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This Week in Bridge

(395) Opening Leads – The Rule of 11

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

When we play traditional 4th best opening leads (whether against suit or notrump contracts), it can be difficult to figure out from exactly what holding partner has led. We have to visualize all of the possible holdings that partner has led from and determine what is the right thing to do in each of these situations. That seems like a lot of work and can often be too much to do at trick 1. There is a tool we can use to help us figure out “What is going on?” and help us decide what to play at trick one. This tool is called the *Rule of 11*. Generally speaking, I don’t like “paint by numbers”, using rules that are purely mathematic in nature and take our judgement out of the play, but this Rule is worth knowing and making use of when we aren’t sure what is going on.

Rule of 11 - Doing a Calculation and Why

When partner makes a 4th best lead, we can calculate the number of cards around the table higher than the spot card led by using the Rule of 11. Let’s see how it works through an example.

Example 1

Partner leads the ♥7 against a 3NT contract. Here is how we use the Rule of 11. We subtract 7 from 11. $11 - 7 = 4$. Four is the number of cards higher than the 7 in the other three hands (dummy, our hand, and declarer’s hand). Now we look at the dummy and our hand to determine how many cards (if any) Declarer has that are higher than partner’s card. If dummy has Q83 and we have KT2, then we can see all four of these cards (K, Q, T, 8) and we know declarer does not have any card higher than the 7.

	Q83	
AJ974		KT2
	65	

If Declarer plays low from dummy at trick 1 (plays the 3) then we can play the 2, expecting partner’s 7 to win the trick!



Why the *Rule of 11* Works

In a deck of cards, there are 13 cards in a suit. They are numbered 2 to 14 (with the Jack = 11, Queen = 12, King = 13, Ace = 14). The number of cards in that suit that are higher than any given card can be determined by subtracting that card number from 14.

Example 2

Consider the 8 of a particular suit. Then, $14 - 8 = 6$. There are six cards higher than the 8 – they are 9, T, J=11, Q=12, K=13, A=14.

When we lead 4th best, we hold three cards in our hand higher than the one we led. So to determine the number of cards in the “other hands” we take the three cards in our hand away and subtract the card led from 11 instead of 14. Thus, the Rule of 11!

Partner leads an 8. $11 - 8 = 3$. There are three cards higher than the 8 in opening leader’s hand and three cards higher than the 8 in the other hands. Imagine something like AJ983 in opening leader’s hand and K, Q, T spread around the other three hands at the table.

Note: This only works if partner leads 4th best. If partner choose to lead from a 3-card suit, then your calculation will go astray. Also, if partner chooses to lead top of nothing, then your calculation will often make no sense. Something like the 9, so $11-9 = 2$. But you will be able to see 3-4 cards higher than the 9 in your hand and the dummy, so you know partner has not led 4th best!

Conclusion

When we are playing 3rd hand (after partner has made the opening lead) then it can be difficult to determine what we should do. Determining what (or how many) cards the declarer has that are higher than partner’s opening lead can help us determine how best to defend the hand. The Rule of 11 helps us visualize all the hands. It helps us place the high cards around the table. Make use of this tool to help you determine what card to play to trick 1 when you are playing 3rd hand.