

Non-Standard Leads Against Notrump Contracts

(Friday mini-lesson – 4 October 2019)

Today we are going to discuss non-standard leads against Notrump contracts. But first a quick look at standard leads.

Standard Leads

What is the text-book standard lead against a Notrump contract? Fourth best from one's longest and strongest suit.

Why is this generally a good lead? What are you trying to accomplish when you lead fourth best? Say you hold:

♠ K 9 4 ♥ A Q 8 5 3 ♦ 4 2 ♣ 6 5 3

The auction goes 1NT on your right, you pass, and then 3NT on your left, ending the auction.

The opponents aren't showing any suits. They certainly don't appear to have a major suit fit. Your sensible and standard lead on this hand is the 5♥ (fourth best). You hope that it is a good day and that partner (with the few points she does have) holds the K♥ and at least one other ♥ which can be led back. If the suit breaks 3-3, you can take the first 5 tricks to defeat the 3NT contract.

But assume for the moment that your partner has very little in the ♥ suit and declarer wins the trick cheaply with the 9♥, say. The real value of the fourth best lead is that partner now knows you have strength in ♥s with at least 4 of them and possibly 5, and that if partner gets the lead in another suit, they can then lead back ♥s to potentially defeat the contract.

The plan is this: Because declarer has the strongest hand at the table, when partner eventually returns a ♥ back to you, you'll have the opportunity to capture some of declarer's valuable cards in the suit. Standard leads help partner know not only what your longest suit is, but also the likely best opportunity the defence has to beat the contract.

Caution: Don't lead fourth best if you have a *sequence of honours* in your long suit – lead the top of a 3-card honour sequence or near sequence, e.g. KQJ53, KQT72, QJT7, etc.

Imagine your horror if you led the 5♥ from KQJ53 and declarer has something like T94 in dummy and A6 in their hand and now gets two tricks (two stoppers) in the suit! I've seen similar things happen with inexperienced players on lead.

What if you have nothing?

Let's say you hold a very weak hand, such as this:

♠ 8 7 ♥ T 8 5 ♦ 9 6 5 4 2 ♣ 7 4 3

and again the auction is 1NT on your right, 3NT on your left, swish.

What do you lead?

Following blindly the rule of fourth best from your longest and strongest, you might consider leading the 4♦. Do you *really* think you are going to take a trick in ♦s? Do you *really* want partner to lead back ♦s when they gain the lead? Even if partner has something in the suit and your side manages to set up a ♦ winner or two, you have no entries to use them!

Let's look at this differently. How many HCP do the opponents have? They have at least 25 and maybe as much as 30. That means partner has 10 to 15 HCP. Does partner have any long suits? It doesn't appear that the opponents have an eight-card major-suit fit, because they didn't use Stayman. Because you have a two-card ♠ suit, it is very possible partner has 4 to 6 cards in ♠s. Hence your lead should be the 8♠. It may work well or it may not affect the outcome, but I can promise you that it would be extremely unusual if a ♦ lead produced a better result!

Partner may ask you later, "How did you know to lead my best suit, spades, partner? That was great!" And you'll just smile. *When you cannot take a trick, try to figure out where you might help partner take tricks.*

What if you know that partner has nothing?

Say you hold this 15-count hand:

♠ A Q 6 4 ♥ K J 7 5 ♦ K J ♣ 9 5 2

And, as above, the auction is 1NT on your right, 3NT on your left, swish.

What is your lead?

Again, you know the opponents have 25 HCP, and so you also know that partner has zero points. If you lead fourth-best, is partner ever getting on lead to make use of that information? No, not a chance.

In fact, any lead you make from a strong suit *helps declarer*. Therefore, make a safe lead and lead from weakness: Lead a ♣.

Force declarer to lead to you and every time you win a trick, lead back a ♣. Remember that declarer is entitled to quite a few tricks. Your goal is to donate as few extra tricks as possible, not necessarily to defeat the contract. Although, on this hand you might just defeat the contract – all declarer's finesses are failing!

When you know that partner cannot win a trick, do not lead fourth best. Do not lead from strength at all.