



Lead Passively Against 6NT

YOU are West, holding this hand:

♠ 10 4 3
♥ Q 9 5 3 2
♦ 7 6 5
♣ A 5

What would you choose to lead after each of the following two auctions?

a) West North East South
Pass 3NT All Pass 1NT

b) West North East South
Pass 6NT All Pass 2NT

Did you make the same choice for both? If so, please think again! Let us conduct a preliminary analysis to find the appropriate strategy in each scenario.

Against 3NT, a low heart stands out (holding just four hearts, this would not be so clear). Often, the opponents will have around 26 HCP, leaving plenty of room for partner to have a helping honour card in hearts. There is a risk that this lead could give a trick away, but it is a risk worth taking when the reward could be to establish your suit, which is a bright prospect given that declarer is likely to have to relinquish the lead, maybe more than once.

Versus 6NT, the opponents will have around 33 HCP (or more) and so establishing the hearts is out of the question – partner is unlikely to have any helping honour in the suit. We should note, however, that this will not be necessary to defeat the slam in any case because a mere two tricks will suffice.

Furthermore, partner's known paucity, in terms of high cards, suggests that a heart lead away from the queen is, in fact, likely to present declarer with a cheap trick – the jack of hearts or lower! Any such gift will probably end our chances of emerging with a plus score.

By far the best chance of making a trick in hearts is to avoid leading them, hoping that declarer will be forced to take a losing finesse in the suit. The conclusion is that the strategy of leading away from an honour card is flawed under these circumstances.

Almost always, with this type of auction, expert players refuse to lead away from unsupported honours, thereby adopting a totally passive approach – with or without a side ace!

At this point, let us take a look at the full deals for the respective auctions:

West North East South
Pass 3NT All Pass 1NT

♠ K J 2
♥ 8 6 4
♦ A J 3 2
♣ K Q 7

♠ 10 4 3
♥ Q 9 5 3 2
♦ 7 6 5
♣ A 5

♠ 9 8 6 5
♥ A 7
♦ 10 4
♣ 10 9 8 3 2

♠ A Q 7
♥ K J 10
♦ K Q 9 8
♣ J 6 4

A heart to the ace and one back sets the suit up for four tricks to go with West's ace. Declarer cannot avoid leading clubs at some point and when this happens, West will pounce and cash out for one off.

West North East South
Pass 6NT All Pass 2NT

♠ K J 2
♥ 8 6 4
♦ A J 3 2
♣ K Q 7

♠ 10 4 3
♥ Q 9 5 3 2
♦ 7 6 5
♣ A 5

♠ 9 8 6 5
♥ 10 7
♦ 10 4
♣ 10 9 8 3 2

♠ A Q 7
♥ A K J
♦ K Q 9 8
♣ J 6 4

The most passive lead is a diamond, which gives nothing away and leaves North-South one trick short. Accordingly, declarer will take the heart finesse at some point and West will grab the setting trick. Note that a heart lead would present declarer with the (gift-wrapped) twelfth trick.

Tip: When the opponents bid to 6NT, it is normally right to lead passively.

Whereas at lower level no-trump contracts it is important to establish long suits, against 6NT this is not an issue, but the donation of a free trick is.

At pairs, this principle should be extended to auctions such as 1NT – 4NT, as well, because the opponents are obviously close to 33 HCP and it is important to restrict overtricks whenever possible. □

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