

Suit Leads & Strategy

Defensive strategy at a suit contract is quite different from that at notrump due to the presence of a trump suit. This lesson explains how to make effective leads and how to decide the best defense after dummy appears.

Which Suit to Lead

As always, the bidding is an important factor in determining the best lead. You should usually lead a suit that partner has bid, and avoid leading a suit bid by the enemy. In most situations the bidding will not reveal an obvious lead so the choice must be based on your hand. I recommend the following priority in choosing the suit. Notice how the list *differs* from notrump leads.

1. Suit headed by ace-king
2. Singleton *if you desire a ruff*
3. Safe honor sequence
4. Long suit *without ace or king*
5. Safe trump lead
6. Unsafe honor sequence
7. Worthless doubleton
8. Worthless three cards
9. Long suit with ace or king

The following 3 hands illustrate the priority list by ranking the choice of suits to lead. The trump suit is \spadesuit .

\spadesuit 7 6 4

\heartsuit 5

\diamondsuit J 9 7 6 3

\clubsuit A K 9 2

Best = \clubsuit K

2nd choice = \heartsuit 5

3rd choice = \diamondsuit 6

Worst = \spadesuit 7

\spadesuit 6 4

\heartsuit A Q 9 6 4

\diamondsuit J 10 9

\clubsuit Q J 4

Best = \diamondsuit J

2nd choice = \spadesuit 4

3rd choice = \clubsuit Q

Worst = \heartsuit A

\spadesuit Q J 10 9

\heartsuit K Q 8 3

\diamondsuit 8 2

\clubsuit 9 6 2

Best = \spadesuit Q

2nd choice = \heartsuit K

3rd choice = \diamondsuit 8

Worst = \clubsuit 2

Which Card to Lead

Choosing the proper card to lead is based on the *same rules that apply at notrump* with the following differences:

Lead the king from any ace-king holding (except A-K doubleton). A K 4 3 A K J 10 2

Lead the king from any king-queen holding. K Q 8 2 K Q 10 8 3

Do not *underlead* an ace (in a side suit). If you intend to lead that suit (rare), cash the ace. A 10 8 2 A J 9 6 3

Lead *low* from three small; this makes a doubleton lead easier for partner to recognize. 8 5 4 8 4

Trump Leads

Leading the trump suit is a special case, and the rules for choosing the card are different. The reason is that it is foolish to part with your highest trump from a doubleton because on some occasions you might be able to overruff with that card later. Lead the lowest card from two or four small trumps. 8 3 9 6 5 2 Lead the middle card (or highest with touching cards) from three small trumps. 7 5 3 8 7 6

The above strategy is also used when *following suit* in trumps or when *ruffing*. Note that a high-low signal (called a trump echo) indicates the presence of a third trump. This may be helpful to partner in deciding the correct defense.

Trying for a Ruff

As indicated in the priority list, a singleton is an excellent lead when you have one or more small trumps with which to ruff. Many otherwise sound contracts can be defeated by leading your singleton provided the defenders cooperate and follow it up with a ruff or two.

Note that a doubleton lead might also obtain a ruff, but the chances are much less likely; hence it is way down the priority list. **If partner's lead appears to be a singleton, be alert to obtain the lead quickly to give him his ruff before trumps are drawn.**

4 ♠ by South

<p>♠8 6 3 ♥Q J 10 6 2 ♦Q J 9 4 ♣2</p>		<p>♠A 4 ♥7 5 ♦A K 8 2 ♣10 8 6 4 3</p>
	<p>♠K Q 9 7 5 2 ♥8 4 3 ♦5 ♣K 9 7</p>	
<p>Lead: ♣2</p>		

West chooses to lead his singleton club because he has several small trumps to ruff with. Assume declarer wins the ♣J and leads the ♠J at trick two. East should read West's lead as a singleton because the only other possibility is that West has led from K-x-x, hardly a popular choice.

East should take the ♠J with the ace on which West plays the six, the beginning of a high-low to indicate three trumps. East returns a club and West ruffs with the ♠3. West next leads the ♦Q and East must *overtake* with the king. Then another club lead sets the contract.

Preventing Ruffs

A trump lead is often overlooked by the average player. Besides being a safe lead it often produces a trick by reducing the ruffing ability of declarer, especially in regard to ruffs in dummy. As soon as a defender gains the lead again, he can lead another trump if necessary. **A trump lead is especially desirable if you have strength in a side suit bid by declarer or dummy.**

4 ♠ by South

<p>♣4 2 ♥J 10 7 ♦K Q J 8 ♣J 10 9 4</p>		<p>♠K J 9 5 ♥A Q 5 3 ♦4 2 ♣Q 5 3</p>
	<p>♠Q 10 8 3 ♥6 4 ♦A 10 9 7 ♣A K 2</p>	<p>♣A 7 6 ♥K 9 8 2 ♦6 5 3 ♣8 7 6</p>
<p>Lead: ♠2</p>		

Normally West would lead the ♦K, but this is less attractive after South has opened the bidding 1 ♦. Instead the ♣J looks correct, however, West reasons that he may be able to gain a trick in diamonds if he can reduce the ruffing power in dummy; hence the trump lead.

East also must make a good play by *ducking* the first trick. If South next gives up a diamond trick, West will return his remaining trump to East's ace; then a third trump lead beats the contract. Without this defense declarer could succeed by obtaining two diamond ruffs in dummy (or two heart ruffs in his hand).

Sometimes a defender must shift to trumps after seeing the dummy if it appears that declarer will try to make ruffs. If the dummy has a singleton or doubleton (and no five-card or longer side suit), it is usually good defense to shift to trumps.

4 ♠ by South

<p>♠K 2 ♥J 10 9 7 3 ♦Q 9 7 4 ♣7 4</p>		<p>♠J 9 4 ♥Q 4 ♦J 8 6 2 ♣K 9 5 2</p>
	<p>♠A Q 10 8 3 ♥6 5 2 ♦A K ♣A Q 3</p>	<p>♠7 6 5 ♥A K 8 ♦10 5 3 ♣J 10 8 6</p>
<p>Lead: ♥J</p>		

West's opening lead is a standout choice. Once the dummy appears East realizes that declarer's most obvious source of an additional trick is a heart ruff in dummy so he attempts to prevent it.

East should win the ♥K *even if dummy plays low* and shift to a trump. Assume South takes the finesse to West's king, and West returns a second trump. Declarer's correct play is to cash the ♦A-K then lead a heart, but East takes the ace and returns his last trump to eliminate the heart ruff.

All that remains is to discard carefully. East must hold on to his club stopper and the contract is defeated.


The astute reader might notice that declarer could make his contract by *hopping* with the ♠A and leading a second heart — the spade suit is blocked so the defenders cannot stop the heart ruff. This is true but the play is unrealistic unless looking at all four hands.

Attacking Entries

As a defender you must continually ask yourself, “How is declarer going to make additional tricks?” Put yourself in declarer’s position and consider how *you* would play the hand. The key to successful defense is to be one step ahead.

A common situation is the case in which declarer tries to establish a side suit, usually in dummy. **If the dummy has a five-card or longer side suit, it is usually good defense to attack dummy’s outside entry.**

4 ♠ by South


♠10 2		♠J 5 3
♥8 4 2		♥Q 9 7 5
♦J 9 7 6 3		♦A 8 4
♣A K 3		♣Q 8 2
♠Q 6		♠A K 9 8 7 4
♥J 10 6 3		♥A K
♦K Q 5		♦10 2
♣J 7 6 4		♣10 9 5
Lead: ♥3		

South captures East’s ♥Q with the ace and leads the ♦10 taken by West’s queen. Declarer’s plan is to establish dummy’s ♦ suit. West’s counterplan should be to lead a *club* to attack dummy’s side entry, as well as to establish a club trick in the event East has the ♣Q.

The club shift keeps the defenders a step ahead of declarer. Without it, the contract would be easily made.

Another way to remove an entry is to make the critical hand ruff early to shorten its trumps.

4 ♠ by South

♠K Q 6		♠8 3
♥4		♥9 7 5 3
♦Q 8 7 6 4 3		♦K J 10
♣J 5 4		♣Q 9 7 2
♠9 4 2		♠A J 10 7 5
♥K Q J 8 6		♥A 10 2
♦9 5		♦A 2
♣A 10 6		♣K 8 3
Lead: ♥K		

South wins the ♥A and immediately plays the ♦A and another diamond, won by East. It is clear that declarer hopes to set up the diamond suit. The only entry to dummy is in trumps, but a trump lead does not help — declarer would win in dummy, ruff a diamond (high), draw trumps ending in dummy and run the diamonds.

The key defense by East is to return a *heart* to make dummy ruff. Then West will have one more trump than dummy, and the diamond suit can never be used to obtain discards. Eventually declarer will have to lose three club tricks and go down.