

Leads and Signals

Ipswich & Kesgrave Stepping Stones
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Why is it all so difficult?

Say you are defending with this spade suit:

♠ Q J 7 4

- Do you play the queen?
- ...The jack?
- ...Or a spot-card? And if so, which?

That's an unfair question

'Play' was a weasel word because you can *play* a card in several circumstances.

- Opening lead: at trick one, 'blind' before dummy is exposed.
- Breaking a suit: first to play a suit after trick one.
- Second hand: partner is still to play and you generally play low.
- Third hand: where your play has the most influence on which side wins the trick.
- Fourth hand: you get to decide to win if you can or which of your non trick-taking cards to play.

That's an unfair question (2)

As important as knowing where you sit at the table and where you are relative to dummy is...

- Are you defending **no-trumps** or a **suit** contract?

Only at no-trumps can low cards necessarily become tricks – in a suit contract declarer will trump them. That makes a huge difference to how you conduct your defence; if you wait too long to take your honours you'll lose them

Don't mix up your leads against no-trump contracts with your leads against suits. More later.

Second, third, fourth...

When you are not the first to lead a suit your plays are very much the same: select the lowest card that does the job. If you cannot influence which side takes the trick or partner can still win, play a low card. Later we will consider signalling when the choice is between low cards.

Example; declarer, South leads ♠5 towards dummy, North, and you West have to play second:

♠ Q J 7 4	♠ A 8 3
	♠ 5

Play low. There's no need to play an honour to "force the ace", partner still has to play and can surely beat the eight.

Second, third, fourth...(2)

If dummy is more threatening and you have to play an honour, choose the lowest of touching cards.

Example; again South leads ♠5 towards dummy West has to play second:

♠ K Q 7 4	♠ A J 3
	♠ 5

Play the queen. But beware! Do this only when you know you must take a trick in this suit. Sometimes declarer has no intention of putting in the jack. You have exposed your cards and whilst you've ensured one trick, you've lost the chance of making both king and queen. This situation, with ace-jack in dummy, is the most common.

Second, third, fourth...(3)

If touching honours do the same job, why play the lowest?
Wouldn't always playing the highest achieve the same?

This is clearest when partner leads and you play third:

♠ 5 ♠ 9 3 ♠ Q J 7 4

Play the jack. Let's say partner led from the king.

♠ 9 3
♠ K 8 6 5 ♠ Q J 7 4
♠ A 10 2

When declarer wins the ace *he cannot have the queen*.
Inferences of this sort abound from third-hand's play.

First-hand plays

Good news!

When a defender is the first to play a suit –
whether that is on opening lead or the
middle of the play – the same guides apply.

1. Honour leads always show the card below
and deny the card above.
2. Spot-cards are always low from suits with
honours and high from suits without.

Suit and no-trump contracts

More good news!

Those two guides – for honours and spot-cards – apply to both suit and no-trump contracts. That is, it's never right to lead the queen against no-trumps and the king against suits or anything like that.

However... Against no-trumps honours are only led from strong holdings – those that contain three honours (counting a ten-nine as two).

Why different for no-trumps?

Q: Why do we need such strong holdings, like KQJxx or J109x before we should lead an honour against no-trumps?

A: Because at no-trumps partner might have to overtake with an honour to avoid blocking the suit.

	♠ 9 8 3	
♠ K Q 6 5 2		♠ A or 7?
	♠ J 10 4	

If East lets the king win the suit is blocked and EW take no more than two tricks. Against a suit, although overtaking sets up a trick for NS, East can ruff the third round. Against no-trumps, West properly leads the ♠5, East wins the ace and returns ♣7, EW take the first five tricks. The ♠K is right for suits, wrong for NT.

Why make standard leads?

Q: Why restrict the cards we lead? Why can't we just lead what we fancy?

A: Because partner has yet to play and we want him to do the right thing.

- It is very important to know whether the defence has chances of tricks in the suit led or should shift to another. So "low shows an honour" marks out a suit the defence should pursue, that is, if leader's partner wins an early trick, he should return the led suit.
- Likewise it's important to know *which* honours are held when one is led. Leading "top of touching cards" prevents third hand from making mistakes because he knows where our honours stop – another way of saying which honour declarer has.
- Lastly, when we're defending against suit contracts we would like partner to give us a ruff when we are short and avoid getting our honours ruffed by declarer. So our leads should also show count.

Why honours are important

Lead an honour whenever you can. You want to make it easy for your partner in layouts like this:

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

West leads the jack and East has an easy play when South calls low from dummy. By withholding the king, EW get two tricks. Note what would happen if West led the ♥2. East would have to play the king to stop South winning her lowly eight.

Surely no-one would lead low when they held three honours?

The Horrors

Lead of wrong card in sequence – the nine denies the ten (usually the jack too)

Dir: South

Vul: All

♠ Q 6

♥ K Q 8 3

♦ K Q 10 6

♣ 6 4 3

♠ 10 5 3 2

♥ J 9 7 6

♦ 8

♣ J 10 9 2

North

7

South

♠ K 7 4

♥ A 5 4

♦ J 7 4 3

♣ A 7 5

12

2

12

14

♠ A J 9 8

♥ 10 2

♦ A 9 5 2

♣ K Q 8

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ N

N 3 5 3 3 4

S 3 5 3 3 4

E - - - -

W - - - -

Board No 7 Both Vul Dealer South

Pairs		Contract					Scores		Points	
N/S	E/W	Bid	By	Ld	Tks	N/S	E/W	N/S	E/W	
3	8	2♥	N	♠ 3	7	100	8	40		
4	10	3NT	S		9	600	17	23		
5	2	3NT	S	♠ 9	9	600	17	23		
9	7	3NT	S	♠ J	9	600	17	23		
11	6	2NT	S	♠ 2	9	150	3	37		

Lead of spot card when an honour – here the ♠J – was correct

The Horrors (2)

Lead of spot card when honour – in this case ♠K – was correct

Dir: North
Vul: N/S

♠ K 6 5 2

♥ Q 10 7 2

♦ J

♣ J 10 7 4

	North	
West	5	East
	South	

♠ J 10 9 8 4 3

♥ A 6

♦ K Q

♣ A 6 3

♠ A 7

♥ J 5 4

♦ A 6 5 4

♣ K Q 8 5

	♠	♥	♦	♣	N
N	2	-	1	-	
S	2	-	1	-	
E	-	3	-	1	
W	-	3	-	1	

Board No 5 N/S Vul Dealer North

Pairs		Contract					Scores		Points	
N/S	E/W	Bid	By	Ld	Tks		N/S	E/W	N/S	E/W
3	9	1♠	E	♠ A	8		110	10	30	
5	6	1♠	E	♠ 8	7		80	30	10	
10	8	2♠	E	♠ 8	7	50		33	7	
11	4	2♠	E	♠ K	8		110	10	30	
12	7	3♠	E	♠ K	7	100		37	3	

Bad leads

- Underleading honours
- Why bad? When you lead away from an honour – especially a single honour – you are less likely to make a trick with that card.
-

	A 7 4	
Q 8 6 2		10 5 3
	K J 9	

This is an ordinary situation: West leads the two *away from* the queen – or *underleads* the queen – and never makes a trick with it.

- Why then was I earlier saying you should “lead low from an honour”?
- Quite simply because there’s often nothing better. Defenders invariably hold poor cards and leading away from an honour – and hoping partner can help out – is the best that can be done.
- But because the club mainly plays matchpoint bridge where every trick counts, making a passive lead from three or more low cards is often preferable. An active lead seeks to create tricks, a passive leads hopes not to gift one to declarer.

More bad leads

- Underleading aces...
 - Why bad? Because aces should ‘take down’ declarer’s kings and queens. By underleading – or leading away from them – that cannot happen.
 - It is even worse at suit contracts because later declarer might trump your ace.
1. Never underlead an ace against a suit contract.
 2. Even against no-trumps be wary of underleading Axxx. A 5-card suit is great – a 4-card suit is not.

The Horrors (3)

Dlr: North Vul: E/W		♠ 5 2 ♥ Q 10 9 5 4 2 ♦ Q J 7 2 ♣ 3
♠ A 6 4 ♥ K 7 6 ♦ K 6 4 3 ♣ Q 10 5	North 9 South	♠ K Q J 8 3 ♥ -- ♦ A 10 9 ♣ A J 9 6 2
5 12 15 8	♠ 10 9 7 ♥ A J 8 3 ♦ 8 5 ♣ K 8 7 4	♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ N N - - 1 - - S - - 1 - - E 5 3 - 5 3 W 5 3 - 5 3
Board No 9 E/W Vul Dealer North		
Pairs	Contract	Scores
N/S	E/W	N/S
3	7 4♠ E +8 12	680 8 32
4	9 4♠ E	620 27 13
8	6 4♠ E ♥2 10	620 27 13
10	2 4♠ E ♥8 11	650 21 19
12	5 4♠ E +8 11	650 21 19

Underlead of an ace! If declarer puts up the king, she makes 12 easy tricks

Standard leads

- An honour is a ten or higher.

trumps

Suits

No-

- | | | |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. ♣ Q 7 3 | • ♣ Q 7 <u>3</u> | |
| 2. ♣ Q 7 3 2 | • ♣ Q 7 3 <u>2</u> | |
| 3. ♣ Q J 7 2 | • ♣ <u>Q</u> J 7 2 | • ♣ Q J 7 <u>2</u> |
| 4. ♣ Q 10 9 2 | • ♣ Q <u>10</u> 9 2 | |
| 5. ♣ 10 9 7 2 | • ♣ <u>10</u> 9 7 2 | |
| 6. ♣ 9 8 7 2 | • ♣ 9 <u>8</u> 7 2 | |

Standard leads (2)

- Short suits. Top of any two cards, second-highest of three-plus low cards.

	Suits	No-trumps
1. ♦ 7 3	• ♦ <u>7</u> 3	
2. ♦ 7 6 2	• ♦ 7 <u>6</u> 2	• ♦ <u>7</u> 6 2
3. ♦ 7 3 2	• ♦ <u>7</u> 3 2	
4. ♦ 10 7 2	• ♦ 10 <u>7</u> 2	• ♦ 10 7 <u>2</u>
5. ♦ J 7	• ♦ <u>J</u> 7	
6. ♦ A 7	• ♦ <u>A</u> 7	

Standard leads (3)

- I've got this far without mentioning '4th highest'. In truth it's less important than "low shows an honour" but reasonably often, knowing how long a suit is, especially against no-trumps, is useful. So if you're going to lead low from four or more cards, lead fourth from the top. Let's consider no-trumps for the time being.

1. ♣ Q 7 3 2	• ♣ Q 7 3 2	• v suit?
2. ♣ Q 7 6 3 2	• ♣ Q 7 6 3 2	
3. ♣ Q 9 7 6 3 2	• ♣ Q 9 7 6 3 2	
4. ♣ A Q 10 3 2	• ♣ A Q 10 3 2	No!
5. ♣ A Q 10 8 2	• ♣ A Q 10 8 2	No!
6. ♣ A 10 9 8 2	• ♣ A 10 9 8 2	No!

Third hand keeps awake

This is a variation on an earlier slide where I said an honour lead “makes it easy for partner”:

♥ Q 4 3
 ♥ J 10 9 5 ♥ A 7 6
 ♥ K 8 2

West leads the jack and East must play low when South calls low from dummy. This time by keeping the ace, EW get two tricks when West next leads the suit. Note that if East plays the ace on the first round, EW only get one trick.

Leading high from suits that don't have an honour prevents partner from wasting an honour. Next is a deal from actual play.

High spot-card denies an honour

South declared 4♥ and West led the ♠6; declarer tried ♠10 from dummy...

EW Vul.
Dealer North

♠ 6 5 3 ♥ A 5 ♦ A J 10 9 4 ♣ A 9 6	♠ Q 10 9 2 ♥ Q 9 6 4 2 ♦ Q 3 ♣ Q 4 <div style="background-color: #333; color: white; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0; display: inline-block;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> N </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> W E </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; width: 100%;"> S </div> </div> ♠ A K ♥ K J 10 3 ♦ 7 6 5 ♣ K J 8 7	♠ J 8 7 4 ♥ 8 7 ♦ K 8 2 ♣ 10 5 3 2
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Signals

- A signal is an indication for the future.
- That means a play that doesn't affect the current trick but says something about how the subsequent defence should go. There are two signals.
 1. Attitude: whether you like the suit you are signalling in.
 2. Count: how many you have of the suit.

Attitude signals

- An unnecessarily high card shows a liking for the suit of the card played.
- Of course, you don't signal with cards you cannot afford – those that will take tricks later. Signal attitude when...
 1. Partner leads an honour and you have a supporting card.
 2. You make a discard.

Third hand signals attitude

This is a typical situation where partner leads an honour:

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

From West's viewpoint unless East helps out by signalling, she won't know who has the king. Without that knowledge, leading another heart might lose a trick to the ten. When more of the low cards are missing, the easier the signal is 'to read'. Here the ♥8 is not likely to be East's lowest card and discouraging. If East's hearts were ♥K62 East should play the ♥6 and hope West can read it.

Count signals

- Playing high-low, that is a high card at your first opportunity and a lower card next, shows an even number of cards in the suit. This is most useful when that number is two.
- Don't signal shortage with a queen or above. Playing the jack from Jx is OK but play low from Qx; keep your queens. Use a count signal when...
 1. Partner leads a king. That's it...

Aces and kings

- So far I've been quiet about aces and kings. I am going to suggest something new to you but which many players use.
- Ace for attitude
- King for count
- With a suit headed by the ace-king the opening leader decides what she wants to know and leads accordingly.

Last week

Dir: East Vul: All		♠ A J 4 ♥ Q 8 ♦ Q J 10 9 ♣ Q 10 6 4	
♠ 9 2 ♥ 7 5 3 2 ♦ 4 3 ♣ A K 9 8 5	West North 26 South East	♠ 7 6 3 ♥ 9 4 ♦ A 7 6 5 2 ♣ 7 3 2	
12 7 4 17	♠ K Q 10 8 5 ♥ A K J 10 6 ♦ K 8 ♣ J	♠ ♥ ♦ ♣ N N 2 3 5 5 4 S 2 3 5 5 4 E - - - - W - - - -	

South declared 4♣ after bidding spades and hearts and West led a top club. With a five card suit it would be good to know how many clubs East had. Playing "ace for attitude, king for count" after king from West and the ♣2 from East, West would not play another club. As it was, a misguided attempt to cash clubs gave declarer 12 tricks.

Aces and kings (2)

- I hope “ace for attitude, king for count” will have these benefits.
 1. It makes it clear how third-hand signals
 2. It makes it clear to leader what signal third-hand is giving.
 3. Because leader makes a definite decision whether to lead ace or king he will look for partner’s signal.

Leads and Signals

- Take these things away:
 1. Help partner, make the standard lead:
 - a) Honours: unless from shortage, an honour denies the card above and promises the card below.
 - b) Spot cards: low from good suits, second-highest from poor, top of a doubleton.
 2. Lead an honour whenever you can – but remember you need stronger holdings at no-trumps.
 3. Make more passive leads from poor suits rather than lead away from single honours.
 4. Consider adopting “ace for attitude, king for count”.
 5. Avoid the horrors.