

OPENING LEADS AGAINST NT – CHOOSING THE RIGHT SUIT

Against a NT contract, it is normally correct to make an attacking lead from a long suit. But there are situations where a passive lead is better.

SETTING UP A LONG SUIT – ATTACKING LEADS

Uninformative auction such as 1NT – 3NT

When the opponents bid to 3NT in confident fashion, they will usually be able to make 9 tricks, if they are given time to do so. To defeat a 3NT contract, the defenders often need to set up 5 tricks first.

This is the ideal sort of hand for leading against NT:

♠ 5 4
♥ K Q J 7 4
♦ A 6 2
♣ 10 9 8

The best lead is ♥K, with the idea of knocking out the opponents' ♥A. When the defender gets on lead with ♦A, there's a good chance of being able to cash the rest of the heart suit. This would be enough to defeat 3NT.

But more often than not, the opening leader's hand is less than ideal:

♠ 5 4
♥ K J 7 4 3
♦ A 6 2
♣ 10 9 8

Although the heart suit is significantly weaker, it still represents the best chance of defeating 3NT, although here partner may need to provide a helpful card. If not, the heart lead could give away a trick. Even so, it's generally worth taking the risk.

Informative auction where suits have been bid

When partner has bid a suit, it's generally right to lead it. Even if it turns out to be wrong on a particular hand, partner will understand. Sometimes it's right to lead one's own 5+ card suit, but this should only be considered with sufficient entries. Even a singleton in partner's suit should be led more often than not.

When the opponents have bid a suit (a natural bid), it's generally wrong to lead it. This may sometimes reduce the choices available to the opening leader. The result is that suits such as Kxx or Qxxx may need to be considered. Although leading from these suits isn't ideal, the bidding may suggest that partner will have length, in which case it could be possible to establish the suit.

It can sometimes be right to lead dummy's second suit, especially from a sequence such as J109x.

PLAYING SAFE – PASSIVE OPENING LEADS

Sometimes the auction suggests that opponents could be short of tricks. For example, in the sequence 1NT – 2NT – 3NT the opponents won't have more than 26 points between the two hands. It may therefore be right for the opening leader to concentrate on not giving tricks away, rather than taking risks setting up tricks for the defence. This approach is known as passive defence.

With a 5+ card suit, it's generally still worth leading it. For example, a heart should be led from the hands shown in the first section, even against the bidding 1NT – 2NT – 3NT. But with only 4 card suits, it's often better to look for a safer lead:

♠ 5 4
♥ K J 7 4
♦ A 10 6 2
♣ 10 9 8

It wouldn't be unreasonable to lead a red suit, but if choosing the wrong one could frequently cost a trick. It's therefore better to make the passive lead of ♣10. This will occasionally serve to set up partner's suit, but whatever happens the lead cannot cost a trick.

A passive lead is often indicated when the defender's long suit has been bid by the opponents:

♠ 4	S	W	N	E
♥ 9 7 4	1♦	pass	1♠	pass
♦ A Q 8 6 2	1NT	pass	3NT	pass
♣ J 8 5 3	pass	pass		

Suppose that West is on lead against the above auction. It's possible that the opponents have strength in reserve, but our 5 card diamond suit and singleton spade suggest that the opponents' long suits are breaking badly. West should therefore make the passive lead of a heart. This is better than leading declarer's diamond suit or his own weak club suit.

ATTACKING OR PASSIVE OPENING LEAD?

When in doubt, it's generally best to choose an attacking lead. Often the lead doesn't actually give away a trick, or sometimes the passive lead doesn't turn out to be particularly safe.

An additional factor is the form of scoring. (If you are a beginner and haven't come across the different forms of scoring, don't worry about this at the moment).

Playing match point pairs (the most common form of duplicate) it can be better to concentrate on minimising overtricks, rather than actively try to defeat the contract. A passive lead can therefore often lead to a good match point score, even when the contract makes. But in a Teams competition (or at rubber bridge) it's the making or defeating of the contract that is important, so there's more case for taking risks with the opening lead.