

LEADS AGAINST NOTRUMP CONTRACTS

Honor Leads

Honor leads against notrump contracts include not only information about neighboring honors (e.g., the king lead shows the queen too), but also may request unblocking, inquire as to “attitude” (“Do you like this lead?”), or ask for count. A lead that warns against unblocking is sometimes useful, as when leading from KQx or QJx.

This “defense handbook” assumes standard attitude signals (high encouraging, low discouraging) and standard count signals (high shows an even number, low an odd number). It also assumes fourth-best leads from length.

The popular “Journalist” leads use the ace to ask for unblocking of a face card held, without which partner shows count. The king lead merely shows a suit headed by AK or KQ, usually accompanied by the jack. In most situations partner shows attitude, not count, but may unblock by playing a high honor. When the leader wants partner to play the jack or ace if he has it, giving count otherwise, he leads the queen from a holding such as KQ109. Except for that holding, the queen lead shows QJ, usually accompanied by the 10 or at least the 9. The jack shows a sequence headed by the jack, with no higher card. The 10 lead shows an interior sequence (e.g., KJ10, A109) and denies a suit headed by only the 109, with which the 9 is led. The ace lead is rather rare, and there is no lead that discourages unblocking.

Other lead systems, such as the puerile “Ace asks for attitude, king asks for count” also have no way to discourage unblocking. Marvin leads have this ability and also tend to distribute the information responsibilities more equally among the honor cards

Marvin Leads

In a nutshell, Marvin leads the ace to ask for attitude, the king to demand unblocking, and the queen to warn against unblocking. The jack is led from J109 and sometimes from QJ9..; the 10 from A109, K109, Q109, AJ10, QJ10, AQJ10, and KJ10 (10 promises strength); 9 from 109.. (9 denies strength); top of any doubleton except 109; and top of three small (but not the 9).

From a non-sequence we lead the standard fourth-best (or third-best from three to an honor). Exception: when declarer is known not to have four cards in the suit (as when denying a major in response to Stayman), the sixth-best card may occasionally be led from six or more. Partner should be able to figure out whether your lead is fourth-best or sixth-best, but declarer won’t be able to. From four or five small cards, the leader must judge whether to lead fourth-best or a high card, as either may turn out to be better. Fifth-best from a good suit is sometimes led as a deceptive move, but this also takes judgment. Remember that the “Rule of Eleven” doesn’t work for a non-standard lead.

-- The lead of the ace:

This lead generally asks for “attitude,” high card to encourage, low to discourage. The leader is usually looking for the queen, such as when leading from AKJx. Sometimes the ace lead is from a short suit (e.g., AKx). Or the leader might have AKxx, when he judges it best to lead high from that suit. Against a gambling 3NT contract, when tricks must be grabbed and fourth-best is seldom advisable, the lead could

even be from AQx or Axx. Other than against a gambling 3NT contract, the ace should not be led from a five-card suit such as AKJxx (lead the king) or AKxxx (lead fourth-best)

Leading the ace from AQJ.. may be in order when the leader has outside strength and partner is unlikely to have an entry (e.g., he has passed your opening bid). The position could be one of these:

	1) K3
	2) 63
AQJ32	1) 97
	2) 107
	1) 10654
	2) K954

In either case a fourth-best lead would work well, but might give declarer an undeserved double stopper. In case 1) the ace lead lets West pick off the king with a small card, establishing the suit. In case 2) it would certainly be counterproductive for East to unblock or give count with the 10. Playing the normal 7, the suit is blocked but can still be established with one loser if West has enough entries. If South has bid the suit, perhaps in response to Stayman, fourth-best is the best choice if the suit is led at all. With no outside entry, fourth-best is also advisable, gaining when partner has the 10 or king, singleton or doubleton, but losing if dummy or declarer has the 10 and declarer the king and two others.

Another possible ace lead is from AQ109.. when partner is unlikely to have an entry. Then you can see what lies in dummy, perhaps Jx or Kx. There is no need to guess the situation on the opening lead, which you are doing if you lead the queen or the 10. Yet another possibility is the ace from AQJ10.., when partner is unlikely to have an entry. Singleton kings do happen.

In these situations, partner plays the king if he has it. The leader must have a good AQ suit, as the ace is not led from weaker holdings (unless declarer has opened a Gambling 3NT, of course).

-- The lead of the king

This lead shows a sequence or broken sequence headed by the king (KQJ.., KQ10..), or a strong suit headed by the ace and king (e.g., AKJ10, AKJ93, AKQ104). It asks for an unblock of any high honor (i.e., not the 10) held, otherwise asking for standard count (not attitude).

With only three or four cards (e.g., KQ2, KQ102, KQJ2), an unblock by partner after a lead of the king could be very damaging. Such holdings therefore call for the lead of the queen. See below.

-- The lead of the queen:

The queen lead warns that unblocking may be unwise. It is led from short KQ or QJ suits. Another possibility is queen from a four-card or longer suit headed by KQ, usually with the 9 but sometimes from length without the 9, in preference to fourth-best. The leader may not relish the possibility of giving up an

early trick by leading fourth-best. After leading the queen from KQ(x) or QJ(x), continuing with the other honor tells partner that the lead is from a short suit.

With no side entry the 10 is usually led from AQ109.., but if the dummy has shown a strong hand, the queen is led. The king may lie in dummy and the jack in declarer's hand, whereupon the lead of the queen prevents declarer from taking two tricks in the suit and establishes the probability of running the rest of the suit if partner can gain entry. As discussed above, the ace may be led from this holding when partner is unlikely to have an entry. The queen may also be led from AQJ.., if dummy has shown a strong hand and is more likely than declarer to have the king.

The bidding is likely to tell partner that these leads are not from a short KQ or QJ suit, and a strong dummy should suggest what you are doing..

-- The lead of the jack:

The jack is usually the top of a sequence, with nothing higher. The jack may also be led from QJ9.., asking partner to play the 10 if he has it. When partner cannot see the 10, he will think the lead is from a jack-high sequence, but the bidding may give a clue. For instance, a weak-two bidder won't have a jack-high suit, so it's safe to play the ace and fire the suit back.

-- The lead of the 10:

The 10 lead shows strength: an interior sequence headed by the jack or 10, or a QJ10 sequence. It can also be the right lead from AQJ10:

KJ10.. AJ10.. AQ109.. AK109..
K109.. A109.. Q109.. QJ10..AQJ10..

-- The lead of the 9:

The 9 lead shows a suit headed by 109 with no higher honor.

-- The lead of the 8:

The 8 may be led from a holding such as 987, when the lead of the 9 would be misleading. The 8 is also led from J98.. or A98.., but with K98.. or Q98.. lead fourth-best. The reason for this is given in chapter 1-4, Later Leads Against Notrump Contracts. What should one do with AJ98 or KJ98? If dummy's hand rates to be stronger than declarer's hand, or dummy has bid the suit, the jack can be led to trap a possible queen in dummy. That will look like a lead from QJ9 if partner can see the 10, but that's okay. With five cards, a fifth-best lead is unlikely to do harm. With four, it is not a great lead into a strong declarer hand. Finally, you can lead the 8 and hope for the best.

-- The lead of the 7:

The 7 lead is either fourth-best or the top of a suit, although it might be second-best from a worthless suit headed by the 9 (e.g., 97432, 9754, 975), because the lead of the 9 implies 109. Besides, leading the 9 from 97x can cost a trick (e.g., dummy has J10 doubleton, declarer A8x).

Leading from Weakness

When leading from a suit that has no honors, generally lead the "top of nothing," although fourth-best from four or more small cards is not incorrect. If you lead the top card (or second-best, as mentioned above), partner may assume you have only three cards in the suit and switch to something else, possibly the wrong defense.

This is an occasion for real judgment, and there are no simple guidelines. Well, maybe one: Against weak bidding, especially when there seems to be no dangerous long suit to be run, lead fourth-best and work patiently to establish a winner in the suit. Against strong bidding, especially if the opposition has shown a long suit, or when a switch by partner would be welcome (e.g., holding AQ10 in another suit) lead the top or second-best card (e.g., 7 from 9732) so that partner will not futilely return your lead when a switch would work better. With five or six cards, leading the top card (or second-best) is less desirable, but works out well on occasion. However, an apparently entryless hand with a six-card suit may indeed have an entry if partner has three and the remainder are 2-2.

Leading Partner's Suit

Lead top of a two-card or better sequence (but king from AKx), top of a doubleton, otherwise low from any three, fourth-best from four or more. It is usually best to lead low from three small because partner may need to know you have three cards in the suit. If you have raised, however, generally lead highest from three small. Another occasion for leading high from three small is when you would welcome a switch (e.g., holding AQ10 in another suit), but be aware that partner will play you for two cards at most.

When Partner Has Doubled

If partner doubles a notrump contract, the general rules are these:

-- If only he has bid a suit, he wants his suit led. Exception: When partner has opened the bidding in a suit other than clubs, hasn't bid again, and then doubles a notrump game, he wants the next-lower unbid suit:

South	West	North	East
1♠	Pass	Pass	3♦
Pass	3NT	Pass	Pass
			Dbl

South wants a heart lead, not a spade: ♠Q10632 ♥KQJ87 ♦A ♣42 With the majors reversed, he would just pass. A spade lead would then be probable, and defeating 3NT undoubled a good enough result. The double may run East-West out of notrump into a makeable 4♦, but at least they won't score an undeserved game. This unusual double is Alertable. When the suit opened is clubs, the double asks for a club lead because it is unlikely that a 1♣ opener will have a long strong suit outside. Besides, opponents are often contemptuous as to the club strength in a hand that has opened 1♣.

-- If only the leader has bid a suit, the doubler asks for the lead of that suit. No doubt he has one or more honors in the suit and wants to make sure partner doesn't try another lead.

-- If both partners have bid a suit, judgment is required. If the leader's long suit is accompanied by side entries, partner's double is probably asking for the lead of that suit:

South	West	North	East
1♣	Pass	1♠	1NT
2♣	3NT	Dbl	

It is most unlikely that North wants a spade lead. He no doubt has a high club honor and wants a club lead. Otherwise South might lead a spade when his clubs are something like AJ9765 (with North holding Kx and East Q10x!).

-- If neither partner has bid a suit, the doubler is usually prepared for the lead of dummy's first bid suit. If you lack a good suit of your own, try leading dummy's suit, which the doubler is supposed to have covered. He may not be *that* well fixed, so if you have some constructive lead of your own, give it a try. If dummy has rebid a suit, it is unlikely to be a good lead. Declarer will no doubt have to go after that suit to make his contract, especially if he has shown no long suit of his own. While partner probably has the dummy's suit well stopped, the best point of attack may lie elsewhere.

-- If dummy has not bid a suit and declarer has bid a minor suit, the double asks for the lead of declarer's suit, not a rarity if his opening bid was artificial or "could be short."

-- If dummy has not bid a suit and declarer has not bid a minor suit, the doubler has a good solid or semi-solid suit that he wants led. Usually that will be the leader's shortest unbid suit. With two short suits, one of which includes a high honor, lead the weaker suit. If in doubt prefer a major to a minor, as the opponents may have a hidden minor in their assets, but rarely a hidden major.

Leading Dummy's Suit

Whether or not partner has doubled the notrump contract, the opening leader may judge that the lead of a suit bid by dummy is the only logical choice. With people bidding very weak suits these days, including two- and three-card minors, the usually unwise lead of an opposing suit may sometimes turn out well.

Such leads often do not follow standard rules for leads. The important consideration in leading dummy's suit is to prevent some singleton or doubleton intermediate card in declarer's hand from playing a role. The way to accomplish this is to lead an honor when possible. Examples:

J from AJ8, KJ8 or better
 10 from A107, Q107, K107, or better

For instance, the suit could be distributed like this:

	J542	
Q1083		K76
	A9	

Leading the 3 gives South two tricks; leading the 10 holds South to one trick in the suit. Of course it is much easier to make such plays later in the hand, when one of the opposing hands is visible. In the above diagram

if West judges to lead the suit after North's hand has been exposed, the 10 is the correct card to lead. This is also true if South is dummy.

This sort of lead is sometimes appropriate for an unbid suit, when dummy is known to be very strong and declarer very weak, e.g., dummy has raised a 1NT response to 3NT. You don't want some 9xx in declarer's hand spoiling the defense, as in this deal:

	AJ5 (dummy)	
Q1083		K76
	965	

Playing against Larry Weiss, the author led the 10 of spades in this situation, holding declarer to 10 tricks instead of 11. The bidding was 1♦=1NT=3NT

Leading Declarer's Suit

If declarer has shown four cards in a suit it may affect third hand's play, but lead conventions are the same. However, from AQJxx, KQJxx, QJ10xx, and the like, a fourth-best lead should be considered.

In a Nutshell

The **ace** asks for attitude, usually second highest (Foster Echo)

The **king** asks for unblocking of the jack or higher card, else asks for standard count

The **queen** cautions that unblocking might be unwise

The **jack** shows the top of a sequence or broken sequence, but is possibly from QJ9..

The **10** is from an interior sequence (KJ10, A109, Q109, AQJ10) or QJ10 (promises strength)

The **9** shows a suit headed by 109 (denies strength)

The **8** may be fourth-best, or "top of nothing," or second-best from 98..., or from J98 or A98.