

Defending against no trump contracts: 1. Opening leads

This is the first of a series of four articles on how to defend against no trump contracts. This article focuses on the defender's opening lead.

Leads

When defending against no trump contracts the choice of lead is critically important. The choice of lead depends on the player's hand and any information that can be gleaned from the bidding e.g. the declarer might have looked for a major fit but then settled in a no trump contract.

- If partner has shown a suit during the bidding, especially an overcall showing five or more cards in a suit, then leading that suit should be an immediate consideration.
- Usually don't lead a suit that the opponents have bid.

In the absence of clues from partner's bidding or the opponents' bidding it's usual to lead from your longest suit. The best lead in these circumstances is usually:

- The top of a **sequence** of three or more from a long suit (e.g. the K from KQJT2; the Q from QJT42) or the top of a **broken sequence** (e.g. the K from KQT85; the J from JT853).
- The fourth highest of your longest suit (e.g. the 5 from AK753; the 6 from KJ765; the 7 from QJ8732; the 4 from KQ8432). The lead of the fourth highest card allows partner (and declarer!) to apply the rule of eleven. Subtracting the value of the card led from 11 indicates the number of cards above the led card which are held in the other three hands. This information is useful to the defender's partner but can also be helpful to the declarer. Note that the lead of the 2 from a long suit indicates that the leader has four cards in that suit.
- The top of an **interior sequence** (e.g. the Q from AQJT82; the J from KJT93; the J from AJT83; the J from AJT6; the T from AT9) – partner needs to be awake to this type of lead and not just assume the lead is the top of a sequence.
- The top of **two touching honours** in a three-card holding (e.g. the J from JTX; the K from KQX) - but not the A from an AKX holding – the lead of an ace asks partner to discard any high cards in the suit led in order to unblock the suit in which partner should have a long holding (e.g. the leader may have a holding such as AKJXXX).
- The lowest card in a three-card holding with one honour or two non-touching honours (e.g. the 4 from QT4; the 3 from K83).
- The top of nothing with three spot cards (e.g. the 9 from 975) or the second best from a four spot card holding (e.g. the 7 from 9763)
- The top of a doubleton – usually when leading a suit partner has bid.

Hand 1

South is in 3NT and west leads the 5H (fourth highest).

	♠ AT	
	♥ 986	
	♦ A9762	
	♣ QJ3	
♠ J84		♠ Q9652
♥ AK753		♥ 42
♦ 53		♦ K8
♣ T85		♣ 9642
	♠ K73	
	♥ QJT	
	♦ QJT4	
	♣ AK7	

This hand illustrates the importance of leading the fourth highest card in a long suit. West has no likely entry other than in hearts – however once east gets in with the KD and returns their remaining heart west can take four heart tricks and defeat the contract.

Hand 2

After south wins the contract in 3NT west leads the KS (top of a broken sequence).

	♠ A76	
	♥ QT82	
	♦ QJ73	
	♣ K6	
♠ KQT94		♠ 852
♥ A73		♥ 964
♦ 82		♦ T93
♣ 875		♣ QJ94
	♠ J3	
	♥ KJ5	
	♦ AK64	
	♣ AT32	

North ducks and east plays the 2S (showing an odd count). This means that east has either one or three cards. Hoping it's three west reasons that south must hold the doubleton JS and so plays the QS – regardless of whether north takes the second or third trick the contract is now doomed because hearts will have to be led before declarer can win nine tricks.

Hand 3

South is in 3NT and west leads the JS (top of interior sequence).

	♠ Q32	
	♥ QT6	
	♦ AK93	
	♣ JT3	
♠ KJT6		♠ A75
♥ J742		♥ 953
♦ T65		♦ 872
♣ 85		♣ A974
	♠ 984	
	♥ AK8	
	♦ QJ4	
	♣ KQ62	

If declarer plays the QS from dummy east will play the AS and return the 7S – defence wins the first four tricks. If declarer ducks the JS east should play whatever card shows encouragement – the 5S if low means ‘encourage’. Now west should play the 6S, AS by east, return the 7S and again the defence wins the first four tricks.

Hand 4

After east opens 1H south bids 1NT and north converts to 3NT. Given partner (east) bid hearts west leads the 7H (top of a doubleton).

	♠ AT3	
	♥ 82	
	♦ K9853	
	♣ K72	
♠ J9764		♠ 82
♥ 74		♥ AQT963
♦ 4		♦ AQ6
♣ JT643		♣ 95
	♠ KQ5	
	♥ KJ5	
	♦ JT72	
	♣ AQ8	

East wins the first trick with the AH and returns the TH, south winning with the JH. Declarer can see eight tricks – three clubs, two hearts and three spades and needs to find a diamond trick to make the contract. South leads the JD and lets it run, taken by east’s QD. The return of another heart, taken by south’s KH, dooms the contract as east also holds the AD.

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