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This Week in Bridge

(127) Opening Leads: Interpreting Partner's Lead

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Levels: 1, 3

General

Partner normally leads 4th best from an honor, but that is not the only type of lead that partner can make. One of the skills a 3rd hand player (partner of the opening leader) needs to develop is how to interpret partner's opening lead. Let's look at the different options we need to consider.

Touching Honors

Level 1

One common opening lead other than 4th best is top of touching honors or from an honor sequence. If partner leads a high card (an honor - A, K, Q, J, or T), then they have at least one more honor.

- Versus a suit contract they have at least one other touching honor and they usually do not have the Ace of the suit led unless that was the lead.
- These are the Standard Leads vs. Suits:
  - Ace Lead from
    - **A**K+
  - King Lead from
    - **K**Q+
    - A**K** (doubleton)
  - Queen Lead from
    - **Q**J+
  - Jack Lead from
    - **J**T+
    - K**J**T+ (top of interior sequence)
  - Ten Lead from
    - **T**9+
    - Q**T**9+ (top of interior sequence)
    - K**T**9+ (top of interior sequence)

- Versus a Notrump contract, if partner leads an honor then they have three touching or nearly touching honors. In this case, they could have underled the Ace.
- These are the Standard Leads vs. Notrump:
    - Ace Lead from
        - **A**KQ+
        - **A**KJT+ (power lead, asking for the unblock of the Q)
    - King Lead from
        - A**K**Jx+
        - **K**QJ+
        - **K**QT+
    - Queen Lead from
        - A**Q**J+
        - A**Q**T+
        - K**Q**T9+ (power lead, asking for the unblock of the J)
        - **Q**JT+
    - Jack Lead from
        - A**J**T+ (top of interior sequence)
        - K**J**T+ (top of interior sequence)
        - **J**T9+
        - **J**T8+
    - Ten Lead From
        - A**T**9+ (top of interior sequence)
        - K**T**9+ (top of interior sequence)
        - Q**T**9+ (top of interior sequence)
        - **T**98+

"Top of Nothing" Leads

Another option for partner's lead (instead of 4th best) is that it is a "Top of Nothing" lead. This is an example of an attitude-oriented lead (low from interest/honor; high from no interest/no honor). Sometimes partner will not want to waste their highest card and in that case, they will lead their 2nd best card (making it appear like a top of nothing lead).

Examples
T**8**73 – Lead the 8.
9863 – Lead the 9.
In either case (top of nothing or 2nd best from a bad holding) we can usually work out that partner has led from no honors by using the Rule of 11 and seeing that partner's lead cannot have been 4th best.

Note: Sometimes we may have confusion when partner leads top of nothing. It can appear as if they are leading top of a doubleton. It is up to 3rd seat to try to work out the possible holdings to determine what partner could be leading from, which is sometimes a challenge, and figure out the position based on other factors/information from the hand.

Interior Sequence

When partner leads a high spot (or even some honors), another option for what that lead can be (instead of top of nothing) is that it is from an interior sequence.

A**J**T+ (NT only)
K**J**T+
A**Q**J+ (NT only)
K**T**9+
A**T**9+ (NT only)
Q**T**9+

Coded 10s/9s and Jack Denies

Non-standard Optional Agreement

Some players lead the T or 9 from their interior sequences, even if it is not the top of that interior sequence. Therefore, when they lead a Jack, it denies holding any higher honor in the suit.

QT**9**
KT**9**
AT**9**
KJ**T**
AJ**T**
JT+

If this is your treatment/agreement, then make sure to make use of the inferences available to you when visualizing the opening lead. In this case, the T or 9 lead shows either zero cards higher (top of nothing) or two cards higher (including specifically the card right above it).

Conclusion

Interpreting partner's opening lead can be difficult. There are some useful rules like the Rule of 11, but the most important thing is to consider the possible types of leads partner may have chosen from: 4th Best, Top of Nothing, Interior Sequence, Coded Ts/9s (Jack Denies), etc. If you can figure out the type of lead that partner is making, you will be in a good position to figure out the right card to play to trick 1 and beyond.