Partner reveals the opening lead...........

It could already be the crucial moment of the whole hand so you should TAKE YOUR TIME!

Declarer will be studying the dummy and making his/her plan and you must do the same; even if Declarer brusquely calls for a card immediately, don’t be rushed in your thoughts for the card Partner chose to lead means something – he/she had thirteen to pick from and selected this one. Why?

Presumably you have a system of leads, what’s called fourth and seconds is good enough for most people and is certainly better than nearest your thumb. It means P will lead a small card (fourth highest) from an honour (A,K,Q) and a biggish card (second highest) from a holding without an honour. Both of these should reveal something about P’s twelve other cards and working out what he/she has (roughly) and what he/she is trying to instigate for the defence will set the plan to defeat the contract.

Did either of you enter the auction? If you did, you note that P has or hasn’t led the suit that one or both of you showed. Hmm... why or why not? There exists a truism that states two reasons why P doesn’t lead your suit: either he/she has none or else possesses the Ace. Actually cynics say there is a third possibility – P doesn’t want to play with you any more.

Many pairs have an agreement that an overcall will show a good enough suit to stand the lead of the King from P. So if you’re Jack high maybe you should forbear to call, or else make a weak jump overcall warning P that quality is probably lacking. Just imagine this layout: stiff Ace in dummy, Qx in Declarer’s hand. Whoops, shouldn’t have led the King!

More often the auction would not have been contested so not only P’s card but the suit itself will convey something: interest (4th) or disinterest (2nd). If you decide P has led his/her fourth highest card you can calculate what Declarer has in that suit by applying the Rule of Eleven and base how you play on your knowledge of the hand. Third hand high is normal here, you’re helping to promote P’s promised honour(s). It’s frequently the case that the lead is in the unbid suit so unless P is showing an honour card you may decide to play low rather than sacrifice your one good card in a losing cause. You may too be making Declarer guess wrongly the location of the card you haven’t played.

More interesting and just as revealing is the passive lead , second highest and preferably from length; Partner leads the eight, you have the Jack and the ten is in dummy. Who has the nine? This lead is sometimes an attempt to find your goodies but it is also called for when P has dangerous holdings in the other suits e.g. Kxx, Ax etc.

There are certain tricks associated with opening leads. Say P leads a King, what do you know? He she/definitely has the Ace or Queen and should have the Jack too – leading high from KQx(x) often proves costly and should be avoided. What’s your play? Well a common leading convention is that the King requires you to show your count in the suit (high = even, low = odd) while the Ace requires you to show your attitude to this suit (high = you like it, low you don’t). This often helps you learn whether P can get a ruff. You can tell P if you like his/her passive lead or not by the size of the card you play to trick two. A high card says carry on, I like this suit while a low one says try something else. This is called a Smith Peter.

You should have an agreement on the meaning of your double of the final contract. If one of you has bid, does X mean “lead this suit” or “don’t lead it”. Most will say don’t, suggesting a poor holding but a source of tricks elsewhere. After an uncontested auction double from you requests the lead of dummy’s first bid suit; you may hold AQJx or KQJ9 or suchlike.

One final device: strong tens. Playing this you lead a ten only if you have length (4+) and at least one higher card (A,K,Q) not counting the Jack. So a Jack high suit counts as a bad suit, you’ll lead second highest unless you also have the ten. Actually with J10x(x) you have every chance of a trick here provided you don’t lead it at all.

A partner who consistently finds good leads is a treasure. It doesn’t matter if he/she can’t bid for toffee and butchers every hand he/she plays; you’re defending most of the time anyway so P’s gift is invaluable. Say you have the luck to play with this genius it’s imperative that you keep your own end up. Analyse what is the point of P’s card in view of what you know; you’ve heard the bidding, you have an idea of the strength of P’s hand and you can see dummy – if you make the effort you are probably half way to visualising the whole layout. Don’t blow the chance by a careless or unintelligent card at trick one. The opening lead is a huge advantage for the defence, make the most of it.

Most people show attitude (like/dislike) when P leads an honour card and then count for ever after. This helps fill in the details of who’s got what and most declarers won’t take any notice of your signals. Sometimes though a different kind of message needs to be sent. P perhaps unwisely leads the Ace of something and you’re horrified to see QJ109 in dummy. Now a continuation will set up Declarer’s tricks so a switch is called for. Count and attitude go out of the window and you must show suit preference, i.e. letting P know where your tricks are and demanding that suit. How? A high card suggests the lead of the highest outside suit and a low one suggests the lowest. Something in between may be neutral, P has to guess but at least he/she knows not to carry on.

Does it make a difference if you’re defending a suit contract or NT? In a suit you aim to win enough tricks to defeat the contract by cashing your high cards, setting up ruffs or curtailing Declarer’s ruffing opportunities by leading trumps. It’s all a bit urgent, you need to get on with things, but in NT you can often afford to take a longer view; maybe you’ll duck a trick to set up two or you’ll attack entries to dummy where a threat exists.

Trick one is where you go right or wrong – at least you should make an effort to do the right thing.