

Rick's Tricks

PLEASE, DON'T REMIND ME OF VICHY

By Rick Roeder

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Shortly after the German occupation of Paris in May 1940, a puppet government was set up in Vichy. Some French patriots, such as Charles DeGaulle, felt compelled to leave the country. Others stayed in France, forming the French Resistance. However, a large cohort of the French were passive and did little.

“Passive” did not work in eliminating the Nazi presence. Nor does passive work in many bridge situations where a more pro-active stance is needed. For all of BBO’s wonderful qualities, they have programmed their Robots to be as passive as many French in 1941. BBO has embraced the David Bird philosophy of “going passive” a large majority of the time.

Here is a laughable example, involving Robots, that virtually no human would get wrong.

You are on lead with:

♠AJ42 ♥1098 ♦10x ♣Kxxx

The auction has gone:

LHO	Pard	RHO	You
1♦	1♥	1♠	2♥
P	P	DBL	P
2♠	P	P	P

A bit of commentary on the auction before you decide. Because your opponents play support doubles, LHO’s pass over 2♥ indicates possession of a doubleton spade. You would expect RHO to compete with 2♠, instead of double, with a six-bagger. Their likely 5-2 spade fit makes your trump holding look even more promising for the defense.

I am hoping you decided to lead the ♥10. You likely deduced that a heart attack will not only develop tricks but may ultimately provide added “oomph” to your 4th trump. The Robot elected to lead the ♦10—a clear Bird-brain lead.

As Paul Harvey famously stated, “and, now, for the rest of the story”:

DECLARER	DUMMY
♠Q10987 ♠Kx	
♥x♥Jxx	
♦KQ9x ♦Axxxx	
♣J10x ♣A9x	

I won the ♦K and was left an agonizing choice. I tried to put out of my mind that a 3♦ bid was far preferable to Robot’s double. The opening leader had at most 2 diamonds and had fewer hearts

than the overcaller. Using the “Rule of Vacant Spaces,” I deduced that the opening leader was more likely to hold the ♠J than the heart overcaller. However, if I was wrong, I might be perpetrating an utter disaster. The hurt would double if the overcaller held either ♠Jx or ♠AJ. Both were live possibilities. I decided to run the ♠8 and closed my eyes. Glorious success! I now had established firm control. After I knocked out the ♠A, the opponents belatedly got around to two rounds of hearts. I was mentally grooving to Carole King’s “It’s Too Late.” I ruffed and played the ♠K. Both the opening leader and I were down to one trump. As Robot’s trump was higher than mine, I started playing off my good diamonds. A sweet +140!

On this hand, it is 110% to lead a heart. You should employ a general rule whenever you defend with 4 trumps. Usually, you want to lead a side suit in which you have length or lead a suit in which you suspect Pard has length (An exception: A trump lead may be indicated if you think Declarer will embark on a program of early ruffing). If you look to score a ruff by leading a short suit, you may “win the battle, but lose the war.” Even when you successfully negotiate a ruff, you may have ceded control of the hand to Declarer. Keep in mind that your 4th trump can be powerful and prove critical as to who can have later control of the hand at a key juncture.

Defending against 3NT, the Robots will often lead from 3-card suits, sometimes in preference to promising 5-card suits. I cannot tell you how many games I have made due to their passivity. I am almost ashamed to admit this, but I will often open 1NT with 5-4 in the Majors against the Robots. When I wind up in 3NT, I am usually blessed with a passive Major suit lead. Merci, beaucoup!

I do not view 4th best leads as a panacea, but I much prefer them to short-suit leads. Your short suits tend to be declarer’s long suits. Why do you wish to help out declarer on a suit she may later have to tackle on her own? I cannot tell you how many defensive tricks are given up by blindly leading the top of a doubleton from 9x, 10x and Jx. Simply because I can’t count that high.

When leading against 3NT, Kit Woolsey profoundly advanced bridge theory. He is not a blind proponent of leading 4th best. He is a huge proponent of leading from a 5-card suit. Lacking a 5-card suit, he encourages the leader to ascertain whether Pard has a possible 5-card suit. If so, try to hit Pard. I find this school of thought much more compelling than the Bird camp.

Of course, there are some exceptions where passive is best. For example, the opponents have reached 3NT in spite of you holding a 13 count. You are on opening lead without a natural lead. Try to find a passive lead. Another possible exception is when you are on lead against 3NT holding a poor 2-count with a 5-card suit of Jxxxx. While leading your 5-card suit might be the winner, give some thought to trying “to hit” Pard in their best suit on the theory that Pard has the outside entry(ies) you lack.

Hula hoops, bobby soxers, doo-wop music and flat tops have gone out of style. I pray for the bridge world that “fourth from longest and strongest” does not. ♣