

DEFENCE AGAINST NO TRUMPS

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CLASS

TOPICS

Opening Leads vs. NT & Special Leads vs NT; Exceptions to 3rd Hand Play; Rule of 11 to Guide Third Hand Play; Defensive Signalling (Equal Honour Signal; Showing Attitude; Giving Count; the Suit Preference Return Signal); Defensive Strategy.

PART I: OPENING LEADS VS NO TRUMP

- **Sequence leads** are better than 4th best leads. A four card suit headed by a sequence is better than leading 4th best from a suit with only one honour.
*At mother's knee, we learned to always lead the fourth of our longest and strongest suit. Note that this does **NOT** apply when you do have a sequence. Leading the top of a sequence always takes precedence.*
- Honour leads show sequences, high middle cards tend to be top of nothing, low cards tend to be fourth best from your longest (4 cards or more) AND strongest (at least 1 honour card) when leading against NT. Note that, you don't want to underlead A J x x vs *suit contracts* but this is a fine lead against N.T.
Do not lead fourth best when you only have small cards, even if you have a long suit. e.g. with 97542 lead the 9. If you lead the 4, then partner has a right to expect you to show up with an honour later. (*If you have 108642, lead the 8. This way you are not squandering the 10 and partner knows that you have small cards only in this suit.*)
- The lead of a **9** always shows the highest card in that suit -- **top of nothing**. Partner does not have to lead back this suit when you have led the 9.
- **With no clues from the bidding**, you will be leading your longest suit. But remember - an ear to the bidding is very helpful ! Expect that most of your tricks will come from your *low cards in suits you are able to establish*.
- We tend to lead the unbid suit, but it is okay to lead the opponents' suit IF you have a solid sequence in that suit. Note that when you lead a sequence, even if you never get a trick in that suit (e.g. J1097) at least you will never be giving away a trick to the declarer or helping declarer in any way i.e. you will not be giving declarer a free finesse.
- Against a contract of 3 NT (or a no-trump partial), lead the **longest and strongest suit held by the partnership**. Save your high cards in other suits as entries to recapture the lead, until you can establish your low cards in the long suit.
- Which is the longest suit? Some guidelines:
 - *If partner has bid a suit, usually lead that suit;*
 - *However, you may lead your own suit if:*

- . the suit is long & solid **AND** you have enough entries to defeat the hand without help from partner.
 - . you have a singleton in partner's suit **AND** a strong suit of your own.
 - . you have bid your own suit **AND** partner has raised your suit.
 - If you are unsure whether your own suit or partner's is the longest and strongest in the combined hands, lead partner's. This way, you can never be prosecuted!
 - If neither of you have bid, lead your own strongest and longest suit.
- Sometimes a lead from your longest suit is **not** recommended, unless you have bid it and partner has raised it: e.g.
 - your long suit is weak and you lack enough entries to establish the suit;
 - your long suit was bid by dummy or declarer **AND** your suit is not headed by a solid sequence

*N.B.: if your suit **is** headed by a solid sequence -- like K Q J 10 x or Q J 10 9 x --, your suit is stronger than their suit; ignore the fact that the enemy have bid it!*

 - your longest suit is only 4 cards long and headed by a single honour or a high tenace (**A J X X**, **K J X X**). In this case, if you have a lot of HCP, suggesting that partner has very little, this situation tends to suggest a passive lead (see below).

Under these circumstances, make a **passive lead**, avoiding any suit bid by declarer or dummy. This may mean leading a high spot card from three worthless cards or a doubleton with no honours in it.

e.g. you have AJ62 K73 AQ6 953

The bidding has gone 1NT on your right and 3 NT on your left. It is your turn to lead. You have 14 HCP. Opponents have 26 HCP between them. Partner is marked with nothing. (Remember: There are only 40 H.C.P. in the deck!) It is best not to help declarer by leading one of your strong suits. Lead the 9 Clubs. This is an example of a passive lead.

In terms of suits to try, if your long suit is out of the question, prefer an unbid major over an unbid minor -- failure to bid a major suggests that the opponents don't have it and partner does!

- By definition, a sequence must be headed by **touching** honour cards. **A 9 8 7 6** or **K 9 8 7 6** are not sequences, interior or otherwise: lead fourth best if you decide to lead from these holdings. Remember that **9 8 7 6 2** is merely a long suit: lead the top of nothing if you lead it ! *i.e. when you lead a small card, you promise to own an honour card (bottom of something).*

- When making a 4th best lead from a 5 card or longer suit, tell partner as soon as possible that it is a 5 card or longer suit by playing your original 5th best card.
- When partner leads a 2 against No Trump, you must assume that she has a 4 card suit only. It cannot be a 5 card suit or partner would have led a higher card than the 2.

(A) Some Special Leads vs No-Trump:

- Leading the A of a suit:
 - Holding a very strong suit, such as **A K J 10 x x** or **A K J 10 x**, lead the **A**. This is a command to your partner to play their honour card - hopefully, the **Q**! **This is called "unblocking". Leading an A is an unusual lead against No-Trump contracts.** If partner doesn't have an honour card, they should **give you the count** of their holding in that suit - i.e. start a high-low with an even # of cards, play low with an odd number.

EXAMPLE

You lead the **A** from **A K Q 10 2**. Partner plays the **9**. There are two small cards in this suit in dummy. This tells you ?????

[Answer: Partner is denying the J and is playing high-low to signify an even number of cards, likely a doubleton. Now shift to another suit; wait for partner to get in to lead the suit back to you.]

Note: this would now differ if there are three cards in the dummy. Once partner has shown you a likely doubleton (by their signal of the 9), you know how the suit is breaking: 3 in the dummy, two in partner's hand and three in declarer's! Your suit will run, even though partner doesn't have the J -- CARRY ON !! Keep leading the suit.

- Leading the top of an "Interior" Sequence
 - An interior sequence is a sequence headed by a higher card *not* in sequence:
A J 10 9 X or **K J 10 9 X** or **A Q J 9 X** Or **A Q J 5 2**
 - The lead from such a holding is wrong against a suit contract but can be a good lead against NT. **Lead the top of the sequenced part** - in other words, the card underlined in the holdings above.

PART II: EXCEPTIONS TO THIRD HAND PLAY VS. NO-TRUMP

- Partner leads fourth best and you hold the **A Q X**. Dummy has two or three low cards. You should play the **Q** to prevent declarer holding up his stopper (i.e. the **K**).

EXAMPLE

Partner leads the ♥ 6. Dummy hits with ♥ 10 3. You hold the ♥ A Q 4.

What are the possible combinations for declarer? [*Declarer holds either the K or the J - but not both, if partner's lead is fourth best!*]

And what should you play ?

[Answer: the Q, which should prevent declarer holding up the K]

- If third hand has a doubleton **A** or doubleton **K**, he usually plays his honour on top of partner's honour lead. This is called **unblocking** and is done to help partner set up his long suit.

EXAMPLE

(1) **Partner leads ♥ K against 3 NT. Dummy has ♥ 7 5 3. You hold the ♥ A 2.**

If you do not play the A ♥, you will win the 2nd trick in the suit but will not be able to return the suit. Very sad, especially if partner has no other entries!

The correct play is A and return the small card. N.B. the lead of the K vs. NT shows a sequence like K Q J X X or K Q 10 X X.

(2) **Partner leads the Q vs. 3 NT. You hold the K 2.**

Play your K! If declarer has the A and holds up, you now have a small card to lead to partner, who can continue the attack on the suit. *If you play low*, partner can continue the suit, you will win the K but will have no more cards in the suit to try and knock out declarer's A.

PART III: THE RULE OF 11

(A) Rule of 11

- Discovered by R.F. Foster in 1889, this rule is an arithmetic gadget to interpret the opening lead (both in suit and no-trump contracts) and can be used by **both** third hand players and declarer. The rule states that

*Whenever the card led is the leader's **fourth best** in a suit, subtract the number of the card from 11. The result will be the **total number** of cards, higher than the card led, held by the remaining three players at the table.*

- The **Rule of 11** is **less useful when partner leads the 2 or the 3**, because there are too many higher cards missing for you to draw any helpful inference as to precisely which cards partner has. But don't discount its use -- do the math and apply it each time so that you are prepared to benefit from the occasions when it does provide useful insights.
- If, after all your calculations, you make the right play and declarer wins the trick with a card that the **Rule of 11** says they can't possibly have, don't panic! This doesn't mean that the Rule has failed, or that you can't do simple arithmetic, all it means is that the lead wasn't fourth best! Likely, it was top of nothing.
- Rule of 11 can be used by defenders AND by declarer to help figure out who has what card. The Rule holds true anytime the lead is 4th best. It can, therefore, also be applied to leads made against suit contracts, provided the lead is 4th best!
- Examples of the Rule of 11 and how the Rule works are given on the following pages.

WHY DOES THE RULE OF 11 WORK ?

[Karpin, Winning Play in Contract Bridge, Pg.143-144]

Assign the proper numerals to the unnumbered cards, according to their rank:

Jack is No. 11
Queen is No. 12
King is No. 13
Ace is No. 14

Hence, each suit, if all the cards were thus numbered, would be designated as follows

2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10. 11 - 12 - 13 - 14

Assume that the leader opens the 6, his fourth highest card of a suit. There are obviously 8 cards outstanding higher than the 6. Since the 6 is, by definition, his fourth highest card in the suit, the leader himself must automatically hold 3 of the 8 higher cards. That leaves exactly 5 outstanding higher cards in the hands of the other three players at the table.

There are in circulation in each suit:

12 cards higher than the 2.
11 cards higher than the 3.
10 cards higher than the 4
9 cards higher than the 5.
8 cards higher than the 6.
7 cards higher than the 7.
6 cards higher than the 8.
5 cards higher than the 9.
4 cards higher than the 10.
3 cards higher than the 11 (Jack).
2 cards higher than the 12 (Queen).
1 card higher than the 13 (King).
0 cards higher than the 14 (Ace).

When opener leads his fourth highest in a suit, quite obviously he therefore has exactly 3 cards higher than the one he has led.

Hence:

If opener leads the 2, there are 9 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 3, there are 8 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 4, there are 7 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 5, there are 6 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 6, there are 5 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 7, there are 4 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 8, there are 3 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 9, there are 2 higher cards in the other three hands.

If opener leads the 10, there is 1 higher card in the other three hands.

*If opener leads the 11 (Jack), there are 0 higher cards in the other three hands.**

And if opener leads the 12, 13. or 14 (Queen, King, and Ace respectively), the lead cannot be the fourth highest, and the Rule of Eleven is inoperative.

Thus, if you subtract the denomination of the card led from the "magic number" 11, the figure you obtain must always equal the number of cards (higher than the one led) that are in circulation in the three other hands.

* ***The reader will note that the italicized figures on each line always total 11.***

PART IV: DEFENSIVE SIGNALS VS NO-TRUMP

(A) The Equal Honour Signal

- You are West. You lead the **Q** ♠ from ♠ **Q J 10 9**. Dummy hits with ♠ **7 6 3**. Declarer wins the first trick with the **A**. Who has the **K**? To answer this question, you must look at the card that partner plays to the trick, i.e. you need to watch partner's attitude when you as a defender lead a high card.

EXAMPLE

- Let's take the same lead as above, same dummy, only now you are East.*
What do you play from:

- (a) ♠ K 8 2 (b) ♠ K 8 5 4 (c) ♠ K 8
(d) ♠ 8 2 (e) ♠ 8 5 2 (f) ♠ 8 5 4 2

Answer:

- (a) and (b) you play the 8 -- the highest spot card you can afford;
- (c) you would play the **K** to unblock the suit;
- (d)(e)(f) you would play the ♠2, the lowest card, as you have no honour card with which to help partner.

- When partner leads an honour card and you play the **highest spot card you can afford**, you are telling your partner you hold an honour **equal** to the one he has led. And if you are unlucky enough to hold something like the **K 3 2** when partner leads the **Q**, play the **3** and hope that partner, noticing that the 2 is missing, may believe you are signalling.
- Remember, if partner leads the **Q** and you hold the **10**, that is an equal honour, because partner will also have the **J**. Signal with the highest spot card you can afford !

EXAMPLES

- (1) *You are West. You lead the K ♠ from ♠ K Q 10 9. Dummy has ♠ 7 6 3. Partner plays the ♠ 4 and declarer the ♠ 2. Should you continue the suit?*

[Answer: NO -- You should not continue. Trust your partner. You know that partner is playing their lowest card. Declarer has the ♠ A Jx and may be trying to lure you into continuing the suit ! { This play by declarer of holding up the A when the K is led is called the **Bath Coup**. }

- (2) *You are West. You lead the Q ♥ from ♥ Q J 9 8. Dummy has the ♥ 7 5 2. Partner plays the ♥ 3. Declarer wins the ♥ A. Who has the ♥ K and the ♥ 10 ?*

[Answer: declarer. Partner played his lowest card.] If he had either the K or the 10, he would have signalled with a high card

(B) Showing Attitude

- **PLAYING A HIGH CARD TO SHOW ATTITUDE** is also used when you have an honour that is **higher but not equal** to the one that partner has led. A common example is you hold the **A 8 2** when partner leads the **Q**. You know that partner has the **J** and you want to encourage attacking with this suit, so signal with the **highest spot card you can afford**, in this case, the **8**.
- Be careful when you hold the **A** or **K** and partner has led the **J** against a NT contract. The lead of the **J** could be from **J 10 9**, **J 10 8**, **K J 10 9**, **A J 10 9** (top of interior sequences). Because of the latter two possibilities, you are **obliged to play your high honour** when partner leads the **J**. Otherwise, declarer gets a cheap trick with the **Q**.

(C) Count Signals

- When **DECLARER** is playing a suit in a no-trump contract, the meaning of the high-low signal changes: **there is little point in using the signal to encourage partner in a suit that declarer is trying to develop for tricks**. The high-low signal is used instead to give count:
 - A High Card** shows an even number of small cards (2,4,6 etc -- just figure it's 2);*
 - A Low Card** shows an odd number of small cards (3,5,7 etc -- just figure it's 3).*
- The defender with the **weaker holding in declarer's long suit most commonly** gives count when declarer is setting up that long suit in dummy and there are no other entries to the dummy. The defender with the **A** must take it at the same time that declarer is playing *his* last card in dummy's long suit. The defender without the **A** tells his partner when to take the **A** by giving his count. [**NOTE: If there is a side entry to dummy, the count signal is not as effective, but should be used anyway.**]

EXAMPLES

(1) Dummy (North) holds ♠ 7 6 3 ♥ 7 2 ♦ K Q J 10 4 ♣ 9 4 3

You (East) hold ♠ J 10 8 ♥ Q 10 8 7 6 ♦ A 9 5 ♣ 10 9.

Declarer (South) wins the opening lead and attacks ♦.

Partner plays the ♦ 2 on the first trick.

How many ♦s does declarer have? Which ♦ will you take ?

[Answer: Declarer has two ♦s. Partner is playing a low card to show you three. You should therefore take the second ♦ and thus sever declarer's entry to the long ♦s in dummy.]

(2) Dummy (North) holds ♣ K Q J 10 9 .

You (East) hold the ♣ A 7 4.

When declarer leads the ♣ 2, partner plays the ♣ 8.

How many ♣s does declarer have ? Which ♣ will you take ?

[Answer: Partner is playing a high card showing two cards. That means declarer has 3 ♣s. WIN the third ♣. This will sever declarer's communication with dummy's clubs forever.]

(3) Dummy (North) holds ♥ A Q J 10 9 .

You (East) hold the ♥ K 8 3.

Declarer (South) leads the ♥ 5. Partner plays the ♥ 2.

How many ♥s does declarer have? Which ♥ should you take?

[Answer: South has two ♥s (partner should be showing three). SO, let declarer win the first trick, return to their hand to repeat the finesse, and surprise them with the K the second time they finesse.]

(D) **Suit Preference Returns Against NT.**

- When a player who has led a suit is about to finally establish it, he may, at the same time, suggest to his partner his entry by the size of the card he plays to clear out declarer's last stopper. If he does so **with his lowest card**, he has an entry in the **lower** of the suits in question. If he establishes his suit **by leading the highest card**, he is suggesting to partner that partner return the **higher** ranking suit.

EXAMPLE

DUMMY

♥ 9 7 6

♦ A K J 9 6

YOU

♥ K Q 5 3 2

Lead the 3♥



PARTNER

Plays the J♥ when you lead the 3♥ !

You hold the ♥ K Q 5 3 2. You lead the ♥ 3 against a NT contract.

Dummy hits with the ♥ 9 7 6. Dummy also holds the ♦ A K J 9 6.

Partner plays the ♥ J. Declarer plays the 4 of ♥, which allows partner's J of ♥ to hold the trick. Partner returns the ♥ 8, declarer plays the ♥ 10 and you win the ♥ Q. Your last play of the suit will clear (or establish) the suit. **If you had an entry in ♠s, you would clear the suit with the ♥K.**

If you had an entry in ♣s, you would lead the ♥2 to clear the suit.

Notice that in this example, as in real life, one suit is usually ruled out. In this case, dummy's ♦ holding rules out ♠s as a possible choice of suits you wish led!

PART V: STRATEGY

(A) The "Rule" of 14

- There are three sets of circumstances for the division of defensive strength. Different styles of defence - and therefore different lead tactics - apply to each:
 - *When the point strength between the partnership is fairly equally distributed, leading your best suit usually works well. Use standard leads that will help you "talk" to partner;*
 - *When you hold the majority of the defensive strength, partner's defensive strength will be limited. If you have a long suit or a solid sequence, lead it. If you don't, make a passive lead from a weak suit;*
 - *When partner holds the majority of strength, try to figure out partner's best suit and lead that suit. If there is a choice of suits, choosing the major suit is usually better.*
- **The "RULE OF 14"** simply states when you are defending a 3 NT contract, assume (for starters) that the opponents have **26 HIGH CARD POINTS** between them.
 - Subtract 26 from 40 (the total number of HCP in the deck)
 - You will find that your partnership holds 14 HCP (approximately). If you have 4 of them, partner has about 10, and so on.

Use this "rule" as a starting point to figure out what cards you need partner to hold. The total points held by the declaring side can be adjusted (upward or downward) once you see dummy. This rule of thumb is most useful when the opponents have opened 1 NT. When the opponents reach 3 NT by other routes, they may be short a few points, relying more on a running suit for 5 or 6 tricks.

Note that you should apply this same principle when defending against a trump suit contract. You should then assume that the declaring side has approximately 24 HCP (plus a couple of distribution pts but just count HCP) Add your points to that and thus calculate how many HCP your partner has. e.g. if he is expected to have approximately 4 HCP and he shows up with an Ace early on in the hand, then you know that you are on your own as partner cannot be expected to show up with any more points.

EXAMPLES

It is your turn to lead. What do you lead from each of the following hands?
The bidding has gone 1 NT - 3 NT

(1) ♠ 9 8 ♥ A Q 9 3 2 ♦ 10 8 7 ♣ J 9 7

[Answer: Lead the 3 of ♥ - this is your "normal" lead and should work here, as strength appears to be fairly evenly balanced between the two defenders' hands].

(2) ♠ A Q ♥ 7 6 3 2 ♦ K J 10 8 ♣ K J 8

[Answer: Lead the 7 of ♥. You have the preponderance of strength and partner has nothing: of the 14 HCP remaining, you have all of them. Let declarer play the suits to you.]

(3) ♠ 9 8 2 ♥ 10 9 ♦ 9 6 3 2 ♣ J 5 3 2

[Answer: Lead the 10 of ♥, particularly if the opponents have not identified a major suit. Since you have shorter ♥ than spades and the opponents have not identified a major suit fit, there is a better chance you will "find" partner's long suit to be ♥.]

(B) Other Factors to Consider When Defending NT

- Start keeping track of declarer's high card points and his tricks as play of the hand progresses. This is the key to figuring out what limited strength that partner has and how best to use it !
- When it is clear that the declarer has enough tricks outside a particular suit to make their contract, it is almost always right to attack that suit.
- Declarers who pass invitational raises (i.e. they open 1 NT and partner invites with 2 NT) usually have the lower end of the point range (i.e. 15 if they play 15-17 point NT **OR** the middle range (16) but with a 4-3-3-3 hand.
- When declarer has a long suit in dummy missing the **A or K** (e.g. KQJ102) and **doesn't** attack that suit right away, assume he has the missing honour.
- When holding both the **A** and the **K** in the suit the opponents have led, declarers worth their salt will try and make life difficult for the defenders by winning the trick with the **K**. This makes it more difficult for the defenders to figure out who has what. After all, when declarer takes a trick with the **K**, he may well have done so because it is his only chance to do so - the defence may hold the **A**. As defender, remember that declarer with the **A** would hold that **A** up if it were his only stopper. **If declarer takes the A right away, assume he has the K as well, or that he has 9 tricks to run right away !**