

Opening Leads & signals

© 2004-2009 Barry C. Harper

Why do we have agreements about our leads and how we signal? It is a reason tied in with the very definition of the game. Declarer can see two hands and on his own can make a plan of attack. The defenders need to cooperate in order to defeat declarer's plans.

One of the problems with lead and signal agreements is that the rules require that declarer know about your agreements, so there is information that is shared with my defending partner and the declarer. In spite of this, it is critically necessary to become a good bridge player and a good partnership to have defensive signaling methods.

Remember: Declarer might not believe you, even when you are being honest. A good partner will always believe you (well at least a big majority of the time).

If you were to kibitz the pair who some would say is the best bridge partnership in the world, Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell, you would see that they try and signal clearly to partner what their holdings are and lead normally for the same reason. It is similar with other experts.

In bridge you almost never say never. You can find bridge topics of unusual leads and defensive false cards, but those are rare and limited to specific situations, often when you know because of your hand that partner does not have any values to contribute to the defensive effort. As well there are some so-called obligatory false cards.

LEADS (circle card led, if not in bold)		DEFENSIVE CARDING			
versus Suits	versus Notrump	vs SUITS vs NT			
X R	X X X X	X R	X X X X		
X X X	X X X X X	X X X	X X X X X		
A K x	T 9 x	A K J x	A Q J x		
K Q x	K J T x	A J T 9	A T 9 x		
Q J x	K T 9 x	K Q J x	K Q T 9		
J T 9	Q T 9 x	Q J T x	Q T 9 x		
K Q T 9		J T 9 x	T 9 x x		
LENGTH LEADS:					
4th Best	vs SUITS <input type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>			
3rd/5th Best	vs SUITS <input type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>			
	Attitude vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>				
Primary signal to partner's leads					
Attitude <input type="checkbox"/>	Count <input type="checkbox"/>	Suit preference <input type="checkbox"/>			
SPECIAL CARDING		PLEASE ASK			
<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>			
Standard: <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>					
Except <input type="checkbox"/>					
Upset-Down:					
count <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		attitude <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>			
FIRST DISCARD					
Lavinthal <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		Odd/Even <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>			
OTHER CARDING					
Smith Echo <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		Trump Suit Pref. <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>			
Foster Echo <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>					

Standard agreements and other defensive methods have been devised mainly to aid in playing card combinations that we have not yet seen, before dummy hits. They try and cater to the most likely possibilities. In spite of that, in some cases almost any play can backfire spectacularly. I have seen a lead that looks very safe, the Jack from JT97 give our side an otherwise no play slam.

a) 4th best

A simple principle. Lacking an honour sequence, the lead is the 4th best spot card.

QT6**5**3
K982

QT6**5**
K9872

QT6**5**432
K98732

This does not apply to interior sequences. From QT987, the lead is always the Ten, never the 8 (**AQJT9 AJT98 AT987 KJT98 KT987**). The decision on whether to lead an honour from a sequence or a low card depends on whether it is NT or a suit, what the auction was and the specific holding.

b) The Rule of Eleven.

This is a way for 3rd hand (and unfortunately declarer) to make use of 4th best leads. Deduct the spot card lead from 11. Then subtract the number of higher cards you can see in dummy and your own hand. The remaining number is the number of cards declarer has larger than partners lead.

e.g. Partner leads the 6 in a suit they have bid and dummy has AJ5. Declarer calls for the five and you have Q972.

$$11 - 6 = 5$$

$$5 - 2 (\text{AJ}) = 3$$

$$3 - 3 (\text{Q97}) = 0 !!!$$

Declarer cannot beat the six, so you can play 9, 7 or 2, knowing that partner has lead from KT86. BEWARE OF PARTNERS WHO LEAD M.U.D.

c) Standard Honour leads.

When we lead from an honour sequence, we lead the top of the sequence (**KQx(x) QJx(x) JTx(x) T9x(x)**)

Against a suit contract, the top honour is almost always lead. BEWARE QJx, SINCE FOR ME DUMMY ALWAYS SEEMS TO HAVE ATx or KTx.

Against NT the 4th best card is usually lead, unless the 3rd highest card is close to the 2nd honour (**KQT4 QJ96 JT87; KQ94 QJ86 JT76**), or the sequence is 3 cards in a row (**KQJ2 QJT4 JT95**)

The lead of the Ace against NT is the POWER lead, asking for partner to unblock, or if they hold no honour, to give count (AKJT8 AKQT97 AKQT)

It has also become standard in NT to lead the Queen from KQT9 or KQTx(x). Partner is expected to overtake the queen with the ace (unless the King is visible in dummy), or unblock the Jack if they have it. With no honour they are to give count.

The standard lead is to lead King from AKx, but then there is confusion vs. King from KQx. The solution adopted by most players is to lead Ace from AKx and then the only confusion arises if you have chosen to lead an “unsupported” ace (Axx).

Another solution to the AK problem is Rusinow (Roman) leads, where the 2nd highest honour of a sequence is lead. This solves one problem and creates some others, not the least of which is strain on memory.

Many players also make the following leads, while common they are not standard. Vs. suit contracts: Queen from AKQ(x). Vs. NT: Extended interior sequences, 9 from J987, and extended unblock cards: Ten from JT87. I can’t say that I would recommend any of these, but you should be aware that they are out there. Also vs. suit contracts: Lead Ace from AK when you want attitude and King from AK for count. May solve some problems, but may also give headaches.

d) High & 2nd high from bad suits.

When I lead 4th best I have an honour. For this rule, the ten is sometimes an honour, but usually not. Lacking an honour I lead the highest card from a sequence and the 2nd highest card from a non-sequence.

e.g. T8643 98654 J6543 9754 6543

e) Standard Signals.

Attitude: A high card encourages, a low card discourages. You should always tend to discourage by pitching from a bad suit rather than encourage by discarding from a good suit. Remember, the card you signal with, might be a trick (Of course some partner’s like me need to be hit on the head with a large hammer)

Count: High-low = even number. Low-high = odd number. In general we do not give count signals in a suit declarer plays, unless partner might need that information for a hold-up, and/or it cannot help declarer.

Suit Preference: Limited to specific situations. When discarding a suit on a lead by partner or declarer, that leaves two other suits, one high and one lower. In a trump contract a play in one suit plus the trump suit leaves two other suits, one high and one lower. In both cases, if it is a suit preference situation, a high card = Preference for the high suit. A lower card = Preference for the lower suit.

I would suggest you limit suit preference to three situations. First, when you are leading a suit partner is likely going to trump. The card you lead is a suit preference signal for how to get to your hand for another ruff.

Second, If partner's opening lead is an Ace against a suit contract and dummy has a singleton or Kx, third hands play should be a suit preference signal for a switch.

Third, If you have already given a signal in a long suit (whether it be attitude or count), then later plays in that suit tend to be suit preference, unless the suggestion is impossible. This is one of the main differences between average and expert defenders: *The ability to give and interpret suit preference during the hand.*

MY STANDARD CC

LEADS (circle card led, if not in bold)		DEFENSIVE CARDING	
versus Suits		versus Notrump	
Ⓐ x	(X) X X (X)	Ⓐ x	(X) X X (X)
(X) X X	(X) X X (X) X	(X) x x	(X) X X (X) X
Ⓐ K x	T 9 x	Ⓐ K J x	A Q J x
K Q x	K J T x	A J T 9	A T 9 x
Q J x	K T 9 x	K Q J x	K Q T 9
J T x	Q T 9 x	Q J T x	Q T 9 x
K Q T 9		J T 9 x	T 9 x x
LENGTH LEADS:			
4th Best	vs SUITS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3rd/5th Best	vs SUITS	<input type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>
	Attitude vs NT	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Primary signal to partner's leads			
Attitude	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Count	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Suit Preference	<input type="checkbox"/>	
SPECIAL CARDING		<input type="checkbox"/> PLEASE ASK	
vs SUITS vs NT		Standard: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Except <input type="checkbox"/>	
		Upside-Down: count <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> attitude <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
FIRST DISCARD			
Lavinthal		<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Odd/Even		<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
OTHER CARDING			
Smith Echo		<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Trump Suit Pref.		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Foster Echo		<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

f) Non-standard Methods.

i) Odd-Even Discards (Roman discards)

First pitch (discard) by either player. An odd card is encouraging in the suit discarded. An even card is discouraging and tends to be suit preference.

ii) 3rd and 5th best leads

This helps distinguish between the actual length of the opening leaders suit, while leaving the honour holding in some doubt. If you play this method you must lead small from ~~xx~~x to avoid confusion. It is sometimes superior vs. suit contracts, but not as beneficial vs. NT.

iii) 2nd and 4th best leads

Part of Polish standard methods, it is an extension of 4th best leads, combined with 2nd from bad suits. It is extended to leading small from a doubleton (2nd)

iv) Coded Tens and Nines

In this method the lead of a Jack denies a higher honour. From all interior sequences the 3rd highest card, i.e. the Ten or the Nine is lead, thus they are “Zero or Two Higher”. This method helps defenders, but in my view crosses the line of helping declarer more.

v) Attitude vs. NT

In these methods the lowest card is always lead in any situation that would be a 4th best lead, regardless of whether the suit is four, five or even nine cards long. High or 2nd high is lead from bad suits. It has the advantage of concealing the opening leaders length from declarer, but also from partner.

vi) Upside down count and attitude

The reverse of standard signals. Upside down count carries very little advantage. Low-high = even number. High-low = odd number. Upside down attitude is theoretically better than standard attitude. High = discouraging. Low = encouraging. If you do not

like the suit, you are more likely to be able to spare a big card (discouraging). Remember, that neither method is perfect and a skillful declarer can still lead you down the garden path.

vii) **Modern High Honours vs. NT**

There has been some changes in the last few years to the following scheme. I recommend these changes, but they do require some getting used to.

King – the new POWER lead; asks for unblock or count, so therefore becomes the lead instead of Ace or Queen.

AKJT8 KQT9
AKQT97 KQT76

The lead of the Ace or queen asks for attitude. These cards are lead from honour sequences not as strong as those above.

AKJ65 KQT2
AKT87 KQ983
AK32 KQ2
A76 (That is, if you have decided
 this is the right suit to lead)

viii) **Smith Echo**

A complex but useful method allowing both partner's to signal on how they liked the opening lead. The play to the first suit declarer plays, if it cannot have another meaning, is high-low I LIKED THE LEAD. If by the leader, it would indicate that the suit is now running, or I certainly want it lead back, by third hand it would show the possible honour or the maximum length previously shown.

MY VERY FANCY CC

LEADS (circle card led, if not in bold)		DEFENSIVE CARDING			
versus Suits		versus Notrump			
x x	x x x x	x x	x x x x		
xx x	xxx x x	xx	xxx x x x		
A K x	T 9 x	A K J x	A Q J x		
K Q x	K J T x	A J T 9	A T 9 x		
Q J x	K T 9 x	K Q J x	K Q T 9		
J T x	Q T 9 x	Q J T x	Q T 9 x		
K Q T 9		J T 9 x	T 9 x x		
LENGTH LEADS:		<small>A,Q = Attitude K = Unblock</small>			
4th Best	vs SUITS <input type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
3rd/5th Best	vs SUITS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>			
	Attitude vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>				
Primary signal to partner's leads					
Attitude <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Count <input type="checkbox"/>	Suit Preference <input type="checkbox"/>			
SPECIAL CARDING		<input type="checkbox"/>	PLEASE ASK		
DEFENSIVE CARDING					
Standard:		<input type="checkbox"/>			
Except		<input type="checkbox"/>			
<hr/>					
Upside-Down:		<hr/>			
count		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
attitude		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
FIRST DISCARD					
Lavinthal		<input type="checkbox"/>			
Odd/Even		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
<hr/>					
OTHER CARDING					
Smith Echo (Reverse)		<input type="checkbox"/>			
Trump Suit Pref.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
Foster Echo		<input type="checkbox"/>			

g) Mid-hand leads

Even more than on opening lead, a shift to a low card **GUARANTEES** an honour. It is crucial to let partner know your attitude about the suit. Do you want it returned? If so, lead 4th best. If not lead a higher card (high or 2nd high). Sometimes the fourth best card is relatively big. In that situation you might consider a lower card even if it not fourth best (KJ982)

Starting with trick 2, the lead of an Ace, denies the King. In mid-hand lead King from AK.

h) vs. unusual contracts

Regardless of your AK agreements, the lead of an Ace against a slam denies the King and asks for attitude. From AK, lead the King and partner should give count.

Some people also use the above rule at the 5 level and against doubled contracts. This is up to you and your partner to agree.

If declarer has opened a gambling 3NT, it is common to lead an Ace or even an unsupported King.

i) Avoid leads from xx or xxx.

These types of leads are usually too passive and either give up a vital tempo or tend to help declarer set up tricks rather than us setting up tricks. Also, partner might think when you lead a shorter suit that you might have a singleton. (This suggestion does not apply when partner has bid this suit.)

j) When is partner's lead a singleton?

These are all possibilities. It is not certain that these are singletons, but it is more likely than not.

- i) When you have bid and raised a suit and partner leads another suit.
- ii) When your side bids a suit and partner leads one of the opponents suit.
- iii) When you lead into declarer's second suit.
- iv) see k) below

k) The singleton shift.

If you lead Ace from Ace-King and you have shown this suit, lead the King. If you now shift to another suit it should be a singleton. The unusual lead was a wake-up call for partner.

Third hand play to trick one.

Third hand is the partner of the opening leader. *Our first obligation is to try and win the trick, usually by playing 3rd hand high.* If that is not possible, or partner's lead is an honour that might win the trick anyway or declarer plays an honour from dummy that we cannot beat, we have other obligations.

If partner leads an honour and you have the next higher honour doubleton, you should likely unblock the suit by playing your honour.

e.g. If a suit happens to be this way:

754

QJT87

K3

A92

Opening leader leads the Queen. If as third hand you play the 3, and declarer wins the Ace, your two tricks in this suit (four in NT) have become tangled up. Since the

leader should have QJT or QJ9 to lead the Queen, the King is usually a safe play.

On the lead of a high honour, third hand's play of a lower honour shows the touching honour below (or of course it might be singleton)

754

AKT87

QJ3

92

Against a suit contract, playing Ace from AK, opening leader leads the Ace. Third hand's play of the Queen shows either stiff Queen or promises the Jack. What for? Opening leader can now underlead the King for a shift through declarer. Against NT, the standard lead could be the 8, but probably will be the King. Again, third hand plays the Queen and we run the first five tricks.

754

AK873

QT

J92

Again vs. a suit contract, the opening lead is the Ace. Third hand plays the Ten, which partner believes is likely the start of an echo (high-low). When they cash the King and see the Queen, they know partner is out of the suit. How? If the had QJT, they would have played the Queen at trick one!

754

KQ83

JT6

A92

Again vs. a suit contract, the opening lead here is the King. Third hand's play of the Jack shows either stiff Jack or promises the Ten. What for? So opening leader does not fall for declarer's BATH COUP, if third hand played the 6 and declarer played the 2 and the suit was:

754

KQ83

T96

AJ2

A slightly different situation, again vs. a suit contract, the opening lead is the Ace. Third hand plays the Jack. This does not suggest the Ten, but is the start of an echo (high-low) showing two cards:

754

AK873

J9

QT2

Other than unblocking or signalling with honours, our order of preferences is as follows:

- 1) Attitude: If there is no need to play an honour, we should show by the spot we play if we like the lead or not. Often this is when dummy wins an honour we cannot beat, our attitude signal is an “equal honour” signal. If dummy plays the Queen from Qx, we should signal whether or not we have the Jack.
 - 2) Count: If our attitude is obvious (Usually on a small lead, by our failure to play third hand high) then we should give count.
 - 3) Suit preference: In limited circumstances we can give suit preference

Remember: There is an overriding priority for defending. Making the right play is more important than any signaling agreement.

As you become more knowledgeable you will see situations where it appears that partners play means something, but in specific situations you need to know it may just be a necessary play, usually an unblock. The most common unblock is when you have Kx and partner has led the Queen. We know that partner should have QJT or QJ9, so we can play the King at trick one in order to increase the chances of taking more tricks, and partner must be aware that we could have singleton or doubleton King.

A very tricky situation is as follows: In NT, dummy has Tx and you hold K9x. We have reached crunch time, where declarer is about to make the contact if we don't beat him right now. We have scored our first trick and need four more. Also, you suspect that partner and declare each have four cards in this suit. Kitchen Bridge players might lead the King, while normal defense agreements say you should lead low to show an honour, but what if the suit is like this:

T5
AJ83 Q764 K92

Now the deuce does not work and the King does not work, the only way to take four tricks is by leading the nine!