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This Week in Bridge

(394) Opening Lead Fundamentals: Card Combinations and More

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

Before we work on selecting our opening lead by combining the information from the auction with that from our entire hand, we need to make sure we have good agreements with partner about what we lead from particular holdings in a given suit. Many of these basic card combination lead agreements are found on the bottom left corner of the ACBL Convention Card, but it is important for us to understand why these are our agreements. Let's spend some time thinking these things through in detail.

Purpose of Opening Leads – Suits vs. Notrump

Before we get into the details of selecting a specific card to lead we need to understand the goal or purpose of our opening lead. The purpose of our lead varies based on several different factors, but the primary one is going to be what kind of contract are we defending – Suit vs. Notrump. In a suit contract, our general goal is short-term - we are trying to produce immediate tricks for our side. In a notrump contract, our general goal is long-term - we are willing to take some early losses or give up tricks to set up several tricks for us later in the hand. Think short-term vs. long-term investment.

Opening Lead Priorities

The following discussion assumes that we have no information from the auction and is designed to help us understand what our priorities should be in a vacuum. Unless we have this as base knowledge, then we will not be able to have the more complex discussions of how to deal with additional information from the auction.

Suit Contracts

In suit contracts we can win tricks by getting ruffs (leading shortness) or by developing our honors into winners. Our goal with both of these leads is to establish and take our tricks as quickly as possible – immediate return on investment! But no matter how strong our holding in a suit is, our winners will eventually run out because the declarer will ruff at some point.



Suits - Honors

Let's look at our preferred leads so we can understand how to best set up these immediate winners:

(Note: This list is ordered from most preferred to least, but is certainly not comprehensive, and assumes no other information from the auction that might change our priorities.)

1. A singleton (not in trump) is generally our most preferred lead – it's a great way to win tricks.
2. We prefer to lead touching honors rather than to lead from length (4th best.) We need at least two touching honors to lead an honor instead of leading low.
3. If we have three touching honors that is still generally better than having only two honors.
4. If we have two sets of touching honors, we prefer the higher or stronger set.
 - KQxx is better than QJxx.
5. A more difficult choice is between three smaller honors and two higher honors:
 - AKxx vs. KQJx -- usually Ace to start.
 - KQxx vs. QJT_x – much more difficult.
6. If we must choose between a good 4-card suit and a good 5-card suit, then we generally choose the 4-card suit. This is because if we have a 5-card suit the declarer will be ruffing sooner.
 - KQJx over KQJxx.
7. If we must choose between a good 3-card suit and a good 4-card suit it will depend much more on the situation.
 - KQJ vs. KQJT – this is difficult, but usually the 4-card suit is a winner against lower-level contracts and the 3-card suit is better against higher-level contracts.
 - QJT vs. QJT_x – Also difficult, but similar to above.

There are many more cases that we could look at in detail, but we have mentioned many of the interesting cases and hopefully have helped provide a good foundation for making judgments about opening honor leads.

Classic Problems

- AKxx vs. Singleton. Though Ace from Ace-King is generally one of our favorite leads, leading a singleton can often work even better.
- One time that we do not lead a singleton is when we are short in trump. Having a control in the trump suit makes leading shortness (side-suit singleton) even better.



Suits - Length

When we do not have touching honors and do not have shortness, we lead from length. When leading from length we must balance leading from length or strength. The old saying, *4th from our longest and strongest*, is a good starting point, but not a mandate. When we have multiple 4-card suits to choose from we will choose the one that gives us the best chance to balance risk (not giving up a trick) and reward (setting up a trick.)

1. Qxxx – First Choice. Attacking enough to set up a trick, but likely to not give up an immediate trick if partner has Ace, King, or Jack.
2. Kxxx – Second Choice. More attacking and more likely to set up a trick, but more likely to give up a trick. We need partner to have either the Ace or Queen to likely not give up an immediate trick.
3. xxx – unlikely to set up a trick quickly, but also unlikely to give up a trick.
4. Jxxx – unlikely to set up a trick, and often will give up a trick. Jacks are usually better for defending a suit than attacking it.
5. Axxx – we generally do not underlead Aces on opening leads against suit contracts. Though this may work from time to time, it is much more likely to give up a trick than gain one.

Notrump Contracts

Our goal in notrump is different than it is in a suit contract. In notrump contracts we win tricks either by developing our long suits and small cards into winners or by establishing our honors as winners. We are not usually looking to win (or establish) our tricks immediately; we can be more patient about taking our tricks. Our opening lead is much more of a long-term investment. If we are successful in establishing our suit, then we can score many winners for our side.

Notrump - Honors

In notrump contracts we lead low far more often than we do versus suit contracts. This is for a variety of reasons that will become clearer as our discussion progresses. But first, we focus on when we lead honors against notrump contracts.

- All things being equal we choose length. A 5-card suit is preferred to a 4-card suit.
 - KQJTx over KQJT.
- Three touching or nearly touching honors are generally required to justify leading an honor. A one- or two-card break is considered nearly touching – Ex. AJTx.
- When we have these holdings we generally lead the top of touching honors or the top of an interior sequence. (See the bottom of the convention card for the standard honor leads vs. notrump.)



Special Opening Leads

- AQTxx – We have three touching or nearly touching honors here. So we plan to lead an honor, but the question is, which honor should we lead? If we lead the Ace, we give up the most important card in the suit and do not capture any honors. If we lead the Ten we may allow the declarer to score the Jack cheaply on the dummy (say with stiff J or Jx.) The standard lead from this holding is to lead the Queen. This drives out the King (declarer's stopper) and leaves us in a good position to run the suit later.
- AKxx – Though it is standard to lead 4th best from only two touching honors (Ex. AKxxx) to set up our suit, leading low from AKxx usually gives up a trick without setting up tricks for us. This holding is an exception to the rule and experienced players generally lead high (Ace) from this holding.

Notrump – Length

When we do not have three touching or nearly touching honors, we lead from our length. The traditional rule is 4th from our longest and strongest, but this is not always correct. When we have choices (multiple 4-card suits) we want to think about which suit is more likely to set up and how we might get back in (our entry) once we have the suit established. Combining these two desires makes choosing the best opening lead difficult.

- All things being equal we choose length. A 5-card suit is preferred to a 4-card suit.
- Qxxx – First Choice. Attacking enough to set up a trick, but likely to not give up an immediate trick if partner has Ace, King, or Jack. Also, the queen is unlikely to be an entry to another suit if we were to choose another lead.
- Kxxx – Second Choice. More attacking and more likely to set up a trick, but more likely to give up a trick. We need partner to have either the Ace or Queen to likely not give up an immediate trick.
- Axxx – Third Choice. Likely to give up a trick, but also likely to set up our suit (even if it takes a while.)
- xxxx – unlikely to set up a trick quickly, but also unlikely to give up a trick.
- Jxxx – unlikely to set up a trick, and often will give up a trick.

Example

Given Qxxx and Axxx and no other information about the hand, it is usually best to try to establish our Qxxx suit by leading it and use our Ace as an outside entry. This is counter to much of what we are taught (4th from our longest and strongest) but is an important change to our thinking as improving players.



Conclusion

The guidelines that we have discussed above will not always lead to the best opening lead on a given hand. They are learned choices that most frequently lead to good results. In suit contracts we are attacking in a way that looks to win tricks as quickly as possible, while in notrump contracts we are more patient. In notrump contracts we are willing to make leads that give the declarer tricks they may not be entitled to (give up tricks), but we do so with the hope that we produce many more winners for ourselves (set up our suit.) Understanding how we attack from different suit holdings vs. different kinds of contracts is a vital part of making good defensive decisions. I hope that this overview has put you in a good place for feeling comfortable with these fundamentals.