



LEADING **QUESTIONS** **IN** **BRIDGE**

SALLY BROCK

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LEADING
QUESTIONS
IN
BRIDGE

INTRODUCTION

Ever since bridge was first played, players have rushed up to other players, clutching pieces of paper with scribbled bridge hands, demanding ‘What would you lead?’ Sometimes it’s ‘What do you bid?’ or maybe ‘How do you play?’ or even ‘How do you defend?’ Generally, the questioner either wants you to agree with his losing line, or he wants you to do something to support his criticism of his partner. Once in a while, however, you will run across people who genuinely want to learn. These are the people I’m writing this book for.

The subject of this book is opening leads. In it, I will endeavor to answer the most frequently asked questions, such as, ‘Should I lead my singleton?’ or ‘Should I lead partner’s suit?’ We defend some 50% of the time and are on lead 25% of the time, so any improvement we can make in this area should pay dividends.

When I read my first bridge book, it gave me a comprehensive table of what card should be led from every honor combination imaginable. As well as being too complicated, the other drawback of this approach is that I don’t usually hold three or four honors in a suit. All a partnership really needs to decide is what to lead from an ace-king combination, what to lead as an unblock card at notrump and whether to lead fourth highest (and second) or third and fifth.

In this book, I will assume that we normally lead the ace from an ace-king combination and the top card from an interior sequence (K-J-10 or Q-10-9, for example). From length, we lead fourth highest when we have an honor and second highest when we don’t. I believe that these are the most common agreements worldwide, but I shall not be trying to persuade you that one method is better than any other. That is not what this book is about. Against a notrump contract, the king requests the unblock of any honor held and requests count otherwise, with high-low showing an even number.

Unless otherwise annotated, it is assumed that both sides play strong notrump, five-card majors, with the better minor being opened. We also play weak two-bids, weak jump overcalls and Roman Keycard Blackwood (there are five ‘aces’ — the four real aces and the king of trumps; in

response to 4NT, 5♣ shows 0 or 3, 5♦ shows 1 or 4, 5♥ shows 2 without the queen of trumps and 5♠ shows 2 *with* the queen of trumps).

As I said, I shall concentrate on the frequently asked questions — not that there is a need to ask them on every hand. Sometimes the lead is obvious. I will concentrate on hands where there is a problem.

If you held this hand

♠ A K Q 3 ♥ 10 7 5 ♦ 7 ♣ A K 4 3 2

and were on lead against four hearts, you wouldn't be asking whether or not to lead your singleton. You would be cashing black-suit winners, unless a ruff seemed possible because your partner had opened three diamonds.

On this hand

♠ Q J 10 9 3 ♥ A 4 3 ♦ A 5 2 ♣ A 6

it is hard to think of circumstances where you wouldn't lead the queen of spades whatever the contract.

However, what would you lead from this hand against a contract of 2NT?

♠ 8 4 ♥ A K Q J 9 ♦ 9 5 2 ♣ Q 9 7

When this question was posed to a group of potential junior internationals, there was much discussion about the 'textbook' lead; it was reminiscent of those tables of opening leads I mentioned before. Should it be the ace because we lead ace from ace-king? Or the king, if that is our agreement? Or should it be the jack, so that partner knows we have a solid suit and can choose his discards accordingly? Those were the simple answers. More esoteric was the suggestion that the jack is right in order to show something in the lowest suit, clubs. In truth, that is not likely to be relevant here — surely you would cash your hearts and then either play partner's ace or simply get off lead as safely as possible, letting declarer get on with playing the rest of the deal.

As it happens, none of those answers is correct. The correct answer is a question: 'What was the bidding?'

South opened one heart, a five-card suit. North responded one spade and South rebid one notrump, which was raised to two notrump by North. Does this change your answer? It should. The odds favor South holding

ten-fifth of hearts and partner a singleton, since both opponents appear to have balanced hands. You must make a neutral lead and hope that partner will see the need to switch to a heart when he gets the lead. The nine of diamonds looks best. It is a sufficiently high card that partner won't think it is fourth highest of your longest and strongest and mistakenly return the suit without engaging his brain.

Listen to the bidding

It is important that you make the effort to understand the inferences that can be drawn from the general system the opponents are playing. Take the simple sequence:

West	North	East	South
1♥	pass	1NT	all pass

Suppose your distribution is 3-4-3-3. You are not going to lead a heart, but have to decide between the other three suits. For the sake of argument, let's suppose that all three three-card holdings are identical. What would you lead?

Well, if you are playing in the USA or France, where the system is five-card majors and a strong notrump, a spade would be a good choice. Responder won't have four spades or he would have responded one spade, and it is unlikely that opener has four spades, though not impossible.

Wait a moment. Your opponents are playing Flannery, and an opening bid of two diamonds shows five hearts and four spades. That means responder could easily have a four-card spade suit, because he knows his partner does not have four (unless he is strong enough to bid again over one notrump). Now a spade lead looks less attractive.

In my part of the world (the UK), the common system is Acol. In this system, a one notrump opening is weak and an opening in a major promises no more than four cards. When holding a balanced hand in the 15+ range with a four-card major and a four-card minor, it is usual (but not universal) to open in the major. Since opener probably has a balanced hand and did not open one notrump, the most likely hand for him is a minimum strong notrump, say 15-16 points in a balanced hand. He could certainly be 4-4 in the majors, so responder should not have four spades.

In any of the above situations, partner could easily have overcalled one spade, but he would need a much better suit to overcall at the two-level. So, playing against the French or the Standard Americans, a spade lead makes sense, because although partner is unlikely to have five spades, he is very likely to have four. However, playing against either of the other systems, partner is less likely to have even four spades and I would lead a minor.

What would you lead from the following hand?

♠ K 4 ♥ K Q 10 9 5 ♦ 10 8 5 3 ♣ 7 4

This was the bidding:

West	North	East	South
	2♣ ¹	pass	2♦ ²
pass	2♥ ³	pass	3NT
all pass			

1. Precision, showing at least five clubs.
2. Inquiry.
3. Natural.

With such a good heart suit, it looks right to lead a heart, especially with a probable entry. Which one should you lead?

Egypt's Tarek Sadek chose the nine. Put yourself in declarer's shoes when you see the whole deal:

	♠ 10				
	♥ A J 6 4				
	♦ J 7 6				
	♣ A Q 8 3 2				
♠ K 4 ♥ K Q 10 9 5 ♦ 10 8 5 3 ♣ 7 4	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ Q 9 8 6 2 ♥ 8 3 ♦ 9 2 ♣ K 10 9 6
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ A J 7 5 3				
	♥ 7 2				
	♦ A K Q 4				
	♣ J 5				

Can you blame declarer for ducking the nine? Sadek continued with the ten, ducked again, and was then able to play the king to clear the suit. Three notrump was doomed.

MAKE A PLAN

Like declarer, defenders can see two hands, but unlike him, they cannot easily determine their combined holding. It is much worse when considering the opening lead: defenders must make assumptions that are consistent with the information gathered about the deal from their own cards and from the bidding.

A word of caution: many books present you with problems where there are clear-cut reasons for finding the winning opening lead. The reality is somewhat different. You have to come up with a reason for making one opening lead rather than another, often with the flimsiest clues to guide you. Even expert defenders do not know exactly what is going on all the time. However, what an expert defender does do is avoid or postpone critical decisions until absolutely necessary. For example, he may lead a top card, say an ace from an ace-king combination, in order to 'have a look at dummy'. Thus, although a good defender may have only the outline of a plan prior to the lead, he knows it is important to get off to a good start.

The major decision on any opening lead is whether to be *active* or *passive*. The opponents' bidding may help you decide, but more often than not you should be non-committal, particularly at matchpoint scoring.

Active or passive?

What do we mean by *active* and *passive*?

An *active* defense is where you lead from honors hoping to promote your side's defensive tricks before declarer has established sufficient tricks of his own. The more confident the opponents' auction and the worse placed you think the defensive cards are for your side, the more attacking should be your lead. The problem with such a lead is that it can set up winners for declarer that he would not otherwise have.

A *passive* defense simply tries to avoid giving declarer any tricks that are not his by right. You should generally make this kind of lead when you are defending from strength. The problem, however, is that sometimes this

MAKE THE RIGHT OPENING LEAD MORE OFTEN

Perhaps more points are won and lost on the opening lead than at any other stage of a bridge deal. With only the bidding and your own thirteen cards to guide you, you must make a decision that has the potential, at one stroke, to determine the outcome of the play. In this book, a top player and writer takes you through the questions that need to be asked before selecting an opening lead.

- Should you be active or passive?
- Should you lead partner's suit or your own?
- Should you lead trumps or not?

Learn the answers to these questions, and many more, inside!



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