

This series is based on *Grant Standard*, a set of conventions and agreements that are in popular use today, such as 15-17 INT openings, five-card majors, and weak two-bids. A summary chart of *Grant Standard* and the corresponding convention card can be found at www.AudreyGrant.com. The site also has *Grant Basic*, a simpler set of agreements.

Earlier articles in this series appeared in the *Bridge Bulletin* and can also be found under 'Articles' at www.AudreyGrant.com.

As with opening leads against suit contracts (see last issue), there are two steps in choosing the lead against a notrump contract:

- Choosing the suit
- Choosing the card

Choosing the best suit to lead is the most critical aspect. Once we've decided on the suit, selecting the appropriate card is usually a matter of rote.

Let's start with the guidelines for deciding which suit to lead.

Choosing the Suit

The key to choosing the best suit to lead is to listen to the auction. The standard guidelines are:

1. Lead partner's suit
2. Otherwise, lead the longest suit, but:
 - avoid the opponents' suits, especially major suits
 - with a weak hand and weak suit, try to find partner's suit
3. With a choice of suits, lead the longer

1. Lead Partner's Suit

The basic idea when defending against a notrump contract is to take advantage of the opening lead by going after the partnership suit that has the potential for developing the

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most tricks. This is typically the longest combined suit held by the partnership. Even if declarer has one or more stoppers in the suit, once they have been driven out, the defenders can take any remaining winners in the suit once they gain the lead. There's no trump suit to help declarer.

If we've bid and raised a suit, then that is likely to be a good source of tricks. However, suppose we are on lead as West with this hand after only partner has bid for our side:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♦	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

♠ 7 6 3 Should we lead the suit
♥ Q 9 7 4 2 partner bid, diamonds,
♦ 8 3 or our long suit, hearts?
♣ 9 8 5 The guideline is clear.

It says to lead partner's suit! True, partner might have opened a three-card diamond suit, the better minor when holding no five-card major. Partner may have four hearts. True, South's 1NT overcall typically shows one or more diamond stoppers.

Nevertheless, we don't 'know' that for certain. Partner could have a six-card or longer diamond suit. Even if declarer has one or two stoppers in diamonds, partner did open the bidding and is likely to have the high cards necessary to regain the lead and take the diamond winners after they are established.

If we lead a heart, we're taking a big gamble. Partner might be short in hearts; it might remove partner's only high card in the suit; even if we can establish some tricks, we have no entry to regain the lead and take them.

So, unless we have a very good suit and some prospect of regaining the lead, it's best to lead partner's suit. Partner won't say anything if we lead a diamond, even if a heart was best, but may comment if we lead a heart when a diamond was best.

2. Lead the Longest Suit

If partner hasn't bid, we typically pick our longest suit as the one with the most potential for developing tricks. With little else to guide us, leading "fourth from longest and strongest" is one of the oldest maxims in the game...and it works remarkably well!

Still, there are exceptions. We try to avoid suits bid by the opponents, especially major suits.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1♠
Pass	2♦	Pass	2NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

♠ K J 8 5 4 Leading a spade right
♥ 6 3 into South's advertised
♦ J 6 five-card suit is unlikely
♣ Q 10 7 4 to be a success. Better
to hope South will need
to develop tricks in spades, and our holding will make that a challenge. Instead, we can choose our second-best suit, and lead a club. Maybe partner will have some help for us there.

Another exception is when we have a weak hand with a weak suit. Even if we were to establish tricks in our long suit, it's unlikely we would ever gain the lead to be able to take them. In this situation, it's usually best to try and 'find' partner's suit, and to help out by leading it.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

♠ 7 6 5 4 3 2 Even if partner holds
♥ J 10 7 the ♠A-K-Q, we'll
♦ 9 5 never get in to take
♣ 6 4 any tricks. Instead, we
can 'guess'—hope—
partner has length in hearts, and lead one to get things started.

3. Lead the Stronger

With a choice of suits to lead, we tend to pick the stronger suit. The more strength we hold in the suit, the less help we need from partner to develop tricks.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1NT

Pass 3NT All Pass

♠ 10 8 6 4 3
♥ K 10 7 5 2
♦ 8
♣ A 5

From this hand, we'd lead a heart rather than a spade. The ♥A, ♥Q, or even ♥J from partner should

help us develop tricks. In spades, the ♠A, ♠K, or ♠Q in partner's hand might not be enough to help us establish the suit.

When we have to choose among four-card suits, the decision is a little closer. We sometimes opt for safety since there is less potential for developing tricks from length.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1NT

Pass 3NT All Pass

♠ A Q 6 3
♥ Q J 10 9
♦ 6
♣ K 7 6 3

Although our strongest suit in terms of high-card points is spades, there are a number of factors that might sway

us toward leading a heart. Since we have 12 high-card points and the opponents have bid game, it's unlikely partner has much in the way of high cards.

By leading hearts, we can promote two winners in the suit without any help from partner. Leading a spade away from our ♠A-Q might cost a trick and gain nothing in return, especially if partner can never gain the lead to return our suit. As to leading a heart rather than a club, the major suit is usually preferable. The opponents didn't show any interest in the major suits on their way to 3NT—by using Stayman, for example—so they are more likely to hold length in the minor suits.

Choosing the Card

After choosing the suit, we can simply follow the time-tested guidelines for selecting the appropriate card to lead:

LEADING AGAINST A NOTRUMP CONTRACT

PARTNER'S SUIT:

- Lead the top of a doubleton (♠Q-6, ♥8-2).
- Lead the top of touching honors (♦Q-J-3, ♣K-J-10).
- With no sequence, lead low (♠Q-6-3, ♥9-5-2, ♦A-8-5-4).

LONG SUIT:

- Lead top of touching honors from a sequence:
 - A solid sequence (♣K-Q-J-7-3, ♠10-9-8-3)
 - A broken sequence (♥Q-J-9-6-5, ♦J-10-8-2)
 - An interior sequence (♣A-J-10-6-4, ♠Q-10-9-5)
- Otherwise, lead fourth highest (♥K-J-9-5-2, ♦A-10-5-3).

There are a couple of considerations.

The Lead from K-Q-10-9

Suppose we lead the ♠K from our broken sequence in this situation:

DUMMY

♠ A 5 2

Us

PARTNER

♠ K Q 10 9 3

♠ 4

DECLARER

♠ 6

The ♠2 is played from dummy, partner plays the ♠4, and declarer the ♠6. Is it safe to continue by leading the ♠Q? It's okay if this is the layout:

1) DUMMY

♠ A 5 2

Us

PARTNER

♠ K Q 10 9 3

♠ J 4

DECLARER

♠ 8 7 6

Or if this is the layout:

2) DUMMY

♠ A 5 2

Us

PARTNER

♠ K Q 10 9 3

♠ 8 7 4

DECLARER

♠ J 6

But it would not be a good idea if this is the layout:

3) DUMMY

♠ A 5 2

Us

PARTNER

♠ K Q 10 9 3

♠ 7 4

DECLARER

♠ J 8 6

If we lead another spade, declarer gets two tricks. Better to wait for partner to get in and lead the suit.

How can we resolve this problem? Some partnerships agree to lead the ♠Q from this type of holding, asking partner to play the ♠J when holding it, and otherwise give a count signal.

That works well in this situation. When partner plays the ♠4, we 'know' it is layout 2). In layout 1), partner would have played the ♠J. In layout 3), partner would have played the ♠7, showing a doubleton.

Although agreements like this can be useful, they can cause confusion, since the lead of the ♠Q could also be simply the top of a sequence, such as ♠Q-J-10-7. So they are best left to experienced partnerships.

The Lead of an Ace

A similar situation arises if we are on lead against 3NT with a holding such as ♥A-K-J-10-7. If we lead the ♥A and two or three low hearts appear in dummy, will we know what to do next? Partner will try to help us with an attitude signal, but that won't always be clear. What is partner suppose to do with ♥Q-2, for example? In fact, a count signal from partner might be helpful. If we know declarer started with a doubleton ♥Q, we can continue with the ♥K and take the first five tricks.

The classic way to deal with this situation is to have an agreement that **the lead of an ace against a notrump contract asks partner to play—unblock—an honor if holding one, and otherwise give a count signal.**

Again, this can cause confusion, especially since some partnerships prefer to use the king as the 'power' lead, asking partner to unblock.

So stick with the basic agreements and focus on choosing the best suit, unless the partnership has the time and inclination for further refinements. ♠