

Basic Leads Versus NoTrump



By Kitty Cooper

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A question I have been frequently asked is “How do you know what to lead against notrump?”

The most likely way to develop tricks against a notrump contract is by setting up your side’s longest combined suit. This is why you have always been advised to lead fourth from your longest and strongest unless your partner has bid a presumed five card or longer suit. A notrump contract is frequently a race between declarer and defenders to see who can set up their tricks first.

When playing matchpoints, another consideration can be not giving declarer an extra trick unless you have hopes of getting it back, so leading a passive sequence like J109 can work out well if leading fourth best costs you a trick you can’t later recover. However, unless declarer has shown 20+ points it is usually better to try to lead your side’s best suit.

Listen to the bidding. The opening lead you select should be very influenced by it. When the opener bid 1NT and was raised to 3NT your side’s best suit is often a major (since the enemy didn’t look for a 4-4 major suit fit it’s likely that responder, at least, doesn’t have a four card major). If they use a Stayman or transfer sequence you know something about which suits they have.

Normally we try to lead suits that our side can be expected to hold. This means we usually avoid leading suits that the opponents have bid or implied in the bidding, particularly declarer’s suit. Remember, the objective is to lead our side’s most likely suit for developing tricks.

A set of guidelines for finding our best suit against a NT contract are, in priority order:

If partner has bid a suit or doubled for a suit, lead it.

Lead our own longest and strongest suit, if the opponents haven’t bid it.

Lead an unbid suit if our side was quiet.

Lead dummy’s second suit, especially if we are short in it (two or three cards), hoping that partner has strength in that suit over the dummy.

There are some obvious exceptions to these guidelines:

If partner has opened one of a minor, lead a good long suit of your own.

If you have a superb suit with four or five honors in sequence, lead it even if the opponents have bid it (e.g., KQJ109).

If you have less than three points, dummy opened a minor, and they got to 3NT without trying for slam chances are very good that partner has the suit that dummy opened (since he has at least 13 points and didn’t bid). So lead dummy’s suit. I once held that hand and led the J from Jx. This worked beautifully when dummy had Kxx and partner had AQ10xx.

This article was co-authored by Kitty's husband, the late Steve Cooper, and previously appeared in the District 17 newsletter. ♣