

DEFENCE AGAINST NT – RETURNING PARTNER’S SUIT

If partner has led from a long suit against a NT contract, it is normally correct to return it. If so, the correct card is the higher from two remaining cards, otherwise the original fourth highest. But sometimes a switch is better.

DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO RETURN PARTNER’S SUIT

More often than not, the opening lead against a NT contract is from a long suit. Since the objective is to set up tricks in that suit, the opening leader’s partner should generally play back the suit. This applies whether he wins trick 1 or regains the lead in another suit. But the opening leader’s partner should consider switching to another suit in these cases:

- dummy is strong in the opening leader’s suit;
- continuing the suit would give away a trick;
- the play so far suggests that opening leader is weak or short in the suit led;
- opening leader’s partner has a strong suit of his own that offers better prospects.

THE RULE OF ELEVEN

The decision as to whether or not to return partner’s suit may sometimes be aided by the rule of 11. This rule assumes that the opening lead was 4th highest. If so:

1. opening leader’s partner subtracts the value of the card led from 11;
2. opening leader’s partner looks at his own and dummy’s holdings in the suit led and counts the number of cards higher than the opening lead;
3. this number is subtracted from the result obtained in 1) above;
4. the final result is the number of cards held by declarer that are higher than the card led.

The rule of 11 may also be used by declarer.

The rule of 11 sometimes enables opening leader’s partner to determine that declarer can’t beat the opening lead:

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

East subtracts the value of the card led (7) from 11 to produce the answer 4. East can see dummy’s king and his own AJ9, which together make up 4 cards higher than the opening lead. Therefore South can’t beat the 7, so East plays low to leave his partner on lead at trick 2.

The rule of 11 isn't so helpful when a very low card is led, but the convention of leading 4th highest is still useful. The simplest example is the lead of a 2, which must be from a 4 card suit (except occasionally from 3 cards to an honour). The same applies for the lead of the 3 when the 2 is visible. If the 2 is not visible, either partner has it and the opening lead was from a 5 card suit or declarer has it (perhaps he has 'false carded' i.e. played a higher card to conceal the 2).

RETURNING THE CORRECT CARD IN THE OPENING LEADER'S SUIT

Suppose that the opening leader's partner decides to return the suit led. Unless he started with a doubleton he will always have a choice of card.

- when the opening leader's partner started with 3 cards in the suit led, he should return the higher of his remaining cards;
- when the opening leader's partner started with 4 or more cards in the suit led, he should return his original 4th highest (i.e. his current 3rd highest).

The opening leader uses this to decide whether or not to play a 3rd round of the suit:

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

West leads the 4 and East wins with the ace. East returns the jack, which is covered by South's queen and West's king. West realises that East would have returned a lower card if he had started with 4 or more of the suit. Therefore West will probably wait for East to lead the suit again through declarer.

This is the opposite situation:

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

This time East returns the 3. Unless South started with 5 cards in the suit (a possibility often ruled out by the bidding) West knows that East started with 4 cards. So West can safely lead a 3rd round.

The opening leader should normally depart from this principle when two high cards are held. For example:

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

After winning the first trick with the ace, East needs to return the jack in order to trap South's queen. Move the 4 from South to the West hand and returning the jack would still be necessary, this time to avoid blocking the suit.