

OPENING LEADS

More contracts are defeated or conceded by the opening lead than at any other point in the defence. It is not possible to find the killing lead on every hand but in order to make an effective choice on the majority of hands, a strategic approach is required. The first step in this process is to debunk all those ‘rules’ that you were taught when you first started to learn the game. Maxims such as “Always lead your partner’s suit or lose the post-mortem” or “Never underlead an unsupported Ace” are useful for sheep, but I’ve yet to meet one who could play Bridge well. In particular, it is often wrong to lead your partner’s suit against a game contract (especially 3NT!) because the opponents have given a clear indication by their game call that they do not fear the suit.

On balance, the maxim that you should lead from length and strength does hold good, particularly against no-trump contracts. For example, holding ♠A Q X X; ♥X X; ♦A X X X; ♣X X X, you should not hesitate to lead a small spade against 3NT. Partner may well hold the King or the Jack or may well have another entry and be able to return the suit later. If you do not lead from strength, partner often has to make a difficult guess.

Example 1

N	E	S	W
			1♥
P	2♦	P	3♣
P	3♠	P	3NT
All pass.			

North led the ♥9!

		♠	J 9
	E	♥	A 4 3
		♦	K 10 9 5 3 2
		♣	A 9
	S		
♠			8 7 4 3
♥			K 6 2
♦			Q 8
♣			J 7 5 4

When declarer ran the lead to his hand, South also ducked. Declarer ran the ♥Q, which South won with the ♥King, thus blocking the suit. He switched to the ♠8, won by North with the ♠Q. North then switched to a ♣! Declarer won with the ♣A, cashed the ♥A and proceeded to finesse South's ♣J, overtaking the ♣9 with the ♣10. When this held, declarer exited with the ♠K to North's ♠A. Sure enough, North returned a low ♠ and declarer was able to claim the remainder, since he was void in ♦s!

♠	A Q 6 5				
♥	9 5				
♦	A J 7 6 4				
♣	8 2				
♠	K 10 2	N		♠	J 9
♥	Q J 10 8 7	W	E	♥	A 4 3
♦	-----	S		♦	K 10 9 5 3 2
♣	K Q 10 6 3			♣	A 9
	♠	8 7 4 3			
	♥	K 6 2			
	♦	Q 8			
	♣	J 7 5 4			

This was certainly one of the worst defences I have ever seen, since North had three chances to take this daft contract well and truly off. If she had underled the ♠s or ♦s - or cashed the ♠A when in with the ♠Q and exited with a ♠ - or led any ♦ when in with the ♠A, since the declarer had endplayed the dummy.

Why did declarer take the additional risk of exiting with the ♠K after winning the ♣10? He recognised that 4♥ was the sensible contract that was unbeatable on any lead and therefore simply making a miraculous 3NT would still not be enough to gain a decent score. Having been highly entertained by the defence to that point, he decided that he might as well look a gift horse in the mouth and try to make ten tricks for a top. Sure enough, the gift horse had gold fillings!

Afterwards, South asked North why she had led into both of declarer's bid suits and she explained that she did not want to give anything away in the ♠s. Controlling himself with some difficulty, South forbore to point out that her reluctance to concede a trick had conceded the contract. This defence was not difficult.

Often a particular lead is indicated by information gleaned during the course of the auction.

Example 2

		S		
	♠	J 9 7		
	♥	A		
	♦	10 9 6 5 3		
	♣	10 9 8 2		
	N	E	S	W
		1♠	P	2♣
	P	3♣	P	3♠
	P	4♠	All pass.	

The choice of a ♣ lead should be automatic, since partner is marked with a shortage in the suit. Which ♣? The ♣9, giving declarer as little indication of the ♣ position as possible, while also giving your partner a hint of your entry via a suit-preference signal.

♠	10 6 3	
♥	Q J 9 4	W
♦	Q 8	
♣	A J 4 3	
		S
♠	J 9 7	
♥	A	
♦	10 9 6 5 3	
♣	10 9 8 2	

Fortunately partner is experienced enough to pause for consideration when declarer quickly goes up with the ♣A, which gives you a few seconds to consider your defence. Clearly if declarer has ♠A K Q to five or more, he will have no problems in trumps, but what if he leads small to the ♠Q at trick two? How can you protect partner if she holds ♠K X? The only chance is to (smoothly) drop the ♠J under the ♠Q. If partner does hold ♠K X and the ♦A, declarer will not be able to afford to lay down the ♠A without risking conceding two potential trump tricks (i.e. placing North with ♠K 9 7 X).

This line of reasoning holds good if partner holds a trick in either ♥s or ♦s. If declarer does hold ♠A K Q X X then the play of the ♠J under the ♠Q may well cause him to reconsider anyway, since he may well need to ruff out a losing ♦ before drawing any more trumps.

Sure enough, partner follows to the first round of ♣s and declarer does indeed play a small trump to the ♠Q. When you smoothly drop your ♠J, declarer has a long pause for thought and then attempts to sneak an entry to the dummy via a small ♥ to the ♥Q. Your play of the ♥A is forced and you exit with the ♣10, ruffed by partner with the ♠K! You ruff partner's return of a low ♥ and switch to a high ♦, won by partner's ♦A. She returns another ♥ for you to ruff and you return a second round of ♦s, conceding the remainder when declarer shows up with the ♦K.

The travelling score-sheet revealed that every other East/West pair had bid and made 4♠ precisely (i.e. losing two Aces and a trump). 4♠ minus two was a clear top. Although this defence was spectacularly successful it carried an element of risk, since declarer would have gained an outright top if he had laid down the ♠A when the ♠Q stood up. Finding the killing defence is often a question of risking an outright bottom against playing safe for an average score.

♠	K 4				
♥	10 8 7 5 3 2				
♦	A J 7 2				
♣	5				
♠	10 6 3	N		♠	A Q 8 5 2
♥	Q J 9 4	W	E	♥	K 6
♦	Q 8			♦	K 4
♣	A J 4 3			♣	K Q 7 6
	♠	J 9 7			
	♥	A			
	♦	10 9 6 5 3			
	♣	10 9 8 2			

Declarer's play when the ♠Q dropped the ♠J was distinctly suspect. If North holds ♠K 9 7 4, then declarer always has a trump to lose no matter how he plays the suit. Therefore he should exit with a trump to the ♠10 at trick three. This play still gives the defence a good chance to beat the contract, provided that North switches to a ♥ when in with the ♠K. South will win the ♥A, cross to partner's ♦A with the ♦10 and ruff a second round of ♥s to set the contract by one trick.

Before you select the opening lead, it pays to consider what you know about the strength and shape of your partner's hand – even when he has passed throughout the auction.

Example 3

	S			
	♠	K 8		
	♥	J 9 3		
	♦	J 8 3		
	♣	10 8 6 5 3		
	N	E	S	W
				P
	P	1♥	P	2♦
	P	2NT	P	3NT
	All pass.			

Sensibly, some players treat a 2NT rebid over a 2-level response as forcing, showing 15-18 HCP balanced, so it is worthwhile to check the strength of the 2NT bid before making your lead. On this occasion it is non-forcing, showing a balanced 15-16 HCP.

Since West declined to open the bidding but was happy to raise 2NT to game he is marked with 10-11 HCP and partner has somewhere between 8-10 HCP. Since West did not offer an alternative game by inviting with 3♥, he is marked with a maximum of two ♥s. Since he also did not show a four-card ♠ suit by inviting with 3♠, he has three ♠s at most. This marks him with at least a five-card ♦ suit, since with 4-4 in the minors he would have responded with 2♣ rather than 2♦. With five ♦s and four ♣s he was more likely to have responded with 3♣ over 2NT, thereby warning his partner of the shortage in the unbid major. Thus he is likely to have 3-2-5-3, 3-1-6-3, 3-2-6-2 or 2-2-6-3 shape. Although it is possible that he has a seven-card ♦ suit, it is not that likely since otherwise a 6♦ slam may well be a viable proposition.

East is unlikely to have a 4-4-1-4 shape, since the modern (but not universal) practice is to open with 1♣ rather than 1♥. Therefore he has at least two ♦s. If he has a five-card ♥ suit he is unlikely to have a second four-card suit, since he would be more inclined to reverse into the second suit rather than risk a no-trump contract with a doubleton in an unbid suit. Thus his shape is likely to be 3-4-3-3, 4-4-2-3, 3-4-2-4 or 3-5-2-3.

If this analysis of the likely shape of the East/West hands is correct *then North holds at least four ♠s*. If East has only a four-card ♥ suit then

North also holds four (or more) ♥s. This raises the distinct possibility that he will come under severe discard pressures when the declarer runs the long ♦ suit. Given that partner has the bulk of the strength in defence it is important to help him as much as you can with the opening lead. Therefore you must avoid leading ♣s, since partner has (at most) three ♣s and may need to discard all of them on the long ♦ suit so that he can guard both of the majors. This only leaves the ♠ suit as the sensible alternative, trying to help partner as best as you can by establishing his suit while maintaining the entries to his hand. Give partner ♠Q J X X X and an outside Ace and you have some prospects to defeat the contract, provided you lead the ♠K at trick one. Bingo!

	♠	A Q 7 5 4 2	
	♥	10 7 4 2	
	♦	9	
	♣	Q J	
♠	10 3	N	♠
♥	A 8	W	J 9 6
♦	K 10 7 6 5 4	E	♥
♣	K 9 4	S	K Q 6 5
			♦
			A Q 2
			♣
			A 7 5
	♠	K 8	
	♥	J 9 3	
	♦	J 8 3	
	♣	10 8 6 5 3	

What would you lead after this auction?

Example 4

	S		
	♠	Q 10 7 6	
	♥	8	
	♦	J 9 8 4 2	
	♣	10 9 4	
N	E	S	W
		P	3♦
P	4♦	P	4NT
P	5♣	P	6♥
All pass.			

The 5♣ response to 4NT was Roman Key-card Blackwood, thereby promising 3 of the 5 controls. Clearly there was a strong possibility that partner was void in ♦s, so a ♦ lead might well give him an immediate ruff. However, if ♦s were not led, declarer was likely to have to take a first-round finesse of the ♦J to bring the suit in for no losers. If declarer could get the suit wrong, he would, since he is extremely unlikely to play for a 5-0 break *unless you lead the suit*.

The second consideration is partner's holding. Assuming that he is void in ♦s, it is likely that he has at least ten cards in the black suits. If he has an honour in both suits he may well be subjected to a squeeze after a ♦ lead, since he will have to find three discards on the ♦s and anywhere between three and five more discards on the trumps, depending on the length of declarer's trump holding.

If the declarer has both the ♠A and ♠K between himself and the dummy, you are unlikely to be able to beat the contract anyway, since either declarer or dummy or both hold no more than a doubleton ♠. So you decide to play your partner for the ♠K and lead a ♠. The only question remaining is which one? Assuming a total of four ♠s between dummy and declarer, the only possible problematic distribution is a singleton ♠A in declarer's hand and ♠J X X in the dummy. You do not want partner to play his ♠K if dummy does not play the ♠J, since you yourself may then be subjected to a ♠/♦ squeeze on the play of the ♥s and ♣s. Therefore the best lead is the ♠10, trusting partner to play low if the dummy holds the ♠J and does not cover. If declarer wins in hand with the ♠A, partner cannot get your ♠ holding wrong and can safely discard all but one of his low ♠s (including the ♠K, if necessary) thereby protecting any holding in his ♣ suit.

	♠	K 8 5 3 2			
	♥	9 5 4			
	♦	-----			
	♣	K 8 6 5 3			
♠	J 4	N		♠	A 9
♥	Q J 7	W	E	♥	A K 10 6 3 2
♦	A K 7 5	S		♦	Q 10 6 3
♣	A J 7 2			♣	Q
		♠			Q 10 7 6
		♥			8
		♦			J 9 8 4 2
		♣			10 9 4

After the lead of the ♠10, declarer has no play for the contract, even if he attempts the squeeze by running his ♥s. South can discard three ♣s, one ♠ and one ♦, while North can discard two ♠s and one ♣.

In the event, declarer covered the ♠10 with the ♠J and won the ♠K with the ♠A. He then drew three rounds of trumps and played a small ♦ to the ♦A. When North showed out on the first round he groaned and returned to hand with the ♦Q. He then ran the ♣Q, but this lost to North's ♣K. North had no difficulty in exiting with a ♠ to South's ♠Q, thus setting the contract by one trick.

Against slam contracts, it is wise to consider the prospects of a squeeze being attempted against either you or your partner. If it is a strong possibility then you must attempt to break it up with your choice of lead, because you will not be likely to get a second chance. With a holding like your ♦s and an implied position in the suit, do not be in too much of a hurry to have partner ruff your winner. Now try the slam after a lead other than a ♠...

- A trump lead makes life very simple. After drawing trumps and winning the ♦A, discovering the 5-0 break, declarer can simply play a small ♣ to the ♣Q, setting up his ♣AJ for a ♠ and ♦ discard.
- A ♣ lead is equally simple, assuming declarer lets it run round to the ♣Q.
- The defence does have chances after North ruffs an opening ♦ lead, providing he returns a ♠. However, if declarer runs the ♥s North must be careful not to shorten his ♣ length to less than that of the dummy. Otherwise declarer can set up the long ♣s for a ♠ discard. North must be prepared to discard his ♠K in order to take the contract off. This is a far more difficult defence than if South had led the ♠10 at trick one.

A trump lead is rarely a good idea, unless you have reason to believe that dummy might be short in declarer's second suit. Far too many players will lead a trump against a slam because they cannot think of anything better to do! On the following auction leading a trump has a good chance of success...

Example 5

		S		
	♠	K 7 6 2		
	♥	A 10 9 8		
	♦	8 4 3		
	♣	J 10		
	N	E	S	W
		1♠	P	2♦
	P	3♥	P	3♠
	P	4♠	All pass.	

It must certainly be correct to lead a trump since your ♠K is adequately guarded. Dummy has shown a marked reluctance to support his partner in this auction. He was not even prepared to bid game over East's reverse, despite having responded initially at the 2-level, thereby guaranteeing values. The likelihood must be that he is short in both of East's suits, with a slight preference for ♠s rather than ♥s. If dummy comes down with two ♠s and a singleton ♥, a trump lead will gain a ♥ trick, provided a second round of trumps is led when in with the ♥A. Even if the dummy has three ♠s (unlikely, because he would have been more willing to raise directly to game) a trump lead could well be correct. After all, Partner could hold the singleton ♠Q! Then you will be able to draw two more rounds of trumps when you get in with the ♥A, thus setting up a second ♥ trick for the defence.

	♠	5 3			
	♥	5 4 3			
	♦	K J 2			
	♣	A 9 8 7 4			
♠	9 8	N		♠	A Q J 10 4
♥	6	W	E	♥	K Q J 7 2
♦	A Q 10 7 6 5		S	♦	9
♣	K 5 3 2			♣	Q 6
	♠	K 7 6 2			
	♥	A 10 9 8			
	♦	8 4 3			
	♣	J 10			

Provided a trump is led, declarer has no play for his contract. On any other lead he can, since he has the time to set up a ♥ ruff to make four ♠ tricks, three ♥ tricks and a ♥ ruff, one ♦ trick and one ♣ trick. Even if South did not have such a strong holding in the ♥ suit he should still lead a trump, playing his partner for something in ♥s.

There are also occasions when it is correct to lead a trump, even though there is a strong possibility that the lead will cost you a trump trick.

Example 6

		S		
	♠	J 8 4 3		
	♥	K Q 7		
	♦	K J 4		
	♣	Q 9 3		
N		E	S	W
		1♠	P	2♠
	All pass.			

After this auction, the temptation is to lead your ♥K to establish your ♥Q, but this would be an error. If East had passed the auction around to you, you would have opened with a weak no-trump. On such hands your aim should be to reduce the hand to a no-trump contract as soon as you can. Therefore you should lead a trump, even though this runs the clear risk of conceding a possible trump trick. There is a much greater danger that declarer will be able to ruff losers in one or both hands and thereby gain extra trump tricks.

Even granted that your lead of a trump is likely to cost you a trick, the same is true for any other suit that you elect to lead. The benefit, however, is that you will be drawing two trumps for the price of one, which is likely to prove far more costly to the declarer than it is to the defence. Your plan is to continue trumps every time you gain the lead – unless something more pressing is revealed when the dummy goes down, of course. The hand is a classic example of the difference between an active or passive defence.

	♠ 10		
	♥ 10 6 3 2		
	♦ A 10 6 2		
	♣ A 7 4 2		
♠ Q 9 7 2	N	♠ A K 6 5	
♥ J 9 4	W	♥ A 8 5	E
♦ Q 8 7 3	S	♦ 9 5	
♣ K 5		♣ J 10 8 6	
	♠ J 8 4 3		
	♥ K Q 7		
	♦ K J 4		
	♣ Q 9 3		

Since East/West were playing a strong no-trump, East decided that his hand merited a 1♠ opening in preference to 1♣, hoping to make it more difficult for North/South to find a red suit fit. The contract depended entirely on the number of losers declarer could ruff, since he had only five tricks on top (four ♠s and a ♥). After winning the trump lead in hand, declarer could set up a ♣ trick and a ♣ ruff by leading out the ♣J at trick two and running it if South ducked. This would leave him searching for one more trick. If South covered the ♣J, declarer's problems were over. Since the ♣9 of clubs would come down in three rounds, declarer could set up the ♣8 for his eighth trick.

In the event declarer made the error of testing the trump suit by cashing the ♠A at trick two, thereby losing control of the trumps. There was now no play for the contract, since a ♣ ruff would concede a later trump trick to South. After cashing the ♠A, declarer made a belated switch to ♣s (South now covered the ♣J) and North found the correct ♥ switch. Declarer ducked this to South, who simply exited with a third round of ♠s. Declarer returned to hand with the ♣10 and switched to a ♦ in a last desperate attempt to set up a ♦ ruff in his hand. Without hesitation South rose with the ♦K and exited with his last trump. All the declarer could do now was win his ♥A and go two down. Since East/West were vulnerable this was not a good result for them.

A lot of players will choose to lead out an Ace in order 'to have a look at dummy'. If the truth be told, they make this lead more because they are afraid that the trick will disappear than that they have any great interest in the dummy's holding. When the Ace is unsupported this often turns out to be an expensive peek, as in the following hand.

Example 7

S
 ♠ Q 10 4 3
 ♥ A 7 5 2
 ♦ 10 9 6 5
 ♣ 7

N	E	S	W
			1♠
P	4NT	P	5♥*
P	6♣	All pass.	

*Responding to key-card Blackwood, showing two controls *with ♠s as trumps*.

Without a great deal of thought, South led out his ♥A. At a stroke this killed any hope the defence had. South should have taken the time to consider the auction. East has bid a slam in a suit in which his partner could be void, despite knowing that they were missing the ♥A. Therefore the fact that they were missing this could not be a threat to the contract, assuming that East had not stupidly overbid the hand. The sensible lead must be the ♦10, which was far less likely to have given anything away.

	♠ J 2		
	♥ Q 10 6 4 3		
	♦ K J 2		
	♣ 9 8 2		
♠ A K 8 7 5	N	♠ 9 6	
♥ K J 9 8	W	♥ -----	
♦ Q 7 3	E	♦ A 8 4	
♣ 6	S	♣ A K Q J 10 5 4 3	
	♠ Q 10 4 3		
	♥ A 7 5 2		
	♦ 10 9 6 5		
	♣ 7		

signal to indicate which suit to continue. If South did not cash his winners immediately you could well earn an outright “bottom”, since declarer could cash his long ♣ suit, discarding major suit losers from his hand, before cashing the ♦ A K for a minimum of nine tricks. Even if partner had absolutely nothing it was still necessary to cash four tricks. There would be at least one defender who had underled one of his major suit holdings!

	♠		9 4 3
	♥		10 9 8 6 3
	♦		J 9 4
	♣		6 3
♠	7 6	N	♠
♥	5 2	W	E
♦	K 7	S	♠
♣	A K Q 9 8 4 2		Q J 10 5
			♥
			Q J
			♦
			A Q 10 2
			♣
			J 10 5
		♠	A K 8 2
		♥	A K 7 4
		♦	8 6 5 3
		♣	7

The hand actually arose in a Teams match and was a source of considerable amusement – to the winners, at least! The auction was the same at both tables, until the South player at the first table decided to double the final contract. He was confident that at least one of his major suits would provide three tricks. Unfortunately he chose to underlead his ♥A K! Ooops! Declarer took the ♥8 with his ♥Q and naturally ran seven rounds of ♣s, discarding the ♠5, ♠J and ♠Q, followed by the ♥J. He then cashed four rounds of ♦s and South, burdened with doom as soon as he saw the dummy, had failed to follow his partner’s discards and decided that declarer had retained a ♥ rather than a ♠. When he threw the ♠A, declarer was able to produce the ♠10 for his fourth overtrick and a score of 1550 to the good guys.

In the other room the player sitting South had less confidence that his hand was worth five tricks and so elected not to double the final contract. On the other hand, he led out the ♠A. When his partner played the 3, he switched to the ♥A. This received a distinctly more encouraging ♥10 from his partner. South then cashed the ♥K, followed by the ♠K. He then exited with a ♥ to partner’s ♥8 and the defence

wrapped up the first seven tricks for a score of plus 300, also to the good guys. Perhaps he should have doubled, after all!

The easiest opening leads are those that stem from being made aware of a critical piece of information from the auction that the declarer is not privy too.

Example 9

	S			
	♠	10		
	♥	J 9 6 5 2		
	♦	10 8 6 2		
	♣	A 5 3		
N				
	E	S	W	
	1♠	P	2♣	
3♦	X*	P	3♠	
P	4NT	P	5♦	
P	6♠	All pass.		

*Promising a four-card ♥ suit and extra values.

Many players sitting South would automatically lead out the ♦10 or ♦8, confident that they would not be subject to criticism in the post-mortem. But a review of the auction should make it clear that a ♦ lead is very unlikely to succeed. East has shown a strong two-suited hand in the majors, but not a hand strong enough to open with a game-forcing 2♣ or an eight playing tricks in ♠s. North has shown a pre-emptive hand with (non-vulnerable) at least a six-card ♦ suit. West has shown enough to respond at the 2-level over his partner's opening bid, but subsequently shown a marked lack of enthusiasm. He was not prepared to show whole-hearted support for his partner's ♠s, despite the fact that his partner effectively 'reversed' when he doubled 3♦. In spite of this, East has confidently pushed on to bid the slam. Why?

There can only be one answer. He thinks that his partner holds the ♣A, whereas you know for certain that West must hold the ♦A. In addition you know that East is (a) short in ♦s, holding either a void or a singleton and (b) *must hold a weak ♣ suit*, since he was not prepared to open with a strong two bid but was prepared to bid on to the slam after his partner showed something in the ♣ suit. East's hand is most likely to

be 6-4-0-3 or 5-4-1-3 shape, with no more than seven playing tricks. West's hand is minimum in high-card strength for his 2♣ response (9-10 HCP) with ♦A X or ♦A X X and no more than a three-card ♥ suit (since he bid 3♠ rather than 4♥). North must hold at least six ♦s and at least a singleton ♥. Given this analysis, it is possible to find the lead most likely to defeat the contract.

Clearly a ♦ is not likely to succeed and may even allow the declarer to make a critical discard at an early stage. A trump lead would be far too feeble, lying down and inviting declarer to stomp all over you. A ♥ lead looks more promising, but the declarer must hold the ♥A K for his bidding and partner will definitely not be able to ruff the first round. Thus a ♥ lead is likely to be too passive also. This leaves a ♣ lead, which raises an intriguing question. The analysis has placed East with a weak ♣ suit, but just how strong is West's holding in the suit? If he holds ♣K Q X X X (X) the contract is unlikely to be beaten unless partner can ruff an early round. But if he holds anything weaker than this then an opening lead of a *low* ♣ might well put declarer to an awkward guess. If partner holds ♣Q X and the dummy holds a five-card suit headed by the ♣K, declarer will feel like he's in a sauna! In the event the lead worked very well.

♠	9 3																												
♥	8 7 4																												
♦	K Q J 9 7 3 2																												
C	♣																												
<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 25%; padding-right: 10px;">♠</td> <td style="width: 25%; padding-right: 10px;">Q 6 2</td> <td style="width: 25%; padding-right: 10px;">N</td> <td style="width: 25%;"></td> <td style="width: 25%; padding-right: 10px;">♠</td> <td style="padding-right: 10px;">A K J 8 7 5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♥</td> <td>Q</td> <td>W</td> <td>E</td> <td>♥</td> <td>A K 10 3</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♦</td> <td>A 5 4</td> <td></td> <td>S</td> <td>♦</td> <td>-----</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♣</td> <td>Q 10 9 8 7 4</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td>♣</td> <td>J 6 2</td> </tr> </table>						♠	Q 6 2	N		♠	A K J 8 7 5	♥	Q	W	E	♥	A K 10 3	♦	A 5 4		S	♦	-----	♣	Q 10 9 8 7 4			♣	J 6 2
♠	Q 6 2	N		♠	A K J 8 7 5																								
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	♦	10 8 6																											
	♣	A 5 3																											

On any lead other than a ♣, careful play sees the declarer home. Assuming a ♦ lead, he wins on the table and discards a ♣ from hand. He cashes the ♥Q and crosses back to hand while drawing the trumps. On the ♥A K, he discards two ♦s from the dummy and then he simply exits with a ♣. If South rises with the ♣A he fells North's singleton ♣K and if North wins he must now concede a ruff and discard, allowing the declarer

to dispose of his losing ♣. Granted that it is lucky that North holds no more than two trumps and three ♥s as well as a singleton honour in ♣s, declarer must play for this to make his contract. Given North's preemptive 3♦ bid and South's failure to lead out the ♣A K, this line must have a chance.

There are many occasions when it is possible to evaluate the best lead because of what is *not said* during the auction, rather than because you have a definite picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the opponents' hands. This next hand is a case in point and also illustrates a situation that arises very frequently.

Example 10

	S			
	♠	A 4		
	♥	10 8 4 3		
	♦	A Q 7		
	♣	9 5 3 2		
N	E	S	W	
	1♠	P	2♦	
P	3♠	P	4♠	
All pass.				

A fairly straightforward auction, with no obvious clues as to the best lead. In such circumstances it can pay to question whether the auction might have been different if West had bid something other than 2♦. Put it another way and ask yourself whether East would have jumped to 3♠ if West had shown a different suit and therefore did West's 2♦ response improve East's hand and make it worth a jump?

Since neither of the opponents have explored the possibility of a slam (not surprising, given that you have the Ace in both of their known suits) there are likely to be weaknesses in the unbid suits. Nevertheless, East is confident that his hand is good enough for a jump to 3♠ over his partner's response and therefore there must be a fair chance that the fact that his partner has a holding in the ♦ suit improves the value of his hand. If this is the case, then North is quite likely to be short in ♦s. Since you also hold the ♠A you may be able to give him a ruff, even if he holds a doubleton in ♦s. So you lead the ♦A...

	♠ 9 5		
	♥ K J 6 5 2		
	♦ 8		
	♣ Q J 8 6 4		
♠ 10 7 6	N	♠ K Q J 8 3 2	
♥ 9 7	W	♥ A Q	E
♦ K J 9 6 4 3	S	♦ 10 5 2	
♣ A 7		♣ K 10	
	♠ A 4		
	♥ 10 8 4 3		
	♦ A Q 7		
	♣ 9 5 3 2		

The lead of two rounds of ♦s gives the declarer a difficult problem. If North has the ♦Q then that will clear the ♦ suit and all that is left is to knock out the ♠A before claiming the overtrick. On the other hand, if South has the ♦Q then North will ruff and there will be yet another ♦ loser to contend with. At Teams the decision would be easy, since failing to make the overtrick would cost 1 IMP. The declarer should run the ♦ continuation to his hand, hoping that if North does ruff he will also hold the ♠A or the trumps will break 2-2. Although the declarer would still need North to be holding the ♥K to make his contract, he definitely will not make it if North started with a singleton ♦ and South holds the ♠A. At pairs the decision whether to rise with the ♦K is a lot more difficult. If the ♦s do break 2-2 then the declarer will have conceded an unnecessary trick to the ♦Q and will be unlikely to score well, regardless of the location of the ♥K. Putting the pressure on the declarer by forcing him to make an early guess will often pay good dividends, since sometimes the declarer will make the wrong choice.

It is possible to present endless examples of the “killing” lead – either relatively straightforward as in the hand above, or more complex as in the lead of the ♠10 in **Example 4**. The point about such examples is to prompt you into using your imagination to construct a possible holding for partner that could defeat the contract, rather than blindly following foolish maxims. The plain fact is that selecting an opening lead will usually be something of a lottery – the trick is to improve the odds as much as you can. Here are some sensible guidelines for making your choice.

1. Use the information revealed by the auction to make a considered choice.
2. Where inadequate information is available, try and construct a holding (that is consistent with the auction) that your partner could have and select your lead accordingly.
3. Select the lead that will guide partner to the best defence (i.e. lead from strength or make the lead that establishes a potential ruffing value).
4. Do not automatically assume that your hand is worthless defensively because you have no high-card strength. You may, for example, have a long suit known to be held by the declarer and therefore partner may be able to ruff your opening lead.
5. If all else fails, lead through the dummy's known strength. At worst, this may finesse your partner. On the other hand, you may well deprive the declarer of a vital entry to the dummy before he has had a chance to set up side-suit winners. Alternatively you may succeed in cutting the communications between declarer and dummy by restricting the entries and/or exits. Such a lead can be very successful if you hold high-card strength in dummy's suit, since the declarer may be forced to make an early, uncomfortable decision regarding a finesse.
6. Only lead partner's suit when you are reasonably certain that you have no better option. Remember that the opponent's have arrived at the final contract despite the bids made by your side. Leading your partner's suit against a suit contract when you hold a shortage is almost always a good idea, as it is when you hold an honour to two or more against a no-trump contract.

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(October 2009)