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This Week in Bridge

(350) Opening Leads vs. Slam Contracts

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Level: 6 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

When we are on an opening lead against a slam contract it is extremely important for us to get off to a good lead. We are not going to be on lead very often, so we must find the winning action now. The most important piece of information for us is the auction. The auction often tells us if the opponents have lots of extra values or are stretching to bid slam. It also gives us a lot of information about both the dummy's and the declarer's distribution. Let's see how we use this information to help guide us on our opening leads vs. slam contracts.

Type of Slam – Points vs. Tricks

One thing we need to figure out is whether the opponents are in a "point-based" or "trick-based" slam. That means we must listen to the auction. A point-based slam is one where the opponents are taking most of their 12 tricks with honor cards. A trick-based slam is one where the opponents are planning to set up a long suit and generate their 12 tricks that way. Trick-based slams require fewer HCP for the opponents, which means that our side has more HCP.

When we are leading against point-based slams we want to try to develop tricks for our side without helping declarer too much. Here we may think about what 4-card suits the opponents have and if those suits are splitting or not. This will help us determine how active vs passive to make our opening lead. But when the opponents are in what sounds like a trick-based slam then it is a race: can we set up and take 2 tricks before the opponents take 12? When the auction suggests that the opponents have a source of tricks, we need to make more active opening leads.

Example 1

1NT 4NT

6NT

Here we know that opponents have two balanced hands and just barely enough points for a slam. We tend to make a more passive opening lead (like top of nothing or from a sequence) rather than lead away from an honor.



Example 2

1♠ 2♣
2NT 3♣
3NT 6NT

Here we know that the dummy is hitting with a long strong ♣ suit. If we have a holding like ♣Qxx or ♣xxx, we should make an extremely aggressive opening lead, like laying down an Ace or leading away from a King. If we think that the dummy's ♣ suit is not setting up, e.g., we are void in ♣, then we can choose to lead more passively.

Jump to Slam

When the opponents jump to slam, they have had an unscientific auction. First, it is possible that they are missing two Aces. We may need to take these two Aces before they use a long suit to discard their losers. Second, they may not have a control in every suit (because with no void and a control in every suit they likely would have used an Ace-asking bid to make sure they do not miss a grand slam). Thus, leading an Ace may allow us to find partner with the King in that suit and we may be able to take the first two tricks. In these auctions, it is often the case that our tricks can go away, so leading an Ace will frequently be the only way to defeat the contract.

Example 3

1♠ 2♥
2♠ 4♠
6♠ All Pass

We usually do not want to lead an unsupported Ace (an Ace without the King) against a slam. But on an auction like this, where the opponents jump to slam without using Blackwood, we usually lead any Ace we have in an unbid suit - ♣A or ♦A.

Bad Leads

As a general rule, leading away from a Jack is dangerous. Against a slam, leading away from a Jack is rarely a good idea. The time we might choose to do so is when the lead of that suit is called for by the auction and nothing else seems reasonable. Then we can lead away from the Jack just as if we had no honor in the suit. Leading away from Jxx or Jxxx can be extremely costly if partner has the Queen and now the opponents do not have to lose a trick.

 ATxx
Jxx Qxx
 K9x



Trump Leads

When we are on lead against a slam, especially when the opponents have bid Keycard and shown the Queen, then a trump lead is often attractive. If the dummy is unlikely to have a source of tricks (especially if we have length in dummy's suit and know it is not setting up) then the asset the dummy may be providing is ruffing values. A trump lead cuts down on potential ruffing values in the dummy and is the ultimate passive action, not breaking any new suit. When the opponents have not shown the trump Queen, leading a trump can be dangerous as it may help the opponents "find the Queen".

Conclusion

The most important consideration against slam contracts is whether to make an attacking lead or a safe lead. The auction should give you a good idea of which one to choose. If the opponents have a source of tricks that is likely to set up then we need to develop our second trick now, so that when we get in later, we can cash the setting trick. If we think that the opponents do not have a source of tricks (and especially if we think they do not have a significant amount of HCP) then we try to make a safer, more passive opening lead. It is important for you to listen to the auction and understand the type of slam the opponents have bid before you select your opening lead.