

DEFENSIVE TIPS by Maritha Pottenger

OPENING LEADS

Best lead is generally **top of a sequence** (or a broken sequence). Against no trump, you promise a sequence of at least three cards (e.g., QJ10x or QJ9x). Against a suit, you only promise two, e.g., KQx.

If your partner has bid, lead that suit. If you have two small, lead the top one (e.g., from 92, lead the 9). If you have three small, lead the top one. If you have three to an honor, lead the smallest one. If you have a doubleton honor, lead the honor. If you have 4 or more, lead 4th best.

If you have scattered honors in several suits, **a trump lead may be best.**

Make an aggressive lead (e.g., underlead a king or queen) **when they have bid easily to a game.**

Make a **passive lead** (e.g., trump or “top of nothing”) **when they have struggled** to get to a contract or when they have bid **slam** (if you DON'T have a sequence—sequence is best lead almost always).

If Declarer has bid two suits and dummy takes a preference, **lead trump.**

FOLLOWING SUIT

Get used to **giving count** when you are following suit. Playing a high card the first time a suit is played and a low card the next time that suit is played says you have an even number of cards (2, 4, 6...) in that suit. Playing low-high says you have an odd number of cards in the suit (3, 5, 7, etc.) When you are following suit (someone else has led to the trick), **play the lowest possible card with which you might take a trick.** For example, partner leads 5 of spades against 3NT. You have QJ2 and dummy plays the 3 of spades. Play the JACK of spades. (If your Jack forces the King from Declarer, partner can reasonably assume you also have the Queen, though declarer might deceptively play the King holding KQ. If you play the Queen partner will definitely assume you do not have Jack.)

When partner leads a suit, **remember to use the rule of 11** if appropriate. (With a 4th-best lead, subtract partner's spot card from 11. The answer is the number of cards ABOVE that spot card in your hand, dummy, and Declarer's hand. For example, partner leads 5 of spades against no trump. Dummy has K 10 4 and you have A J 9. You know that Declarer has only ONE card above the 5 in his/her hand. If dummy's 4 is played, you play the 9. If the 10 is played, you play the Jack. If the King is played, you play the Ace.

DISCARDING

When discarding, you have two objectives: to **guard important suits** and to **give partner information.** **Discarding an unusually high card tells your partner you like that suit.** In guarding a suit, you must **keep enough low cards to protect your honors** from falling under higher honors. Thus, if you have a king in a suit, keep at least one low card with it. If you have a queen, keep at least 2 low cards with it. If you have a jack, keep 3 low cards with it. If you can see from dummy that you are the only person likely to guard the 4th round of a suit, you should try to guard that suit (keep all 4 cards). For example, dummy hold A 10 9 4 of hearts and you hold J 7 5 3. Do not discard any. Or, dummy has A654 and you have 9872. Do not discard any. (The other cards in the suit are likely to divide 3-2, so you and dummy are competing for the 4th round of the suit.) When you are guarding several honor cards in several suits, make priorities (usually guard the most important cards first—or the suits you know partner cannot help you out with).

If you know from the bidding that Declarer (the hidden hand) has a 4-card suit, if you have 4 in that suit, do not discard any until AFTER you see Declarer discard one. For example, RHO opens one club and LHO bids 1S (promising at least 4 spades). They end up in 3NT declared by LHO. Dummy comes down with 3 small spades. You know that LHO has 4 spades, so even if your spades are as poor as 9864, do not discard even one. (Partner could hold J10 doubleton or Q10 doubleton or QJ doubleton, and your 9 guards the 4th-round.)

LEADING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HAND

Lead TOP of a sequence. Lead low (4th-best or 3rd-best) from an honor.

As a general rule, **lead through strength and TO weakness.** For example, if you are to the left of dummy and dummy has ♠ 1095 ♥ KQJ5 ♦ 76 ♣ AQ10 and spades are trump. If you have the lead, you should lead a diamond—dummy's weakness. If Declarer has any high cards, your partner's high cards are behind Declarer. You are, in a sense, finessing against Declarer's holding.

GENERAL RULES (to which there are many exceptions)

Third hand high. Try to win the trick unless there is a good reason to play low. **Second hand low:** third hand will HAVE to play high, so you might as well conserve your good cards.

Cover an honor with an honor (unless Declarer cannot “get” your honor if you refuse to cover, e.g. you hold K542 and dummy has 109. Do NOT cover. Declarer cannot finesse more than twice.) With two touching honors (e.g., QJ87), cover the SECOND touching honor. Do not cover the first time. You usually cover an honor with an honor in order to promote a lower honor in your hand—or in your partner’s hand. For example, Declarer has QJ3 in dummy opposite A52 in his/her hand. If Declarer plays the Queen off dummy and you have the King, duck (the first time). If Declarer then plays the Jack, cover it with the King. The Ace will kill your King, but if either you or your partner has the 10 in that suit, the 10 will take the 3rd round of the suit. Exception: if you have a doubleton King, cover the first time.

When you don’t know what to do, **lead to weakness** (or play trump).

Suit Preference Signals

There are two situations in which you can signal a suit preference to your partner:

- 1) When dummy makes it crystal clear (and I do mean crystal—there must be absolutely no doubt) that a shift (a suit different than your partner’s opening lead) is indicated.
- 2) When your partner gives you a ruff (or you give your partner a ruff).

Suppose, for example, spades are trump and your partner leads the Ace of hearts after both of you have bid and supported hearts. There is a singleton heart in dummy. Partner probably does **not** want to continue hearts (especially if there is any chance that another heart would give Declarer a ruff-and-sluff). So, the size of the heart you play should be a suit preference signal. If you play an extra high heart, it asks partner to shift to the higher of the two remaining suits (trumps are excluded)—which would be diamonds in this case. If you play an extra low heart, it asks partner to shift to the lower of the two remaining suits—in this case, clubs. Note that you have supported hearts, so you have at least three hearts from which to choose. (A middle heart would say you don’t care or don’t know what to do.)

Suppose that spades are trump and partner leads a singleton diamond, and you take the Ace of diamonds. You don’t know that partner’s diamond is singleton, but based on the bidding and/or dummy’s diamond holding, you think it is likely that partner’s diamond is a singleton. The size of the diamond you lead back—hoping partner can trump it—will tell partner how to get to your hand again (for another ruff). If you lead a high diamond for your partner to trump, it tells partner you have an entry (or possible entry) in hearts. If you lead a low diamond for your partner to trump, it tells partner you have an entry (or possible entry) in clubs. An ace is a sure (usually) entry. A king or queen is a possible entry.

Listen to the bidding

- 1) If the opponents bid three suits and end up playing at 5 of a minor rather than 3 NT, they almost certainly do not have good stoppers in the 4th suit. Lead that suit no matter what your holding is. For example, even if you have KJxx, lead a low card. Partner is almost guaranteed to have the Ace or queen or both. For example, 1♣ by LHO, Pass by partner, 1♠ by RHO, you pass, 2♦ by LHO, pass, 3♣ by RHO, 4♣ by LHO, 5♣ by RHO. **Lead a heart!**
- 2) Sometimes opponents have shown a “double fit” with a fit in a side suit along with the trump suit they end up in. If you have 4 cards in that side suit, there is a good chance your partner has a singleton (or is void). Lead the suit, hoping to give partner a ruff. Especially if you have a control in the trump suit (Ax or Kx), lead the side suit, because even if partner has a singleton, you’ll get in with your trump control and can lead the suit again and give partner a ruff. Example: 1♣ by LHO, 1♥ by RHO, 1NT by LHO, 3♣ by RHO, 3♥ by LHO, 4♥ by RHO. If you have 4 clubs, try leading a club. Partner may be able to trump the 1st or 2nd round.
- 3) If your partner has bid a suit and you have 3 or 4 to an honor, the “standard” lead is a low card. However, if dummy has bid NT at any point, lead your honor, hoping to finesse dummy’s holdings. If Declarer has bid NT, lead low (promising an honor), hoping partner can take the first trick and lead through (finesse) Declarer’s honor(s) with your honor behind.