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This Week in Bridge

(397) Opening Leads - Always Lead Partner's Suit?

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

There are some “old rules” of bridge that still have value today. But they are not perfect and we know what they say about rules in general – “*They are made to be broken!*” This is very much the case for the rule, “*Always Lead Partner's Suit!*” We must be careful in bridge with any rule that includes the word “always.” Very few things in bridge are “always” true, there is often more information for us to consider in order for us to make our best decision. Let's look at when we should lead partner's suit and when we should consider leading something different.

Knowing Partner's Psychology

First, an important thing to know when considering leading your partner's suit, or your own, is to know your partner's temperament. With some partners, if you do not lead their suit when they have opened or overcalled, they will get upset and likely make a mistake later in the defense. If this describes your partner, then you may want to lead their suit more often (and encourage partner to become a better partner or maybe search for other partners to play with as well).

Suit Contracts – Shortness Leads

Another long-time bridge saying is “The only reason not to lead partner's suit is that you are void in it, and even then, you should try to”. Clearly, we cannot lead the suit when we are void, but when we are void in partner's suit, they will often be able to figure it out from their hand, the dummy, and the auction (and our failure to lead their suit). If we had a singleton in partner's suit, that would be one of the best leads against a suit contract (trying to get our ruff) and we would be very inclined to lead it. So, if information implies that we are likely to be short in partner's suit and we do not lead it, partner will often be able to work out that this is because we are void in their suit.

Example 1

Partner overcalls ♠ and the opponents end up in 4♥. If we lead what looks like a 4th best ♣ (say the ♣5) and it seems to partner that we are short in ♠ because dummy has something like a 4-card ♠ suit, then partner can infer that we are likely void in their suit and partner should consider trying to give us a ruff.



Another reason, related to shortness, that we may not lead partner's suit is that we have a singleton in another suit and hope for a ruff there. This lead of a singleton is particularly effective if we have a trump control and can regain the lead before trump is completely drawn. After we regain the lead we can cross to partner's hand by then leading their suit, allowing partner to now give us a ruff in the suit that we originally led.

Suit Contracts – Holding Partner's Ace

When we are defending a suit contract, holding the Ace in partner's suit makes for a difficult decision about leading their suit. The modern style is to overcall very aggressively (or even open the bidding aggressively) so we certainly cannot count on partner to have the King of their suit whenever they bid it. This means that leading the Ace may give up a trick and it may be best to save our Ace to capture one of the opponent's honors in this suit. Nothing is absolute, but without anything else fabulous to lead, leading the Ace in partner's suit from Ax (doubleton) is much better than leading from Axx or Axxx. Leading Ace doubleton has the added advantage of possibly getting us a ruff if partner has the King or if we can get partner the lead before trump are drawn. Also, when we are shorter in the suit (like with Ax instead of Axx), then the opponents are more likely to be longer in the suit and have more losers.

Example 2

 K93
A7 QT842
 J65

In this position, we lead the Ace and then another, setting up partner's Queen. Hopefully partner can later gain the lead and then cash their Queen.

Suit Contracts – Few Tricks Available in Partner's Suit

When we have a large fit for partner's suit, we know that leading their suit is not likely to produce a lot of tricks. Since the point of leading is to try to build tricks for our side, then if we know there are few tricks are available in this suit, we may choose to attack somewhere else and try to build tricks there.

Example 3

Consider the following auction.

1♥ 4♠ 5♥ 5♠

All Pass

If we are the Responder and have 5-card ♥ support for our partner's ♥ suit, we know that we are taking at most one trick in the ♥ suit (and many times none) before the opponents can ruff. In a case like this we should consider attacking in one of the minor suits, hoping to build (or take immediate) tricks there. This is a time we may choose a lead other than partner's suit.



Example 4

Consider this auction:

1♣	1♥	1♠	P
4♥	P	4♠	All Pass

Here, the opening bidder has made a splinter bid in partner's suit (showing 0-1 cards in ♥). We know that we can take at most one ♥ trick. We should consider leading another suit in this situation, perhaps a ♦, the unbid suit, and see if we can build tricks in this suit.

Suit or NT Contracts - Leading Our Own Powerful Holding

When we have a standout lead in our own hand, like AKQ or KQJ (or others), it is reasonable to make this lead and immediately set up (or take) tricks for our side instead of leading partner's suit. Partner should recognize that if we lead an honor in another suit instead of leading their suit, it is likely from a very powerful holding. This contrasts with the situation where we lead a spot card in another suit instead of leading partner's suit, often as a singleton.

Other Times to Choose a Lead Other than Partner's Suit

There are some other times where it is best not to lead partner's suit. We may choose to lead trump to stop declarer from ruffing their losers in the short side (especially if we expect dummy to be short in partner's suit). If we think dummy is going to have shorter trump support (2 or 3 cards) and shortness in partner's suit, then leading trump each time our side gains the lead may protect partner's tricks from getting ruffed away.

Another time we may choose a lead other than partner's suit is if the opponents seem "ready" for the lead of partner's suit, we may choose to lead an unbid suit. This is especially true against a slam.

Example 5

1♣	1♥	1♠	P
3♣	P	3♠	P
4♠	P	6♠	All Pass

In this auction clearly the opponents are ready for a ♥ lead. Responder has jumped to slam expecting a lead of a ♥ (they would be crazy to have two losers in the ♥ suit on this auction.) We should consider leading a ♦, the unbid suit, in this auction. This is especially true with an attractive ♦ holding like QJT.



Another consideration when it comes to leading partner's suit is whether they opened the bidding with that suit or made an overcall. An opening bid is dictated by rules of strength and shape, not by suit quality. Partner will often not have an option of which suit to bid when determining whether to open the bidding. With an overcall, on the other hand, partner has more options. With a borderline hand, they did not have to overcall, and 2-level overcalls promise better suits than 1-level overcalls. We can also consider which suit partner bid. An opening bid of 1♣ does not promise as much length as that of 1♦, which still could be shorter than 1M. If our goal is to set up partner's suit, then the longer their suit is the better chance we have of doing so, especially against NT contracts.

Opening Leads Against 3NT

When partner has overcalled a suit and the opponents have bid to 3NT, we may need to choose between leading partner's suit (which is at least 5-cards long) or our longest suit. We usually will not consider leading our own suit unless it is at least 5-cards long as well. If we have a singleton in partner's suit, we will not be able to lead the suit again if we regain the lead. So, we should think about how likely we are to regain the lead. If we have about 8-9 points, we know that partner does not have a lot of values (maybe 6-8 points) and thus they cannot have both a great suit and an outside entry. In this situation, leading partner's suit may serve as a passive lead, but it is unlikely to defeat the contract or build extra tricks for our side. If we want to beat the contract it may be better to lead our 5-card suit (the only suit where our side may have a fit) and see if partner has an honor there or if they can get in with an outside honor and return our lead – hopefully setting up our suit to allow our side to take more tricks.

Conclusion

When partner bids a suit, it is often a good idea to lead their suit. But this is certainly not an "always" rule (as you can see from all the situations discussed above). There are many factors that go into choosing an opening lead – your hand, partner's actions, the opponents' actions, and the final contract the opponents reach. The bottom line is to not just blindly lead partner's suit because they made a bid! Consider all the information available to you and find the best lead for your side.