

Opening leader's next play

What is revealed by the first trick

You have made your opening lead, dummy has been revealed, and you have seen what cards have been played to the first trick. Now is the time to try to draw inferences from the information available to date:

You are defending against NT.

The spade suit is like this:

♠ 6 2

(Dummy)

♠ J 8 5 4 3

(You)

You (West) lead ♠4, partner plays ♠10 and declarer wins with ♠K. What is the spade situation?

Clue: remember that it is the duty of third player (i.e. partner, East) to play high in this situation.

We can work out that East's highest spade is ♠10, as if he held ♠A or ♠Q he would have played it. Therefore declarer must hold ♠A K Q.

Also, if partner held ♠9 as well as ♠10 he would have played it - you play the lower of touching cards. So South also holds ♠9.

If the bidding has revealed that South has at most four spades (perhaps he opened 1NT, which denies a 5-card major suit) then we know that he holds precisely ♠AKQ9 (and East holds ♠10 7). This places 9 of South's points, and if he did, in fact open 1NT you are a long way towards knowing exactly where his high cards are. It is surprising how much information has been uncovered by the play to this one trick!

Incidentally, it is futile to continue leading spades, and a switch is indicated if you regain the lead.

You are defending against NT.

The spade suit is like this:

♠ 6 2

(Dummy)

♠ K 9 4 3

(You)

You (West) lead ♠3, partner plays ♠J and declarer wins with ♠A. Opening lead is ♠3. Who has ♠10? Who has ♠Q?

Partner has ♠Q, as declarer would have won the trick with ♠Q if he had it. Declarer has ♠10 - partner would have played it if he held ♠J 10

You are defending against NT.

The spade suit is like this:

♠ A 6 2

(Dummy)

♠ K 8 5 4 3

(You)

You (West) lead ♠4, dummy plays small, partner plays ♠J and declarer wins with ♠Q. Who has ♠10?

South holds ♠Q10(x)(x) and another spade lead by West will cost a trick.

When to duck the second round of a suit

♠ A 5 2		
♥ T 5		
♦ A J T 9 8 6		
♣ Q 4	North	South
♠ 6 4 3		1♣
♥ K 9 7 6 4	1♦	1NT
♦ 7 5	3NT	
♣ 9 5 2		

You lead ♥6. Partner plays ♥A to trick one, declarer playing ♥2, and East returns ♥8, declarer playing ♥Q. Should you win this trick?

If partner had held ♥J (giving him an original suit of ♥AJ8) he would have returned ♥J, not ♥8. So do not be fooled by declarer's play of ♥Q, he also has ♥J. He probably started with ♥QJ2 (he did not bid 1♥ over 1♦ so he probably does not hold four hearts). Therefore partner started with ♥A83.

You have no entry, so you must duck the second round of hearts, i.e. play a low card, allowing declarer's ♥Q to win.

Now, if partner gains the lead later in the hand (perhaps after declarer takes a losing finesse in diamonds) he will be able to play his third heart. You will then make ♥K and two more winners in the suit to beat the contract (four tricks in hearts plus partner's winner in diamonds).

When ducking the second round of hearts, play ♥4. Partner will be able to read that you led from a five-card suit.

Now suppose that, after winning trick one with ♥A, partner had led back ♥3, declarer still playing ♥Q to this second trick.

That ♥3 is partner's lowest heart. That means that he either started with only two (so that he had no choice of what card to return) or he held four cards in the suit - i.e. ♥AJ83. How does this affect your play?

You should win trick two with ♥K and play a third round of the suit. If partner started with only two hearts there is nothing that you can do. However, if he had four, then declarer only held ♥Q2, and you are able to win the first five tricks in hearts to beat the contract. This shows why the choice of card for East to return is so important.

Remember: East leads back his higher remaining card if he started with three, but his original fourth highest from a longer suit (four or more).

♠ A 5 2		
♥ Q T		
♦ A J T 9 8 6		
♣ 6 4	North	South
♠ 6 4 3		1NT
♥ K 9 7 6 4	3NT	
♦ 7 5		
♣ 9 5 2		

You lead ♥6. Dummy plays ♥T. Partner plays ♥A to trick one, declarer playing ♥2, and East returns ♥8, declarer playing ♥3. Should you win this trick or allow dummy to win ♥Q?

The position has not really changed, although it is dummy, rather than declarer, who holds ♥Q. The key point is that you know that partner still does not hold ♥J. With ♥Q in dummy, partner would have played ♥J at trick one had he held ♥AJ8. So you can read the heart suit as being distributed like this:

♥ Q 10	
♥ K 9 7 6 4	♥ A 8
♥ J 5 3 2	

or

♥ Q 10

♥ K 9 7 6 4

♥ A 8 5

♥ J 3 2

There is no hope of more than two heart tricks in this first case, as you have no possible entry to your hand should you win the second trick and knock out declarer's remaining heart stopper. So hope that partner holds three hearts and can gain the lead later on; duck the second trick.

♠ A 5 2		
♥ Q		
♦ A Q J T 6 2		
♣ 6 4 3	North	South
♠ 6 4 3		1NT
♥ K T 8 6 4		3NT
♦ 7 5		
♣ 9 5 2		

You lead ♥6. Dummy plays ♥Q. Partner plays ♥A to trick one, declarer playing ♥2, and East returns ♥7, declarer playing ♥9. You win this trick with ♥T, South discarding a low card from dummy. How do you defend this hand? Do you continue with ♥K?

East, for his return of ♥7, can only have three cards in the suit. This gives declarer something like ♥J952. Cashing ♥K will not beat the contract, as South's ♥J5 still gives him a stopper.

You must hope that partner can gain the lead and play a third round of hearts through declarer's ♥Jx to your ♥K8x. You will then be able to take three further heart tricks to beat the contract.

Probably it is best to switch to a spade, hoping that partner has an entry.

In order to defend well, it is important to notice the cards that partner plays, and vital that you can trust them.

When to switch to another suit

♠ K 2		
♥ T 5		
♦ A K Q 9 8 6 3		
♣ A 4	North	South
♠ Q J 3	2♣	2♦
♥ A 9 7 6 4	3♦	3NT
♦ 7 5		
♣ 9 5 2		

You lead ♥6. Partner plays ♥K to trick one, declarer playing ♥2, and East returns ♥8, declarer playing ♥J. Should you win this trick?

Who has ♥Q? Do you duck the second trick or do you win?

If you let declarer win this trick, he will surely cash eight further tricks in dummy - seven diamonds and ace of clubs for his contract. To defeat this contract, we need to cash five tricks at once.

Declarer holds ♥Q, as partner played ♥K at trick one. The only chance is to switch to a spade, hoping that partner holds a suit headed by the ace and ten. Play ♠Q.

The full hand:

♠ K 2	
♥ T 5	
♦ A K Q 9 8 6 3	
♣ A 4	
♠ Q J 3	♠ A T 8 6 5
♥ A 9 7 6 4	♥ K 8 3
♦ 7 5	♦ J 2
♣ 9 5 2	♣ T 7 3
♠ 9 7 4	
♥ Q J 2	
♦ T 4	
♣ K Q J 8 6	

If you duck the second trick, or win but then fail to switch to ♠Q, declarer easily makes his game.

Showing partner where your entry lies

♠ K 5 3				
♥ T 7 2				
♦ A Q T 9 8 6				
♣ 6	West	North	East	South
♠ A 6				1♣
♥ K J 9 6 4 3	1♥	2♦	pass	3NT
♦ 5	all pass			
♣ 9 5 4 2				

You lead ♥6. Dummy plays ♥2. Partner plays ♥Q to trick one, declarer playing ♥8, and East returns ♥5, declarer playing ♥A. What do you play to this trick?

You cannot win this trick, and with only one heart outstanding (dummy's ♥10) is does not matter which heart you play to trick two. So which heart should it be?

In order to beat this contract, partner will almost certainly need to have a trick in diamonds. When he wins this trick, you need him to play a spade so that you may gain the lead and cash those heart winners.

Play ♥K under declarer's ♥A! It cannot cost a trick, and it should make partner sit up and take notice. It is the highest card, calling for him to lead the higher suit (spades rather than clubs, diamonds being out of the question) when he gains the lead. If your black suits were reversed you would play ♥3 to ask him to lead a club.

When you can play any card in the suit without giving away a trick, give a suit preference signal.

Make your signals as clear and obvious as you possibly can. Give partner a slap, not a tickle!