

Keeping Up With Conventions

Leads and Signals — by David Lindop



This series of articles looks at how to fill out the standard convention card. Previous articles can be found by visiting the *Better Bridge News* section at www.AudreyGrant.com.

We've come to the final section of the convention card. It covers opening leads and signals. Since the partnership is defending about the half the time, having firm agreements in this area is as important as all your bidding conventions.

Choosing the Card to Lead

Suppose you are defending against a notrump contract with this hand. What is your opening lead?

♠ 8 3
♥ Q 9 6 5 2
♦ A K 7
♣ 7 4 2

It's traditional to lead your long suit against notrump — "fourth from longest and strongest." That would be the ♥5. A heart lead isn't automatic, however. Always listen to the auction before choosing the suit to lead. If partner bid spades during the auction, you should probably be leading a spade; if the opponents bid hearts during the auction, you should probably be leading another suit; if the contract is 6NT, you should be taking the two diamond winners!

If the opponents are playing in a spade contract rather than notrump, a heart lead is less attractive because of the impact of the trump suit. So, you might choose to lead from your touching honors in diamonds.

Once you've chosen the suit to lead, the specific card you lead is determined by your partnership agreement. That's what goes on the convention card. Since there is a difference between defending against suit contracts and notrump contracts, the card has room for separate agreements for each:

LEADS (circle card led, if not in bold)

	versus Suits		versus Notrump
x x	x x x x	x x	x x x x
x x x	x x x x x	x x x	x x x x x
A K x	T 9 x	A K J x	A Q J x
K Q x	K J T x	A J T 9	A T 9 x
Q J x	K T 9 x	K Q J x	K Q 10 9
J T 9	Q T 9 x	Q J T x	Q T 9 x
K Q T 9		J T 9 x	T 9 x x

LENGTH LEADS:

4th Best vs SUITS vs NT
 3rd/5th Best vs SUITS vs NT
 Attitude vs NT

This section applies primarily to opening leads, but you usually use similar agreements at any point during the play. If you don't, make a note on the card.

Leads Against Suits

Against suit contracts, it is standard to lead the top of two or more cards headed by an honor. This includes *solid sequences*, such as **K-Q-J-x** (where the x in this situation stands for one or more low cards), *broken sequences*, such as **Q-J-9-x**, and *interior sequences*, such as **K-J-T-x** (the T stands for 10).

On the card, there are examples of such holdings and the standard lead is already marked in bold. Notice that there is no example of leading from a holding such as A-J-T-x against a suit contract, although there is against notrump. Against a suit contract, you rarely lead away from an ace. If you're going to lead that suit, start with the ace.

If your agreement is to lead the top of touching high cards, you don't need to mark anything for the honor leads against a suit contract ... with one notable exception. The king is indicated as the "standard" lead from a suit headed by the ace-king. There are reasons for this — sometimes the best choice of lead against a suit

contract is the ace from a holding in which you don't have the king — but many players prefer to be consistent and always lead the top of touching honors. If that's your agreement, you would circle the ace as your lead from A-K-x.

If you don't have touching high cards in the suit you are leading, the standard approach is to lead fourth highest. You would check the box beside "4th Best vs. SUITS" under LENGTH LEADS. There are also example holdings on the card of four (x x x x) or five (x x x x x) — or more — low cards, for which the fourth highest cards are in bold. So, you don't need to change anything unless you have some agreement such as leading a higher card when you don't have an honor in the suit.

The top card of a doubleton (x x) is marked as the standard lead. In fact, if you lead low from a doubleton, it is marked in red and your opponents would have to be alerted.

The only other combination that the partnership should discuss is the lead from three low cards (x x x). The lowest card is marked in bold, but some partnerships prefer to lead "top of nothing" and would circle the first x. Other partnerships prefer middle-up-down (MUD) and would circle the middle card.

Leads Against Notrump

The leads against notrump from suits containing touching honors are similar to those against suits when you have a solid sequence, such as **Q-J-T-x** or an interior sequence, such as A-**T**-9-x.

The leads indicated as "standard" from broken sequences, however, are different and might require some explanation.

The king is shown as the standard lead from A-K-J-x. This is because some partnerships have the agreement

that the lead of an ace against a notrump contract asks for partner to play the highest honor held in the suit; with no honor, partner gives a count signal. If that isn't your agreement, you can circle the ace to be consistent with always leading the top of touching honors.

The queen is in bold for a holding headed by K-Q-T-9. This is because some players have the agreement that partner should drop the jack under the queen when holding that card. The opening leader will now know for certain who holds the jack — if partner doesn't have it, it will appear in dummy or be concealed in declarer's hand — and can decide whether to continue leading the suit.

This may seem confusing because the queen is also led from holdings such as Q-J-10-x and A-Q-J-x. In practice, however, partner is usually able to figure out which combination the opening leader holds.

If your partnership doesn't have this agreement, simply circle the king to be consistent with top of touching honors from a sequence.

As with the leads against suits, you can check the box beside "4th Best vs NT" for when you don't have a sequence. Notice, however, that the top card is indicated as the standard lead from three low cards (x x x) or four low cards (x x x x). If that isn't your agreement, circle the appropriate card.

When finished, this section of the card will look something like this:

LEADS (circle card led, if not in bold)	
versus Suits	versus Notrump
x x x x x x	x x x x x (x)
x x x x x x x x	x x x x x x x x
(A)K x T 9 x	(A)K J x A Q J x
K Q x K J T x	A J T 9 A T 9 x
Q J x K T 9 x	K Q J x (K)Q 10 9
J T 9 Q T 9 x	Q J T x Q T 9 x
K Q T 9	J T 9 x T 9 x x

LENGTH LEADS:

4th Best	vs SUITS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3rd/5th Best	vs SUITS <input type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>
	Attitude vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>	

Defensive Signals

The signals your partnership uses to show such things as whether you like the suit partner has led are indicated on this section of the card:

DEFENSIVE CARDING		
	vs SUITS	vs NT
Standard:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Except <input type="checkbox"/>		
Upside-Down:		
count	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
attitude	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FIRST DISCARD		
Lavinthal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Odd/Even	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
OTHER CARDING		
Smith Echo	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trump Suit Pref.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Foster Echo	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

As a defender, you often don't have a choice of which card to play. For example, if partner leads a low card and a low card is played from dummy, you will typically have to play your highest card — third hand high — to try to win the trick for your side; or you might have to cover an honor with an honor.

When you have a choice of cards to play — if partner's card is winning the trick or you are discarding, for example — you can give a defensive signal to indicate something about your strength or distribution.

The most common signal is *attitude*. The standard approach is to play as high a card as you can afford if you like a suit and your lowest card if you don't like a suit.

If an attitude signal doesn't apply — perhaps declarer is promoting winners in dummy's suit where it is clear you have no interest — then a *count* signal is sometimes useful. In standard methods, a high card followed by a low card (high-low) shows an even number of cards in the suit; a low card followed by a higher card shows an odd number.

If neither attitude nor count are applicable — perhaps partner leads an ace against a suit contract and there is a singleton in the dummy — then you can give a *suit preference* signal. A high card says you prefer the higher-ranking of the two "obvious" suits; a low card says you prefer the lower-ranking suit.

Of course, knowing what the "obvious" suits are — or, indeed, whether the situation calls for an attitude, count, or suit preference signal — is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, if you use standard signals you would check off the appropriate boxes:

DEFENSIVE CARDING		
	vs SUITS	vs NT
Standard:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

That's it unless you use some other approach such as upside-down signals — where a high card says you don't like the suit and a low card says you do — or Lavinthal discards.

However, you can also indicate which type of signal you use most frequently when partner leads and you have a choice of cards to play. Most players prefer to give an attitude signal, although some partnerships feel that a count signal is most important ... that doesn't require any judgment. Players rarely agree to use suit preference as the primary signal on a suit led by partner.

Primary signal to partner's leads		
Attitude	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Count <input type="checkbox"/>
Suit preference	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Conclusion

That's it for this series. It is only intended as an overview; detailed discussions of specific conventions are left for other articles.

The most important advice on filling out the convention card is to **keep it simple**. It is far better to have a straightforward agreement that both partners understand than to use complex methods that leave one or both partners feeling uncomfortable during the bidding or defense.