 5
	♦ J 7 6 5		♦ J 7 6 5
	♣ 7 5 4		♣ A 5 4
	♠ K 8 3		♠ K 8 3
	♥ A Q 7 2		♥ A Q 7 2
	♦ A K Q		♦ A K Q
	♣ K 6 2		♣ K 6 2

You are playing (q) in 2NT. West leads ♠Q which you win with the ♠K. What do you do next? Maybe you decide to cash ♦A K Q and exit with a spade, but your chances of making 8 tricks are slim.

Now compare (r), which you are playing in 3NT. Again West leads the ♠Q. You can win the ♠K, cash ♦A K Q and when you cross to the ♣A you can finesse the ♥Q. When 2NT is raised to 3NT dummy might have only one card, an ace, but it may be worth as many as three tricks: in this case apart from the fact that it is a certain trick it promotes the ♣K to a certain winner, it provides an entry to the ♦J and it allows you finesse ♥Q.

Principle 7: If an opening 2NT bid is passed out it pays to be as passive as possible, though it must be said that it is not always possible to avoid finessing partner's honour at trick 1.

2) *Leading against a gambling 3NT opening.*

There are some no-trump contracts when it is clear that either declarer or dummy is far from balanced, indeed he plans to make his contract by running a long, hopefully solid suit and take a couple of tricks outside. The hand below was played in a teams-of-four match. In both rooms South opened 3NT, showing a 7-card solid minor suit and no more than a queen outside.

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

One West led the 'obvious' ♠ J. Declarer had no problems. This sort of lead has no place against a gambling 3NT. Presumably West is trying to set up slow spade tricks, but bearing in mind declarer only needs two tricks outside his solid minor that is hardly likely to be the killing defence.

The other West realised the urgency of cashing whatever is available quickly. He started with ♥ A. From now on the defence is almost double dummy because declarer's hand is an open book. West could see the need to take a spade, two hearts and a diamond. He made the thoughtful, and successful, switch to the ♦ 10 at trick 2. If he had switched to a lower diamond then declarer could have played low from dummy, holding the defenders to one diamond trick.

Similar principles can apply if one opponent pre-empts and the other bids 3NT. Usually the 3NT bidder is hoping to make tricks in the pre-emptor's suit, though there isn't the same degree of certainty as if there is known to be a completely solid suit in the pre-emptor's hand. It is also worth commenting that subsequent defence will be harder because the unknown hand is concealed as declarer.

Principle 8: It is often correct to cash an ace against a gambling 3NT.

3) *Leading against 6NT*

It is a common generalisation that you should always defend passively against 6NT. As always you should listen to the bidding. Suppose you are on lead with hand (s) against the auctions shown:

(s) ♠ 8 6 ♥ K 5 2 ♦ 10 6 4 2 ♣ 7 6 4 3

(t) South North
1NT 4NT
6NT

(u) South North
1NT 6NT

(v) South North
1♣ 2♠
3♣ 3♠
3NT 6NT

After auction (t) it is clear that North/South each have balanced hands with not too many points to spare. Lead as passively as possible. Leading from a ten can be dangerous so rule out a diamond. Faced with the choice between the black suits, the longer suit is more likely to give nothing away. Lead a club.

After auction (u) North/South may or may not have points to spare. However again they seem to have balanced hands. That suggests that if we have tricks in any suit they may not run away. Again I would lead a club.

Auction (v) is totally different. Each opponent has a long suit, and you have no particular reason to believe you can stop declarer making lots of tricks with them. Your lead problem is similar to the problem you would have faced if South had bid 6♣ rather than 6NT. Lead the ♥ 2, hoping that partner has the ♥ A, or more likely the ♥ Q and a black-suit trick. Of course it is highly likely that your heart will give a trick again, but it is hardly likely to be declarer's twelfth trick. Unless you take whatever is coming to you in hearts quickly, it will disappear.

**This seminar was developed by Andrew Kambites
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