

Notrump Leads & Strategy

Good defense begins with a good lead. This lesson explains how to make effective leads and how to plan your defensive strategy against enemy notrump contracts.

Which Suit to Lead

Remember the bidding! If partner has bid a suit you should lead his suit unless you have a very good lead of your own. If the enemy has bid a suit, you should avoid leading that suit unless you have a strong holding that is safe to lead.

In most situations the bidding will not reveal an obvious lead, so the choice must be based on your hand. I recommend the following priority in choosing the suit:

1. Five-card or longer suit
2. Safe honor sequence
3. Four cards *without* A or K
4. Worthless three cards
5. Worthless doubleton
6. Unsafe honor sequence
7. Four cards with A or K

The following three hands illustrate the priority list by ranking the choice of suits to lead:

♠K 10 8 4 3
♥J 9 5 2
♦J 10
♣8 6

♠6 4
♥A Q 8 6
♦J 10 3
♣10 8 6 2

♠K 8 6 3
♥7 5 3
♦10 9 8
♣8 7 6

Note that *within categories* it is better to lead a major than a minor; hence a heart is preferable to a club on Example 3.

Best = ♠4
2nd choice = ♦J
3rd choice = ♥2
Worst = ♣8

Best = ♣2
2nd choice = ♠6
3rd choice = ♦J
Worst = ♥6

Best = ♦10
2nd choice = ♥7
3rd choice = ♣8
Worst = ♠3

Which Card to Lead

Once you have selected the suit, choosing the card to lead is based on the standard rules below.

Lead the ace from ace-king with two other honors: A K Q 10 A K J 10 2

Lead the king from ace-king with one other honor, or if you have fewer than four cards: A K 10 8 6 A K 2

Lead the top of a three-card sequence headed by an honor: K Q J 5 Q J 10 4 2

Lead the top of a two-card honor sequence if the next lower card is only one rank apart: QJ92 J10853

Or if you have a higher honor: AJ104 K10952

Or if you have just three cards: K Q 3 10 9 2

Lead LOW from 3 to an honor: Q 7 3 10 7 4

Lead HIGH from 3 small: 6 5 2 9 7 4

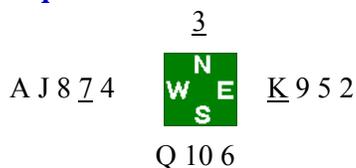
Lead the top of any doubleton (except A-K): 8 6 10 4

Lead your 4th highest card from any other holding: Q J 8 3 K 9 7 5 2

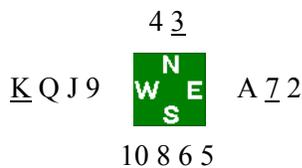
Second Lead in a Suit

After a suit has been led, it is important to lead the suit correctly on the second round. This applies whether you are returning partner's suit or continuing your own suit.

If you originally held four or more cards, lead your original *fourth-best* or the *lowest* card of a remaining honor sequence.

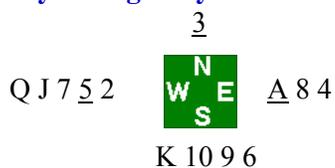


East should continue with the *two*; 10, jack. West can deduce that South's queen must fall so he cashes the ace on which East must be careful to unblock the nine.

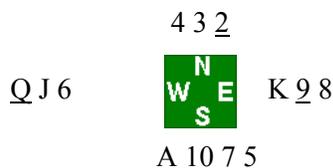


West should continue with the *jack*; East should overtake and return the two. Lacking the nine West should trust his partner's seven as a signal and lead his lowest card.

If you originally held three cards, lead your *highest* card.



East should continue with the *eight*; nine, jack. West knows that South has the K-10 left so he switches to another suit. If East held A-10-8-4 he would return the 4.

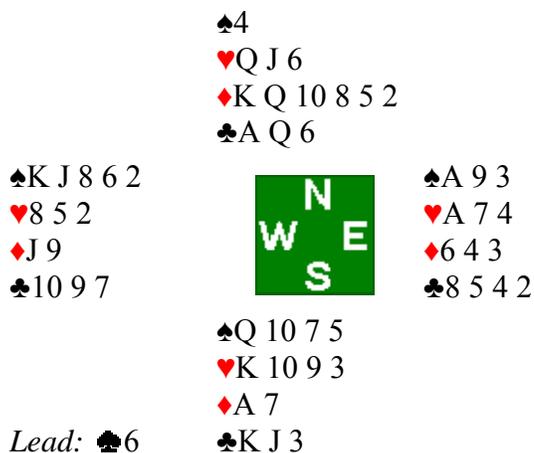


West should continue with the *jack*; East must not overtake — else disaster! If West held Q-J-10-x(x), his second lead would be the 10 or a lower card.

Active Defense

On a majority of notrump deals it is a race between the two sides to establish and cash tricks in a long suit. As a defender you should try to determine the number of tricks declarer is able to win and look for ways to prevent him from fulfilling his contract. **If you need to shift to a different suit, ask yourself which card or cards you need partner to have for the lead to be successful.**

8. 3 NT by South



East wins the ♣ A and returns the *nine*; 10, jack. It is apparent to West that South holds the guarded queen so it is desirable to shift to another suit. But which suit?

West should reason this way: If East holds the ♦ A, the contract will always be set so that shift is not urgent. The problem is whether to play East for the ♥ A or the ♣ K. If East holds the ♥ A, the contract can be set by an immediate shift to heart. But if East holds the ♣ K, declarer will have 8 top tricks (assuming the ♥ A and ♦ A in the South hand) and he can make his contract by winning the ♣ A and eventually finessing if necessary in hearts.

Hence the correct shift is the ♥8 because it will always succeed when East has the right card. In the actual layout you will set the contract two tricks.

When shifting to another suit, lead low (fourth-best) only when you want partner to return that suit. Otherwise lead high.

9. 3 NT by South

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

At trick two South leads the ♣ J; queen, king; then a club is ducked to West's nine. From East's ♠ 10 at trick one it is clear that a spade continuation is futile. A diamond shift is needed if East has the ♦ A. A heart shift is desirable if East has the ♥ A — but in that case East must have additional heart strength (Q or 10) and further, a diamond shift would do just as well since declarer would have no entry to dummy's clubs.

West should shift to the diamond *two* so, when East wins the ace, he will know to return a diamond. If West wanted a spade back, he should shift to a *high* diamond. **Do not routinely return partner's opening lead, especially if it is likely to be a weak suit.**

10. 3 NT by South

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

South captures East's ♠ J with the ace and leads the ♦ 2; five, queen, king. East should reason: West's lead of the two indicates four cards, and it is generally poor to lead from K-x-x-x; hence South is likely to have the king. Further, even if West has the ♠ K, a return of that suit would establish only one trick, not enough to set the contract along with the ♠ K and ♦ A-K.

East should shift to the ♥ 3.

