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This Week in Bridge

(396) Opening Leads - Leading Partner's Suit

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

One of the most common opening leads that we make is the suit that partner bid. If we are going to do this frequently, then we should put the time and effort into developing good agreements about this situation. Partner should know what we are communicating to them with our lead so that they can make a good decision about how to defend at trick 1. Let's look at some of these situations in detail and flesh out our agreements with partner.

First Things First

One thing we need to make clear is when we treat the auction as if partner has shown a suit. We will treat the following situations as if partner "has the suit" –

- Partner has opened the suit, showing at least 3-cards.
- Partner has overcalled the suit.
- Partner has made a lead-directing double by doubling an artificial bid.

Basic Agreements

Now that we are on the same page with partner for when they have "shown a suit", we can make some agreements about our opening leads in their suit. The information that we are communicating to partner with our opening lead will be dependent upon what we have done in the auction.

- If we have NOT supported partner's suit in the bidding, then our opening lead will attempt to communicate our count (the number of cards we hold).
- If we have supported partner's suit in the bidding, then our opening lead will attempt to communicate our attitude (if we have an honor or not).

If we have NOT supported partner's suit, then we lead a count card:

- Low from an odd number (usually 3-cards).
- High from an even number (usually 2-cards).

We have this agreement because this is usually the most useful information for partner, as it allows them to visualize the distribution of the suit around the table at trick 1.



If we have supported partner's suit, then partner knows we have length (at least 3-cards), so it is more important for us to communicate the quality of our support and our attitude to partner. Thus, our leads in partner's suit will be attitude-oriented:

- Low from an honor.
- Top of a bad holding.

Example – “Three Small”

When we are leading from three small cards in partner's suit, we lead low (showing count) if we have not supported them. We lead high (attitude, top of nothing) if we have supported their suit.

Here are both the count and attitude leads, from a variety of different common holdings:

- 97
 - Count – Lead the 9. High from a doubleton.
 - Attitude – Lead the 9. Top of nothing.
- Q9
 - Count – Lead the Q. High from a doubleton.
 - Attitude – Lead the Q. We do not lead low from a doubleton honor because it will block the suit and partner will never work out what is going on.
- 975
 - Count – Lead the 5. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 9. Top of nothing.
- Q95
 - Count – Lead the 5. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 5. Low from an honor.
- 9753
 - Count – Lead the 7 (or 9.) High from an even number of cards. The 9 is the clearest card, but it might cost a trick later. We must use our judgment about balancing clarity in count with protecting our holding. The 7 seems high enough for partner to be able to read as a high card.
 - Attitude – Lead the 7 (or 9.) High from a bad holding. Similar discussion as above, so the 7 seems high enough.
- Q975
 - Count – Lead the 9. High from an even number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 5. Low from an honor.
- 97532
 - Count – Lead the 2. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 7. Top of nothing. We must use our judgment about balancing clarity in count with protecting our holding. The 7 seems high enough for partner to be able to read as a high card.
- Q9753
 - Count – Lead the 3. Low from an odd number of cards.
 - Attitude – Lead the 3. Low from an honor.



Exceptions to the Rules - Touching Honors

When we have a holding like KQx and have not raised partner, we usually still lead the King. We want to communicate with partner clearly and this card may confuse them, but it is most important to “play bridge” and not give up a trick first. This is true for KQx, QJx, and JTx, but from a holding like 98x or 87x, it is not necessary, and we can lead a small card to give proper count.

Exceptions to the Rules - Notrump Unblocks

Following this idea that “playing bridge” is more important than specific agreements to its end brings us to some three and four card holdings where leading low can potentially block the suit against a notrump contract. Here are some examples:

- Q92
- QT82

In these cases, we want to unblock the suit by leading something other than our 2. We don’t want to win the final round (3rd / 4th round) in our hand. Even in attitude situations when we have supported partner, the accepted play is to lead the 9 from Q92 and the 8 from QT82. This is how we unblock the suit, by saving our 2 until the end to force partner to win the later tricks.

Conclusion

Though leads in partner’s suit may seem like a very specific topic to make so many agreements on, it is a very important topic and one that is worthwhile. You are certain to lead partner’s suit often, so it is important to have good agreements in a situation that comes up frequently. Spending time discussing these details with your partners is a good use of your bridge time!