

ChRONicles of Cardplay

District 6 TableTALK – April-May 2010

By: Ron Kral – RonKral@gmail.com

The Dirty Dozen Opening Leads

I'm often asked to give classes on opening leads. While I'd really like to help, MY opening leads often leave something to be desired! To quote Mike Lawrence, "No matter how hard you try, you will get off to some vile opening leads." Regardless, I'll try to give some guidelines here. I'm going to take a non-traditional approach – most literature discusses GOOD opening leads. In this article, I'm going to list a dozen of what many consider the WORST opening leads. One method I often use to select my opening lead is to eliminate the bad ones then select my lead from the remainder. Of course, when it comes to bridge, ANY play can work on any given hand. The following are guidelines and avoiding them should work for you most of the time.

Poor lead #1 – Underleading an ace *in a suit contract at trick one*.

Terence Reese, the late British champion, was rumored to say that "Underleading an ace is an excellent idea if you plan to look for a new partner". Underleading an ace at trick one against a suit contract is about the worst lead you can make. If there's anything like a 100% rule in bridge, this is it. Read the above sentence again. Note the caveats – IN A SUIT CONTRACT, AT TRICK ONE. You and your partner should agree on this rule. It will greatly improve your defense largely due to the negative inferences. For example, if partner fails to lead the suit you bid suit at trick one? He has the Ace and doesn't want to bang it down. Partner leads 4th best and you can't see the ace in dummy or in your hand? Declarer must have it. As you might expect, there ARE exceptions to this rule, but they're VERY rare. The loss in partnership confidence simply isn't worth it. If you MUST lead a suit headed by the ace, then lead the ace. **Exceptions:** Underleading an ace against *notrump* contracts is often right. Underleading an ace *after trick one* is often right. **Corollary:** as declarer, when analyzing the opening lead against your suit contract, assume the opening leader does NOT hold the ace in the suit led. This means that holding the KJx in dummy, play the Jack at trick one, not the King.

Poor lead #2 – Leading an unsupported ace (e.g., without the king) at trick one.

This isn't quite as bad as underleading an ace, but almost. Most of the time when I'm declarer, I just love it when the opponents bang down an ace. It usually helps me to place cards around the table and plan the hand more accurately. Leading a *supported* Ace from an Ace/King combination however is usually safe and a good choice. **Exception:** Leading an unsupported ace playing matchpoint pairs against a freely bid slam can often save a trick that you might not get otherwise. Playing in a team match, leading the ace is less desirable since it's just possible it may give the declarer a trick and the contract, or be the only way to beat the contract.

Poor lead #3 – Leading a doubleton.

A common error by newer players. "I thought I could get a ruff". Leading doubletons are generally a poor choice. Often they cost a tempo and simply help declarer establish their second suit. You rarely get the ruff you're hoping for. **Exceptions:** all your other choices are worse! Or in a team event when you have little hope of beating the contract without a ruff.

Poor lead #4 – Leading a singleton trump.

You might think this is a safe, passive lead. However, it often exposes the position and pickles your partner's holding in the suit. For example, if declarer has a 2-way guess for the queen of trump, he's going to get it wrong about half the time. However, if you lead the suit for him, he has no chance to go wrong. **Exceptions:** Partner has passed your a low-level takeout double converting it to penalty. NOW you MUST lead your singleton trump if you have one. It's also often right to lead a trump when the opponent's have sacrificed or when the opponents have bid Flannery, Mini-Roman, Michaels, or unusual NT.

Poor lead #5 – 4th best from a Jack.

A very common situation is for one side to hold the queen of a suit in one hand and the jack in the other with neither holding the 10. Whenever the suit is divided no worse than 3-2, the side that leads the suit first loses. Try it. If the side holding the Ace and King leads the suit, the Jack or Queen will eventually win a trick. If the side holding the Queen and Jack leads the suit, they often don't score any tricks at all. So, leading away from a Jack often gives up a trick. **Exception:** Partner has bid the suit, or, all your other leads are worse. **Note:** In my experience, even leading the Queen from QJ without the 10 often gives away an underserved trick because it discloses the position to declarer. I try to avoid this lead too.

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Poor lead #6 – An unsupported honor while holding 3 in your partner's suit.

It's a common misconception that when partner bids a suit, you should always lead your highest card in that suit. This is simply flat-out wrong when you hold three or more cards in the suit. Here's the example. Say you hold Kxx, your partner holds AJ10xx and declarer holds Qxx. If you lead the King, you've now established declarer's queen as a trick. However, if you correctly lead small, declarer can never score his Queen. Note that if you hold Kx doubleton, NOW the correct lead IS the King to both unblock the suit and possibly score a ruff.

Exception: Holding 3 small, the rules are a little different. IF you've SUPPORTED partner with 3 small, lead the highest one. Given the fact that you supported him during the auction, partner won't mistake you for a doubleton. However, if you DIDN'T support partner during the auction, I lead SMALL from three so partner sees the correct count and doesn't try to give me a ruff. Some people lead MUD – Middle Up Down. Some lead Top of Nothing (a poor choice in my opinion). Discuss what you lead from 3 small with your partner.

Poor lead #7 – a singleton when you have lots of high card strength OR the opponents have bid the suit.

Usually the purpose of leading a singleton is that you're hopeful you'll get a ruff. However, let's say they've bid on up to game and you hold 13 points. They have about 26 points to be in game. How much is left for your partner? Almost nothing. Leading a singleton in this circumstance has almost nothing going for it. You're simply giving up a tempo and possibly helping declarer establish his secondary long suit. Partner will never get in to give you your ruff. Leading a singleton when the opponents have bid the suit is similar to leading a doubleton – you're often just helping declarer set up his second suit.

Poor lead #8 – leading shortness when you have long trump and/or natural trump tricks.

I see this all the time. Someone holds Qxxx of trump and leads their short suit hoping for a ruff. Of course, you might get one, but what you've really done is help declarer control the hand by relinquishing control of the trump suit. When you have length in the trump suit and/or natural trump tricks, you don't want a ruff. What you want to do is force declarer to ruff (*tap* him) so eventually you have more trump than him. Best is to **lead length (your long suit) when holding trump length**. **Corollary:** As declarer, playing against strong opponents, if you decide the lead is from shortness, play the OTHER hand for the honors in the trump suit.

Poor lead #9 – A suit the opposition has bid.

You must listen to and review the auction before selecting your opening lead. I've seen people automatically lead their fourth best ("longest and strongest") EVEN THOUGH that suit was bid by declarer or dummy. This is usually an unattractive lead if dummy has bid the suit and a TERRIBLE lead if declarer has bid the suit. You lose a tempo AND help declarer establish his 2nd suit. **Exceptions:** This can work if you're VERY long in the suit and you expect partner to be void and ruffing the 1st round. It can also work if you're leading a singleton in declarer's second suit hoping partner either has that ace or the ace of trump and can give you a quick ruff. It's also OK if you have a solid sequence like KQJ10 or QJ109.

Poor lead #10 – A suit that partner COULD have made a lead-directing double for and didn't.

Let's say your RHO has opened 1NT and LHO has transferred to spades by bidding 2 hearts. Partner had a chance to double the artificial 2 heart bid for the lead, but didn't. All other things being equal shy away from leading a heart. **Exception:** you have a strong sequence like KQJxx.

Poor lead #11 – A three-card suit without an honor.

People ask me all the time "What do you lead from three small?" My stock answer is "Another suit!" Seriously, leading from three small is very unappealing unless all your other choices are worse. You mislead partner no matter which card you've agreed to lead, and partner will often erroneously return the suit. Discuss with your partner what you lead from three small. Some lead small (my choice), some lead MUD (Middle Up Down), some lead "Top of Nothing" (which in my opinion is the worst of the three.).

Poor lead #12 – Leading from a broken sequence (e.g. KJ83) into a strong opening bidder (2 clubs or 2NT).

I usually like to get my suit on the road and lead from strength, even from a broken sequence. Giving up the tempo often costs. Steve Robinson says "Lead from nothing, get nothing." However, discretion is the better part of valor. When you know you're outgunned, don't lead into the teeth of declarer's tenace holdings. Make a passive lead and let him do his own work. **Exception:** Make aggressive leads against small slams, even if leading from honors. If you don't get your suit going, you may never see a trick in it.

Many times, your holdings are ALL undesirable and fall into one of the above categories. When all your leads are unappealing, select the one that's the least objectionable based on the order above.