

ChRONicles of Cardplay

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Inferences from the Opening Lead – Every card tells a tale

I've been reading several books lately about "card reading". As declarer, it's really quite amazing once you get into it how much you can tell about the suit distribution and high cards your opponents hold based on their bidding and the way they defend a hand. The same is true when you're on defense and carefully watch and analyze declarer's moves, but that's a different article.

One very important clue about a hand is the opening lead. Many declarers don't take the time to examine the opening lead carefully, reflect on what it means and use it to get clues as to the defender's holdings and how to play the hand. I'm going to ask a series of questions below about opening leads and then discuss what they mean in the context of the bidding. Note that many of these are *negative inferences*. You can tell a lot about the opponents' hands by what was NOT led.

Q: LHO bid hearts, but now leads a diamond against your spade contract. Why didn't he lead a heart?

A: If LHO held a sequence in hearts like AK or KQ, he'd likely have led a heart. He likely holds a tenace in hearts like ♥AQxxx or ♥KJxxx. He doesn't want to bang down the ♥A from space or make a dangerous lead from a broken holding that could give away a trick.

Q: You're declarer in a Spade contract and your RHO bid hearts during the auction. The opening lead is NOT a heart. What's going on?

A: Either LHO is void in partner's suit, or, more likely; LHO has the ♥A. Leading an Ace at trick one is not a great lead even if it's in partner's suit. *Underleading* an Ace at trick one at a suit contract is even worse.

Q: Your side is in spades after bidding clubs and spades. The opponents have passed throughout. The opening lead is an unbid suit, a small heart. When dummy hits, you realize that you're missing both the ♦A and ♦K, the other unbid suit. Can you read anything from the lead?

A: Yes. The Ace from AK is a very good lead. Since LHO didn't lead the ♦A, it's highly unlikely he holds both the A and K of diamonds. They're either split or RHO holds them both. In fact, it's slightly more likely that LHO holds the ♦A and RHO holds the ♦K. LHO might have led a diamond away from the King (and didn't), but would **not** have led away from the Ace.

Q: You're in a notrump contract and the opening lead is the ♠2. What do you make of that?

A: First off, you need to look at their convention card. Most pairs lead 4th best, but some lead 3rd and 5th. If they lead 4th best, LHO likely has exactly 4 spades (can't be 4th from 5 since there's no card lower than the 2!). LHO MAY have only 3 spades if it's an unbid suit. You can calculate how many spades RHO has by counting the ones you see in dummy and your hand plus the 4 LHO holds. Also, it's very unlikely LHO has a 5-card unbid suit or that would have been led. Note that other low cards can imply a 4-card suit. If for example a four is led and you can see the two and the three, the opening leader cannot have one smaller and it's likely a 4th best lead with all the implications that come with that.

Q: The opening lead against your spade contract is a low heart. You see you're missing the ♦A, ♦K and ♦Q. What can you determine?

A: The opening leader does NOT hold the ♦AK or ♦KQ. These are much better leads than small from a broken holding. LHO either holds the ♦A, or ♦AQ, or perhaps just the ♦K or RHO holds them all. You can often tell by the bidding (RHO might have overcalled diamonds holding ♦AKQ).

Q: LHO preempted in hearts, but now leads a small diamond against your spade contract. What's going on?

A: Frequently a lead of the non-preempted suit is a singleton. Alternatively, LHO holds the Ace in his suit without the King, or some sort of broken tenace holding which he has decided is a dangerous lead. Another inference: if a singleton isn't led, the preemptor may have a singleton TRUMP.

Q: LHO takes a long time to select his lead. What does this tell you?

A: LHO has no obvious good lead. He doesn't have a sequence. He doesn't have an AK. Against a suit contract, he probably doesn't have a singleton (unless it's in the trump suit).

Q: The opening lead is a trump. Why?

A: Unless you've had an auction that suggests a trump lead, LHO is making a *passive* lead because he has honors in the other suits and doesn't want to give you a free finesse. Also a trump lead is seldom made if it's singleton or away from an honor. If you're missing a trump honor, play RHO for it.

Q: The opening lead is a suit dummy has bid. Why?

A: LHO either has great length in dummy's suit, or is trying to hit his partner's strength because he has little or nothing, or it's a singleton. You can usually tell which one it is by the size of the card led. An honor is from a strong sequence. Low is from length or a singleton. A highish card is often a singleton rather than a doubleton.

Q: The lead is a J, 10 or 9. Can you tell anything from that?

A: Usually. Check their convention card to see if they're playing "*Jack Denies*" or "*Coded 9's and 10's*" or "*Zero or two higher*" (these are all different names for the same convention). If they play this way, the Jack denies a higher honor. A nine or 10 shows either zero cards above it, OR, the one immediately above it and then another one above that in a broken sequence. Example: Holding Q109, these players lead the nine, NOT the standard lead of the 10. Note that some pairs play Jack denies only against notrump while others play it against suits also. If a 10 is led and you can see the Jack, they have zero cards above the 10. Also note that even if they're playing standard leads, the J, 10 or 9 is seldom led when holding a higher honor.

Q: The lead is a small card against a trump suit contract and you hold 9 cards in that suit. Any ideas?

A: Often this is a singleton. If you have the AQ on dummy, you should consider going up with the Ace and pulling trump. Taking the finesse may allow RHO to get in with the King and give LHO a ruff at trick two with a small trump. This is probably not good for your side. On the other hand, if you and your partner have bid this suit, it's possible that a good player will lead it if he's LONG hoping to give his partner a first-round ruff.

There are a number of books available on Card Reading and inferences. Here's a list. The first four are available from Baron-Barclay with a 10% ACBL member discount. Countdown to Winning Bridge is available on CD.

- How to Read Your Opponent's Cards – Mike Lawrence – ISBN 0-910791-48-1
- Inferences at Bridge – Marshall Miles – ISBN – 1-894154-51-7
- Reading the Cards – David Bird & Marc Smith – ISBN 1-894154-34-7
- Reading the Cards – David Bird & Tim Burke – ISBN 1-894154-81-9
- Countdown to Winning Bridge – Tim Burke & Marc Smith – ISBN 1-894154-05-3 (out of print)
- Test Your Card Reading – Hugh Kelsey - 0-575-03170-0 (out of print)
- Card Reading: The Art of Guessing Right at the Bridge Table – Eric Jannersten – ISBN 08055-1047-8 (out of print)
- The Art of Card Reading at Bridge – Fred Karpin – ISBN 0-486-2177-6 (out of print)