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This Week in Bridge

(347) Opening Leads vs. 3NT Contracts

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Level: 6 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

When our right-hand opponent declares the hand in 3NT, we have a lot of options for ways to approach the opening lead. There are some basic guidelines, like 4th from our longest and strongest, that can be helpful, but the most important thing is to make use of the information from the auction (both explicit and implicit) in combination with the information from what cards we hold to help us select a lead. One of the most important decisions we must make is what type of lead to make – active vs. passive. Let's take a look at how the auction and our hand help shape our decision-making process.

Active Opening Leads

When the opponents are playing in 3NT, then our default guideline "4th from our longest and strongest" suggests that we make an aggressive opening lead. With a decent hand and no useful information from the auction, this is often the case.

But if we have a choice of a couple of reasonable opening leads, then our choice should be shaped by using more than just the card combinations we hold. If we expect that the opponents have a source of tricks (like a long suit that we expect is going to set up) then we want to make an attacking opening lead. Attacking opening leads tend to be leading away from honors. Leading away from a tenace (or multiple honors) is an even more attacking lead.

Example 1

1♣ 1♠
3♣ 3NT
♠ 963
♥ JT93
♦ KJ93
♣ K8

Because of our ♣ holding we fear that dummy has a running source of tricks (the finesse is going to work), so we should make an attacking opening lead of the ♦3.



The choice to make an attacking opening lead (and take some risk that we give the opponents additional tricks) is based on a prediction of how the play is likely to go for the opponents. If we think that the line of play the opponents are going to try will work, then we should attack and take risk. In that case, sitting back is not going to be successful.

Passive Opening Leads

The opposite of an attacking opening lead is a passive one. A passive lead against the opponent's 3NT attempts to balance developing our tricks with not giving the opponents any tricks they do not deserve. Frequently, the best passive leads are from long suits that have a sequence of honors at the top.

Example 2

QJTxx
JT9xx
T987x

One of our major take-aways from the auction should be an idea of "should we be active or passive". The location of our honors combined with listening to the auction helps us make this decision. One of those times we should most consider making a passive opening lead (or a slightly less attacking one) is when the opponents have had an invitational auction. When one player has invited game in notrump, limiting their hand, and the other accepts, we know they have enough points to give game a try, but not a significant amount extra (this is especially true if both players have limited their hand.)

Example 3

1♦ 1♠
1NT 2NT
3NT

Here the opponents have about 14 pts opposite 11 pts. We should be able to look at our holdings in their suits and have a good idea if things are breaking for them or if their finesses are likely to work. Using this information can help us decide to stay passive when we have the right holds. In this example, good ♣ and ♥ holdings (declarer's likely suits) with shortness in ♠ (dummy's suit) strongly suggests staying passive.



Conclusion

When we make an opening lead against 3NT, we often fall into the rut of unthinkingly leading 4th from our longest and strongest. But it is important for us to listen to the auction and think about how the play is likely to go for the opponents. This shapes our large-scale decision-making process about “should we be active or should we be passive”. Before you robotically select your opening lead against 3NT, make sure you ask yourself is the hand going to play well (or not) and should I be attacking (or should I be careful). If you make this a regular process you will become much better at making opening leads against all contracts, but especially 3NT.