



Longest and Strongest?

SOUTH OPENS 1NT, passed out and it is your lead. What would you select from the hand below?

♠ 8 5 4
♥ 7 6 3
♦ K 10 5 3
♣ A 8 2

Would your choice have been different if North had raised to 3NT?

Most players are taught to lead 'fourth highest from your longest and strongest against no-trumps' and I am sure that the three of diamonds would be a popular choice in both of the scenarios above. This approach has appeal in its simplicity, but rather than following it automatically, consider for a moment the reasoning behind it. One important idea is that if the defending side leads and persists with a long suit then rewards will be reaped when declarer runs out.

There are two issues to consider at this point:

1. Often, leading away from an unsupported honour will give declarer an extra trick.
2. There might not be many (or any) subsequent rounds of the suit led.

When appraising such a lead, in order to justify the risk taken, a lot depends on the frequency of success and how much there is to be gained when lady luck is smiling.

When leading from ♦K-10-x-x, unless the suit breaks 4-3-3-3 (improbable), to make the opponents run out, partner will also need to have at least four cards in the suit. Furthermore, the reward rates to be small - establishing just one more winner (the fourth round).

If, instead, the lead had been from ♦K-10-x-x-x, then the prospects would have been much brighter. In this case, the hope would be to establish two extra winners - a satisfactory return. Moreover, the chances of the other players having run out of cards in the suit by the fourth round are reasonably good.

Another reason for making this type of lead is that sometimes it is expedient to take tricks quickly. Such circumstances are likely to be characterised by an opponent having a long and strong suit. Success will depend upon partner holding enough of the complementary honours to enable a quick kill.

A further consideration is that there is likely to be a greater need to cash tricks quickly against game contracts than against part-scores. This is because the defenders expect to have more high cards in part-scores, thus being able to regain the lead more often, than in game contracts. As a consequence, should an attacking defence be required in a part-score, the defenders frequently have time to find it, despite not leading declarer's weak suit at trick one, whereas at game-level there might be no second chance.

In summary, there are risks attached to leading away from unsupported honours. As outlined above, it can be seen that such leads from five-card suits provide the prospect of greater rewards with more likelihood of achieving success than those from four-card suits, so a lead from H-x-x-x-x (and similar five-card holdings) would be considered fairly routine versus a no-trump contract. In contrast . . .

Tip: Be very wary of leading from four card suits that are headed by unsupported honours. Choose this type of lead only when the bidding calls for it, or when it is the least of all evils.

Applying this approach to the lead problem to 1NT above, the choice lies between the two major suits, which are both passive leads, chosen to avoid giving declarer a free trick - a likely result of a minor-suit lead.

Given that the major suits are so similar, my specific choice of card would probably

be determined by my partnership agreement. If playing, 'top of nothing', I would lead the eight of spades and if playing 'second from bad suits', I would select the six of hearts. In other words, I would choose the one that looks *least* like a fourth-highest lead - it is important that partner can interpret the lead.

In this way, both defenders should be aware that it might be advisable to switch to another suit later, although persisting with a passive approach frequently pays dividends. Much will depend on the dummy, the signals and the early play. With a small sprinkling of good fortune, there will be time to steer the defence along the appropriate channel to eventual success!

Here is the full deal:

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

On this occasion, the club suit is declarer's weakness. A diamond lead surrenders the contract immediately but both major suit leads are safe for the defence - a club switch can come when East obtains the lead with the ace of spades.

And what if North had raised to 3NT? Despite it being a game contract (which might suggest attack), my choice would be the same, this time seduced by the opponents' failure to bid a major suit. After all, listening to the bidding is the most important aspect of choosing the correct lead. □