

NVBA I/N Lecture July 25, 2013

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Club Director, Montebello DBC, Monday night at 7 pm

Tonight's topic is **Opening Leads -- what your cards tell you.**

Notice the sequence we have followed -- what the auction tells you first, then what the contract tells you, finally what your cards tell you. **You need the context to understand the cards.**

Now for some help from Karen Walker, well-known teacher and National Champion, from her web site at <http://home.comcast.net/~kwbridge/bb/leads1.htm>, and originally published in the ACBL Bulletin over four years ago (March & April 2009).

"Some opening leads are relatively easy, even routine. If you're on lead after the opponents bid 1 NT-3 NT, the old standby of 'fourth down from longest and strongest' works well on most deals. You may also have an obvious lead after partner has overcalled or when you hold a suit with a strong honor sequence.

It's the hands where the choice isn't so clear that test us, and it seems those occur most often. In these situations, your playing experience may give you a good sense of what works and what doesn't. More important, though, is the ability to listen to the auction and use the clues to visualize the hidden hands. As the late Terence Reese once said, 'There is no such thing as a blind opening lead. Just deaf opening leaders.'

Three-step decision

The conventional wisdom is that selecting an opening lead is a two-part decision: you choose the suit first, then the specific card. The 'which card?' decision is usually automatic once you've decided on the suit, so the main challenge is 'which suit?'

This decision will be easier – and more successful -- if you back up and ask yourself a broader question: **Does this auction call for a passive lead or an aggressive lead?**

Some auctions will tell you that it's best to make a safe, passive opening lead that isn't likely to give declarer an extra trick. These leads are often from topless suits such as 86543 or 10982. On other deals, it will pay to make an aggressive lead – one that might give declarer a 'gift' if partner has no help in the suit, but offers your best chance to beat the contract if partner has an honor or two. Aggressive leads are usually from suits with unprotected honors (low from Kxxx, for example).

Aggressive leads

How do you know when an aggressive lead is the best choice? One of your strongest clues comes when the opponents' auction identifies a long side suit that can be set up as a source of tricks. For example, suppose you're South holding ♠ 7654 ♥ A3 ♦ KJ952 ♣ J7 and it's your lead after your opponents have this auction:

West	East
1 ♠	2 ♥
3 ♥	4 ♥

Where do we presume East-West will get their tricks?
What do we know about the Spade suit?
Where will our side get its tricks?
NOW, what do the cards tell us to lead?

How about **leads to higher-level contracts**? When the opponents bid a small slam, your natural instinct may be to make a safe opening lead, but on some deals, being passive can give away the contract. An aggressive lead may be your only chance to beat a slam, especially if the opponents have shown great strength or a fit in a side suit. For example, your opponents bid to 6H via this auction:

West	East
	1 ♥
2 ♦	3 ♦
3 ♥	4 NT
5 ♥	6 ♥

And you're on lead with ♠ 109876 ♥ 762 ♦ A3 ♣ K102.

Where do we presume East-West will get their tricks?
What do we know about the Diamond suit?
What do we know about our side's high-card points?
What do we know about the Aces and Kings?
Where will our side get its tricks?
NOW, what do the cards tell us to lead?

"Tapping" strategies

It can be especially important to adopt an attacking defense when you have length in the opponents' trump suit.

West	East
	1 ♠
2 ♠	4 ♠

What's your lead as South holding ♠ 10865 ♥ 987 ♦ AJ962 ♣ 10 ?

What do we know about the Spade suit?
Where will our side get its tricks?
NOW, what do the cards tell us to lead?

Passive opening leads

In other situations, you'll want to be more patient and make declarer work for all his tricks. Your goal on these hands is to make a safe opening lead that won't give declarer a "cheap" or undeserved trick.

A safe lead may also be an attacking combination -- such as a suit headed by AK, KQJ or QJ10 -- and these are usually good choices for a lead to any contract. If you aren't dealt these easy holdings, you'll sometimes have to select a passive lead. Passive leads include:

A lead from a topless suit (such as 8762), especially one in which you don't expect partner to hold an honor. When in doubt, lead through strength by choosing a suit dummy (rather than declarer) has bid.

A lead from length -- such as fourth best from Q9653 or K87432. Even though underleading an honor is standard to a notrump contract, it can be risky against a suit contract. Length, however, gives you a margin of safety. The longer your suit, the less likely it will be that declarer needs to develop his own tricks in that suit.

A trump, in some cases.

How do you know when a passive lead is your best choice? Here are some of the contracts and types of auctions that call for a safe, non-attacking opening lead:

The opponents are in 6 NT or a grand slam.

An exception is if the opponents bid 6 NT after an auction that suggests that their main source of tricks will be a long suit. In this case, you may want to make an aggressive opening lead (away from an honor) to try to set up a trick you can cash if you get the lead later.

The auction tells you that declarer has a strong hand and dummy (and/or partner) will be very weak.

Suppose your RHO opens 2 NT (20-22 pts.) and LHO raises to 3 NT. What's your lead from

♠ 986 ♥ AQ62 ♦ KQ43 ♣ Q6 ?

If you follow the "fourth from longest and strongest" rule, you'd choose the ♥ 2 or the ♦ 3. But with almost all the outstanding honors on your right, either of these leads has a high risk of giving declarer a gift. Partner can't hold more than 2-3 high-card points, so it's not a good idea to count on him for help in a specific suit.

A more attractive choice is a passive ♠ 9. This is unlikely to set up tricks for your side, but it probably won't help declarer. You'll be on lead again soon, and if your spade lead was indeed safe, you should consider continuing the suit. If a switch is necessary, you'll have a better idea of which suit to choose later.

Note that you should not lead a diamond honor. A diamond will probably be right only when partner has the ♦ J (or the unlikely ♦ A), so if you do choose a diamond lead, it's better to lead low (the ♦ 3). If partner has no honors (declarer and dummy have any combination of the ♦ A, J, 10 and 9), leading the ♦ K will give declarer three eventual tricks. If you instead lead low, declarer can't take more than two tricks in the suit.

You're defending a suit contract where the opponents are fairly balanced.

On these hands, declarer will usually have to play the side suits himself, so it's best to sit back and wait for your tricks. Suppose you're on lead as South holding ♠ Q74 ♥ 5 ♦ 108432 ♣ KJ64 after this auction:

West	East	
	1 ♥	
2 NT*	4 ♥	* (Jacoby 2 NT, forcing heart raise)

The opponents have shown game-level strength and their hands rate to be semi-balanced. Opener's 4 ♥ rebid showed a minimum with no singleton, and responder might have chosen a different way to raise hearts if he had a very distributional hand. You expect that declarer will have to lead the side suits himself, so you want to avoid leading any suit that will make it easier for him to find missing honors.

The singleton trump is probably the most dangerous lead (partners always seem to hold Qxx). It's also risky to lead away from your club or spade honors. That leaves your "nothing" suit -- diamonds -- so try the ♦ 3.

IMPs vs. matchpoints

If you're not sure about whether to adopt an aggressive or passive strategy, consider the form of scoring. **Passive leads tend to be more attractive in pair events**, where saving an overtrick can have a big impact on your matchpoint score. In team events, the cost of an overtrick is tiny compared to the potential score for beating a contract, so there's a greater incentive for making an aggressive lead. At IMPs, if there's a realistic layout of the cards that will result in a set, choose your lead to cater to that possibility.

There's an old bridge adage that advises, "Lead from nothing, get nothing", and that should be your expectation with most passive leads. Your main goal is to do no harm, not to establish tricks. When considering a passive lead, keep this advice in mind:

When in doubt, choose a safe, passive lead if the opponents have struggled to a game contract. If they've bid strongly to game, you may need to find specific cards in partner's hand to beat it, so there's more incentive to take a risk and lead away from an honor.

Don't choose a passive lead solely because you're superstitious about your holding in a suit that offers a better attack. "Every time I lead the queen from QJxx, dummy hits with K10x and declarer has the ace." If the auction tells you it's right to lead that suit, do it.

Avoid going overboard with the give-them-nothing strategy at matchpoints. If others holding your cards will be leading from their KJxxx suit to 3 NT, don't try to out-think them by choosing a "brilliant" lead from your xxx suit. Like other unusual leads, going passive when you know the field will be aggressive is a gamble that rates to lose in the long run.

A top-of-nothing lead should promise at least a two-card sequence. From 9873, lead the 9. From 9643, you'll want to retain the 9 (it could be a winner), so lead the 6 (second-highest). Partner will see that two low spot cards are missing from the first trick, which should help him determine that you're leading from an honorless suit.

A lead from xxx should be your last choice, especially to a suit contract. This is the most difficult lead for partner to read. If you lead low, partner will think you have an honor. If you lead the middle or top card, it may look like a doubleton. The exception is if partner has bid the suit, in which case you should lead low (unless you've already shown three cards by raising the suit).

