# **LEADING AGAINST NO-TRUMPS by Arthur Bennett**

First off, any advice here is only for making leads against their no-trump contracts. It will not apply at all to leading against suit contracts. There are two situations to consider: Leading when your partner has bid a suit and leading when your partner has not bid a suit.

Leading when partner has bid a suit.

Generally, but not always, it is best to lead that suit if partner has bid it. Partner might not win the first trick, but your lead will help him establish the suit. I say, “not always”, because after all they have decided to play in no-trumps despite your partner having bid the suit, so they must have a hold. If you have a really good alternative suit to lead, don’t be shy to do so. If for example I held AQJT6 in diamonds and my partner had bid hearts, I would lead the Jack of diamonds (some would lead the Queen). Generally though I would feel obliged to lead my partner’s suit. Which card should I lead? If all I have is small cards in his suit, I would lead the highest of those small cards. I am not showing count at all. Partner will not care how many cards I have in his suit, and I certainly don’t want to inform declarer. My highish rag is an attitude signal (high from nothing, low from something). You might have been advised to lead “top of your partner’s suit”, but that is in fact a poorly understood and dangerous piece of advice. It only really applies if all you have is rags in partner’s suit. If you have an honour card (Ace, King or Queen), it is much better to lead LOW TO SHOW. Leading a low card suggests very strongly that you hold an honour. Even with the Ace, it’s a good idea to lead low. Look at it from declarer’s point of view. Even if he suspects you have an honour, he doesn’t know which. Let’s say declarer is on your left and he holds KJx in partner’s suit. He will probably put up the Jack, taken by partner’s Queen, who returns the suit to your Ace, and you now clear the suit. If I only had the Jack, I would probably lead it. It might help promote partner’s ten. If all I have is a doubleton honour, I will also probably lead it, in case I block the suit.

Leading when partner has not bid a suit.

There are several important principles to consider here. Why have they decided to play in no-trumps? Who has the better hand, you, or your partner? What to lead and possibly more importantly, what not to lead from various combinations.

Before I go any further, let’s dispose of leading from a suit headed by a nice series of honours in sequence. Everybody easily recognizes that this is a good suit to lead. Do I really need to tell you what to lead from a suit such as AKQJT6? Well, actually, yes, I should. In terms of this particular holding, it obviously doesn’t matter whether you lead the King, the Queen, the Jack or the Ten. Normally though, each honour card would carry a different message. Let’s look at each honour in turn. These are my recommendations (there are alternative treatments).

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Description automatically generatedThe Lead of an ACE: This promises the KING as well, but no other honours. An ace backed up by the king is what we refer to as a supported ace. An ace without the king is an unsupported ace. You must NOT lead the ACE unless you also have the KING. You might think it is a cute idea to lead an unsupported ace to have a look at dummy. It is not. It is a stupid idea. Your ace was meant to take one of their honours, not to flap air. The lead of an ACE also asks for attitude. It says to partner, “Do you like this suit? Do you want me to continue with the KING and another, or should I stop leading this suit? If you want me to continue, play your lowest card to encourage, LOW TO GO. If you want me to stop, play your highest rag to discourage.

A picture containing text, queen

Description automatically generatedThe Lead of a KING promises a late-gap sequence. You have HH-H, which means you are leading from AKJ or KQT. Once again it asks for attitude. *[Some people play the King as simply asking for Count and nothing to do with a late-gap sequence. You can’t have it meaning both attitude and count, and for my money, asking for count is a waste of time.]*

The lead of a KING says to partner, “I have a late-gap sequence. If you have one of the other honours, please play your lowest card to encourage (LOW TO SHOW). If you do not have a touching honour, play your highest rag. I will stop playing the suit, but when you get in, you will know to play a card towards my tenace.” By the way, the term “tenace” has nothing to do with tens or aces. It means a holding like AQ or KJ where the two honours are like the jaws of a trap.

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Description automatically generatedThe Lead of a QUEEN says that it is the highest honour in a sequence that you have in the suit, or that you have two higher. Thus the QUEEN can be from AKQ or QJT. It is advisable not to lead the Queen from the Jack unless you also have the Ten. Lead some other suit.

A picture containing text, queen

Description automatically generatedThe Lead of the JACK also shows it is the highest honour in a sequence or that you have two higher. Thus it can be from AQJ, KQJ or JT.

Leading away from an early-gap sequence H-HH, such as AQJ or KJT is a tricky decision because you are probably conceding an unnecessary trick. Often it is correct not to lead that suit at all. With just 4 cards I would probably not lead the suit, with 5 to the AQJ I would lead my lowest card.

Sometimes you will decide to lead a particular suit, because you hope your partner will have length in that suit. You might have only a doubleton Queen or Jack or even a singleton Queen or Jack, but you lead it anyway. You are deliberately breaking your Meaning of Each Honour rule. Famously I once led a king for the same purpose against the two best players in the club. I had opened 1D (showing a weak 1NT hand) on ♠K7 ♥Q987 ♦AQT6 ♣Q73. My Left Hand opponent overcalled 1S and my Right Hand opponent bid 3NT. What would you lead? I didn’t fancy leading clubs, diamonds or hearts and figured that my K♠was probably a dead duck in the water anyway, so I led it in the hope that partner had spades. Dummy came down with AJ654 in spades; my partner had QT982; and declarer had the singleton 3. He ducked the K♠ lead, put the J♠ up on my continuation. and finished up losing 4 spade tricks. We also made a couple of diamonds and a heart. At all the other tables they made 3NT.

Generally they have decided to play in no-trumps because they have failed to find a fit in a major suit. What this means is that, with all things being equal, it is generally always better to lead a major than a minor. There is another rather foolish motto floating around, that you should lead “4th from your longest and strongest”. This advice is crass idiocy. Just because you have 5 clubs or 5 diamonds, does not mean that you should lead that suit. It is still much more important that you look for a major suit to lead. Of course, if you had a minor suit such AQJ86, you ought to lead it, but leading from Q8654 in clubs against 3NT, is the equivalent of shooting yourself in the mouth.

[You will hear people recommend leading your 4th highest from a suit of interest to give your partner the count, so that he can apply the rule of 11 to know when to go up with his ace. There are several reasons why this is a bad idea. Firstly, your partner might lack the card sense to spot your signal or the ability to count distribution, and will waste energy trying to figure it out. Secondly, Declarer might be much more interested in that information than your partner, so that he can hold up the ace to block your communication, and thirdly, that counting signal might be in conflict with my proposed attitude signal. No card can send two opposing messages.

You should only make three sorts of leads: An honour card from a sequence; a highish rag saying that this is not a suit you have any interest in; and your lowest card in the suit saying that this is a suit you are vitally interested in (LOW SHOWS).

When you are leading against their no-trump contract, you have to remember that you have a partner. It could well be that no 4+ card suit in your hand has any prospect at all of defeating declarer. Count your high card points, and try to work out from the bidding roughly how many points declarer and dummy have between them, and this will give you an estimate of what partner might hold. Let us consider the notion of an ESTABLISHABLE SUIT and a non-establishable suit. Here are two hands, each with 5 hearts: ♠A76 ♥KQJT5 ♦T75 ♣42 and ♠876 ♥KQ654 ♦T75 ♣42. The heart suit in the first hand is establishable. Even if they hold off with their Ace for three rounds, they cannot prevent you enjoying the suit, because you will get back in with the ♠A. The heart suit in the second hand is not establishable. Apart from the fact that declarer might have all or some of AJT9 in hearts, as long as he has the Ace, all he has to do, is duck twice, and that’s the end of your heart suit. So, if you are weak with no establishable suit, don’t lead your best suit, but what you hope is your partner’s best suit.

Consider this hand against a 3NT contract bid on your right: T93 AQT4 K873 83. I would lead the ten of spades every day. This is a reverse attitude lead of a highish rag (HIGH DENIGHS). It denies any interest in the spade suit, although you could serendipitously have hit a 5-card spade suit in your partner’s hand. It carries one simple message: “LOOK ELSEWHERE!”. It doesn’t specify the heart suit because it is the highest rag. You can only signal with the cards you have and if your spade suit were 743, then the lead of the 7 would carry precisely the same message. Your partner has to look at his own hand and at dummy and work out which suit you would like him to return, and you hope he guesses you have hearts.

It is ironical that so many average players would lead “4th best from their longest and strongest”, conceding a trick in the suit they have, instead of leading from the suit they don’t have, as they should. Leading a highish rag from the suit you don’t hold has all the following advantages:

* It stops us conceding a trick by leading away from a tenace.
* It gives us an alternative to making bad leads like an unsupported ace.
* There is a chance that the lead will help your partner set up his suit.
* You won’t harm partner because his honours were always under declarer.
* Sometimes declarer will assume that you have that suit and not your partner and misplay the hand accordingly.

I hope that by now, you have flushed the “4th from longest and strongest” idea down the loo. Here are a few better mottos to replace it:

* Consider each and every suit carefully before choosing a lead.
* Prefer to lead a major suit to a minor.
* Lead a suit that has prospects of establishment, either in your own hand or in partner’s.
* Never lead small from a 4-card major to just one honour.
* Do not lead away from tenaces.
* Do not lead an unsupported ace.
* Consider making a look elsewhere lead.

Let’s have a look at this sample hand again: ♠T93 ♥AQT4 ♦K873 ♣83. Declarer, playing ACOL, opened 1NT, and his partner invited with 2NT, but declarer passed. Declarer must have about 12HCP and his partner about 10. You have 9, which leaves your partner also with 9. Nobody used Stayman to enquire about majors and nobody bid a major. You have only 3 spades, but you should see that as a good thing because your partner is likely to have at least 4 spades and possibly even 5 spades. Your heart tricks aren’t going away. You decide to lead the ♠T. No lead is guaranteed of course. Partner could just as easily have the ♥K and nothing much in his spade suit. Still you expect one or two good things to happen. Firstly you might hit paydirt with the spade suit and your partner will be astonished at your perspicacious lead. Secondly and much more importantly, your partner will know by your lead of the ten, that you have nothing in the spade suit and that it is in fact a look elsewhere lead. If he gets to lead hearts twice, they are going down the gurgler.

Finally, all advice on leads deals with probabilities and percentage of success. I believe that if you follow my advice, you will come out on top more often, but that doesn’t mean that you won’t occasionally get a bottom board when the field leads small from four cards to one honour, and everything lies right for them.

Your practice hand. You are sitting over a 1NT ACOL opener and they have bid: 1NT – 2C – 2D – 3NT.

Q.1. What do you know so far?

This is your hand:

♠QT76 ♥T9 ♦Q8765 ♣94

Q. 2. How many HCP does your partner have?

Q. 3. Who has the stronger hand, you, or your partner?

Q. 4. Why would you lead the spade suit and why would you not lead the spade suit?

Q.5. If you decide to lead the spade suit, which spade would you lead and what would that card show?

Q. 6. Why would you lead the heart suit and why would you not lead the heart suit?

Q. 7. If you decide to lead the heart suit, which heart would you lead and what would that card show?

Q. 8. Why would you lead the diamond suit and why would you not lead the diamond suit?

Q.9. If you decide to lead the diamond suit, which diamond would you lead and what would that card show?

Q, 10. Why would you not lead the club suit?

Q. 11. Which suit and which card will you finally lead?

♠QT76 ♥T9 ♦Q8765 ♣94

ANSWERS

Q. 1. What do you know so far?

You know that dummy will have at least one 4-card major, and that declarer has no 4-card major. You know therefore that your partner will have 5+ hearts (dummy might have 4; declarer has 2 or 3; and you have 2). You know that partner will have 2+ spades (dummy might have 4; declarer will have 2 or 3; and you have 4).

Q. 2. How many HCP does your partner have?

We can estimate declarer to have 13 and dummy to have 12. You have 4, which leaves about 11 for your partner.

Q. 3. Who has the stronger hand, you, or your partner?

Clearly, your partner.

Q.3. Which suit will you lead and why?

Q. 4. Why would you lead the spade suit and why would you not lead the spade suit?

I might lead the spade suit in case my partner also has spades, and we can establish the suit. I might lead the spade suit to tell partner that I have length in this suit. I would lead the spade suit because it is generally wise to lead a major rather than a minor. I would not lead the spade suit because leading away from one honour might give declarer extra tricks. I would not lead the spade suit because I might make my queen if I don’t. I would not lead the spade suit because with my few points and non-establishable suits, I should probably be leading to help partner with his suits instead. I would not lead the spade suit without examining other options because there might be a better suit to lead.

Q.5. If you decide to lead the spade suit, which spade would you lead and what would that card show?

If I did lead a spade, I would lead the 6, my lowest card, to try to tell partner that this is a suit I am interested in (LOW SHOWS).

Q. 6. Why would you lead the heart suit and why would you not lead the heart suit?

I would lead the heart suit because I know my partner has the better hand and because he rates to have 5 hearts. I would lead the heart suit because it is generally wise to lead a major rather than a minor. I would not lead the heart suit because I would be forcing partner to play before declarer. I would not lead the heart suit without examining other options because there might be a better suit to lead.

Q. 7. If you decide to lead the heart suit, which heart would you lead and what would that card show?

I would lead the Ten because this card would indicate that hearts is not a suit that I personally have any interest in (HIGH DENIGHS). I would lead the Ten because this card is a LOOK ELSEWHERE LEAD and even if it doesn’t hit paydirt with partner, he will know to examine dummy and work out which suit I might want returned.

Q. 8. Why would you lead the diamond suit and why would you not lead the diamond suit?

I would lead the diamond suit because it is my longest suit, and I would hope to establish it. I would not lead the diamond suit because with my very poor hand it is probably not establishable. I would not lead the diamond suit because it might give them an extra trick to lead away from my queen. I would not lead the diamond suit because it is generally not wise to lead a minor against no-trump contracts. I would not lead the diamond suit without examining other options because there might be a better suit to lead.

Q.9. If you decide to lead the diamond suit, which diamond would you lead and what would that card show?

I would lead the 5, my lowest card, to try to tell partner that this is a suit I am interested in (LOW SHOWS). I would not lead the 6, my 4th lowest because I do not wish to help declarer with the count.

Q, 10. Why would you not lead the club suit?

Because I am not an idiot.

Q.11. Which suit and card will you lead?

After carefully considering all possible options, I shall lead the Ten of Hearts!