

## Opening Leads in Notrump

The opening lead is probably the most difficult part of defending. The reason is that with all later plays you have the benefit of seeing dummy, which usually provides a better and clearer guide to your defense. It's said that if an average player always made the most effective opening lead, she would be a world champion. Opening leads are hardly a science -- and the "right" lead might not be the best lead, simply because you can't see the opponents' hands.

There are, however, some guidelines to follow.

First, carefully review the bidding. Too many players consider only the cards in their own hands when making decisions on the opening lead. Some questions to ask yourself are: How strong was the opponents' bidding? Do they have a fit? Did they seem to be stretching? Did my partner bid?

**General guideline when defending against NT contracts: Promote long suits and suits with controlling honors**

In NT, defenders' goals are similar to declarer's goals: Quickly attack the suit that will bring in the most tricks for your side. For the defender, that often means leading your longest suit and then continuing to lead it at every opportunity until declarer and dummy have been exhausted of the suit. Then the remaining cards in your long suit will be winners, no matter how small they are.

Here's a general guide for selecting a suit to lead -- in order of preference:

1. A suit in which your partner has shown length or strength, either by bidding the suit or by implying the suit (with a takeout double or a lead-directing double, for example). There are always exceptions, of course, and you should also rely on your own judgement, based on your hand and on the bidding. If you have real weakness in partner's suit (a singleton, for example) and declarer has bid NT behind partner's suit, you might want to consider other possibilities for an opening lead.

2. Top of an honor sequence -- or close to a sequence -- from a 4+ card suit: KQJ86, QJ102, J1098, QJ98.
3. 4<sup>th</sup> highest from a 5-card suit with useful entries, particularly with an honor in your suit. (You might want to reconsider if opponents have bid that suit.) With two equally long suits, prefer the stronger.
4. Suits inferred by partner's pass (for example, if partner failed to make a takeout or lead-directing double when he had the opportunity).
5. Without useful entries to establish your own long suit, lead another suit potentially helpful to partner (for example, an unbid major), especially if you have help in the form of an honor.

## Which Cards to Lead from Particular Holdings

### 1. Fourth Best Leads

If your own longest and strongest suit is your choice for a lead, generally the fourth highest card is your best choice. So, if you have K9872, lead the 7; with QJ32, lead the 2; with Q98642, lead the 6.

Leading 4<sup>th</sup> best invokes the **Rule of 11**. What that means for opening leader's partner (and for declarer) is that the number of the card led subtracted from 11 reveals how many cards above that card are in the other three hands. So, for instance, in the first example above, four cards higher than the 7 are in the other three hands ( $11-7=4$ ); in the second example, nine cards higher than the 2 are in the other three hands; and in the third example, five cards higher than the 6 are in the other three hands. As defender or declarer, you might not immediately be able to tell specifically where those cards are (although sometimes you can), but later in the hand you might be able use that information. Also, if a 2 is led, and you know your partner leads 4<sup>th</sup> best, you can be confident that partner doesn't have a 5-card suit. Again, this is potentially very useful information in the play of the hand. Not all defenders lead 4<sup>th</sup> best, however, so as declarer, you should always ask about opponents' leads and carding or look at their convention card.

## 2. Leads from Particular Holdings

What should you lead from KQ76? KQ3? 1093? K1094? Q10986? KJ986?  
AQ943?

## 3. Special cases

From KQ109 or KQ109x, lead the Q, asking partner to play the J if he has it. If declarer has Axx(x) or AJx(x) of the suit, you want to know which.

With particularly strong holdings, like AKJ10x, lead the A, which asks partner to play an honor if she has one or to otherwise give count, so the Q can be finessed when partner gets in.

### Some typical auctions

1NT-Pass-3NT: Strongly consider leading a major.

1D-Pass-1N: Strongly consider leading a major.

1C-Pass-1H-Pass-1NT: Strongly consider leading a spade.

1C-1S-1N: There may be a reason not to lead it, but a spade is probably best.

## Quick Quiz

Which suit should you lead?

The auction has gone:

1♥-Pass-1♠-Pass-2♣-Pass-3♣-Pass-3NT

The opponents have bid 1NT-3NT. What is your opening lead with each of these hands?

1. ♠QJ1082 ♥K43 ♦A5 ♣10543
2. ♠AK8 ♥854 ♦75 ♣KJ742
3. ♠95 ♥43 ♦K10984 ♣AQ102

What is your opening lead after each of these auctions?

Your hand as West is: ♠KJ9752 ♥J108 ♦96 ♣72

1. N E S W  
1♦ 2♠  
3♣ Pass 3♦ Pass  
3♠ Pass 3NT All Pass

3. N E S W  
1NT Pass  
2♣ Pass 2♥ Pass  
3NT Pass Pass Pass

2. N E S W  
1♦ 2♣ 2NT Pass  
3NT Pass Pass Pass

4. N E S W  
1♦ Pass 1NT Pass  
2NT Pass 3NT All Pass

Note: Some of the questions and examples in this lesson were taken from Mike Lawrence's book, *Opening Leads*.