

DEFENCE AGAINST SUIT CONTRACTS – RETURNING PARTNER’S SUIT

Against a suit contract, it is frequently correct to return the suit of the opening lead. 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 suit contract is from a suit containing at least one honour. 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;
- a continuation would give away a trick;
- opening leader’s partner has a strong suit that offers better prospects;
- declarer is short or void in partner’s suit;
- to lead a new suit through declarer’s strength.

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 in (1);
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 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 3 or 4 card suit. The same applies for the lead of the 3 when the 2 is visible. If not, either declarer has it (perhaps because he false carded) or the opening lead was from a 5 card suit.

If the lead is a higher spot card (e.g. a 7), it is quite likely to be second highest from a suit without honours. The opening leader’s partner should examine his and dummy’s cards in the suit to determine whether the lead might be fourth highest.

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 (or equivalently his current 3rd highest).

The opening leader can then determine whether a further trick in the suit is cashable:

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

West leads the jack and East wins with the ace. East returns the queen, which South wins with the king. West realises that East would have returned a lower card if he had started with 4 or more of the suit. Therefore West can count the ten as a further defensive trick.

This is the converse situation:

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

This time East returns the 3. West now realises that East started with either AQ73 or A3. In neither case is West's ten cashable.

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

	6 5 2	
K 8 7		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.