



Clues from the Bidding

SITTING WEST, on lead to 3NT, what would be your choice with the following collection?

♠ 8 4
♥ 7 6 3
♦ K J 8 7
♣ K 8 5 2

'Hold on, what about the bidding?' you exclaim. Well, that is the point of this article. The bidding almost always provides clues – some subtle, some fairly obvious. So let us consider this uncontested auction:

North	South
	1♦
1♠	1NT
2NT	3NT
Pass	

There are some (hopefully, not many) whose choice would be completely unaffected by the auction and who would have the ♦7 on the table, almost before the final pass has been made, in the firm belief that 'fourth highest of longest and strongest' is the answer to all lead problems. This might prove effective but because of the opening bid many would prefer a club.

My choice, however, after considering the bidding, would be a heart. I would lead the ♥7 (top of nothing) or the ♥6 (second from bad suits), depending on partnership agreement, to ensure that partner can interpret the lead.

In general, there are two main strategies that the defenders might adopt:

- Passive, to avoid giving declarer any free gifts.
- Attacking, to cash winners or set them up before it is too late.

The opening lead should be chosen with the appropriate strategy in mind. A successful lead will be in accordance with it, although occasionally there might be enough time to change tack. Often the correct plan can be inferred from the bidding.

What are the clues on the featured hand and auction?

1. The opponents do not have a surplus of high-card points (opener can pass 2NT with a minimum).
2. Moreover, it is probable, but not certain, that their hands are fairly balanced.
3. West's diamond holding is likely to make it difficult for declarer to develop tricks in this suit.
4. It is probable that partner's spades will stop declarer from developing that suit as well.

All things considered, it would appear that declarer will not have many tricks to start with and will not find it easy to establish many more. This analysis strongly suggests a *passive* defence.

Here is the full deal:

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

It can be seen that persisting with hearts only gives declarer that which is readily available to him, the approach resulting in a comfortable defeat of the contract. A minor-suit lead will give declarer a free trick and a much better chance of making 3NT.

Note that if East's hand is changed to ♠ A1093 ♥ 9842 ♦ 103 ♣ A106 but the South and West hands are not altered, then the bidding would be the same but this time a club lead would work well. The salient issue, however, is that

leading hearts would still be better, confirming the wisdom of adopting a passive stance, which, in the context of the auction, is strongly indicated by the diamond holding.

What about the following lead problem for West with the hand below after this auction?

♠ K 10 4	North	South
♥ 7 6 3		1♦
♦ 8 7 5	1♠	3NT
♣ K 8 5 2	Pass	

The prognosis is very different this time in that any diamond finesse that declarer might require, rates to be working and all the suits are breaking evenly for him, which suggests that declarer will be able to generate several tricks given time. Therefore, there is much more to be said for attacking with a club lead. Although this might give away a trick, it might strike gold – and to beat 3NT there is evidence that the defenders will have to grab their tricks quickly.

Tips:

- Listen to the bidding. When there is evidence that declarer might have to struggle, adopt a passive approach.
- Leads from holdings without honour cards are not likely to give a trick that declarer could not have made otherwise and are in keeping with a passive approach. When choosing a lead of this sort, lead a high pip so that partner can tell what you have done.
- Leads from unsupported honours (such as Q-x-x-x) are not passive and are in keeping with an attacking stance, which a defender should be prepared to adopt when it can be seen that tricks might have to be taken quickly. □