

Defending No Trump Contracts

When do I start planning the defence?

- × When dummy goes down. No.
- × At the opening lead. No.
- ✓ **As soon as the auction starts. Yes!**



Clues from the Bidding

When your opponents are bidding, they are giving information to each other by their bids. You should be picking up this information too and building up a picture of their hands.

In the following examples, your opponents are good players using a very standard bidding system. They have a 15-17 HCP 1NT. They use transfers to the majors and simple Stayman.

| West | East |
|------|------|
| 1NT | 3NT |
| Pass | |

What do North and South know?

West has shown 15-17 HCP by opening 1NT. East must have at least 10 HCP to bid game. On the other hand, West cannot have as many as 17 HCP because then, East would have investigated a slam. So, East's range is 10-16 HCP.

East cannot have a four card major because Stayman was not used. Since East is happy to play in no trumps, East is very unlikely to have a void. Most likely, East has two or three cards in each of the majors. It is just possible that one of the majors could be a singleton.

West can have as many as four cards in each major. Since West opened 1NT, there can be no singleton; so at least two cards in both majors.

| West | East |
|------|------|
| 1NT | 2♣ |
| 2♥ | 2NT |
| 3NT | Pass |

What do North and South know?

West has shown 15-17 HCP by opening 1NT. Since the game invitation was accepted, West must be at the upper end of the range; so 16-17 HCP. East has made a game invitational bid and so must have 8 or 9 HCP.

East has promised a four card major. It is not hearts so it must be spades. Since East seems happy with no trumps, East most likely has two or three hearts.

West has shown four hearts but denied four spades by bidding 3NT. It is probable that West has two or three spades.

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| 1♥ | 2♣ | 2NT | Pass |
| 3NT | Pass | Pass | Pass |

What does South know?

East has made a game invitational bid and must have 10-12 HCP. Since West accepted the invitation, West must have at least 14 and probably 15 HCP. Because West did not open 2♣ or 2NT, West's upper limit is 18 or 19 HCP.

West has shown five hearts. It is unlikely to be six because then, East would have preferred 3♥ to 3NT. East has denied three hearts by bidding 2NT. It is unlikely that East has a singleton or void in hearts because of the no trump bid. Therefore, East probably has one or two hearts.

After 1♥ – 2♣, many Easts would double if they have four spades. (This is known as a negative double.) Since East did not do this, East probably has two or three spades.

By overcalling at the two level North has promised at least five clubs and 10 HCP. If North has six clubs then the HCP may be slightly lower. With only five clubs, North should have at least three honours to meet the suit quality test. So the suit would be at least as good as QJTxx. If North has six clubs, the minimum would be QTxxxx.

Which Suit do you Lead?

| West | |
|------|-------------|
| ♠ | Q 4 |
| ♥ | Q 5 3 |
| ♦ | T 9 7 5 4 2 |
| ♣ | J 9 |

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| | 1♣ | 1♠ | 1NT |
| Pass | 2NT | Pass | 3NT |
| Pass | Pass | Pass | |

South's 1NT shows 6 to 9 HCP. To invite to game, North must have 16 to 17 HCP; just possibly 18 HCP. Any more and North would have bid 3NT instead of 2NT. South accepted the invitation and must have 8 or 9 HCP. Between them, North-South have 24 to 26 HCP. West has 5 HCP leaving East with 9 to 11 HCP.

East has at least five spades. It could possibly be six although with 9 or 10 HCP, wouldn't East have bid 2♠ rather than 1♠?

South is unlikely to have four hearts because there was no negative double. So, South probably has 2 or 3 hearts.

If North has 16 or 17 HCP and did not open 1NT; one wonders why. Surely North has not got a balanced hand. Still, it can't be that unbalanced because North is happy to play in no trumps. Clubs is North's longest suit. Possibly North has 6 clubs, 2 diamonds, 3 hearts and 2 spades. Or maybe 5 clubs, 2 diamonds, 4 hearts and 2 spades.

To overcall with five spades, East must have two honours including the ace and/or the king. (West has the queen.) To bid 1NT, South almost certainly has the ace or king. Tentatively place East with ♠KJxxx.

What suit should West lead? It should be almost automatic to lead partner's suit after an overcall. The above analysis simply reinforces that decision. Lead the queen of spades.

| | |
|------|-----------|
| West | |
| ♠ | T 8 6 4 2 |
| ♥ | K Q J 9 |
| ♦ | 9 7 |
| ♣ | Q 9 |

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | 1♦ | Pass | 1♣ |
| Pass | 2NT | Pass | 3NT |
| Pass | Pass | Pass | |

South's 1NT rebid shows 12-14 HCP. North's 2NT is an invitation to game showing 11 or 12 HCP. Since South subsequently accepted North's game invitation, South should have 13 or 14 HCP.

North-South have a combined 24 to 26 HCP. West has 8 HCP, leaving 6 to 8 HCP with East.

By bidding 1NT and not bidding a major, South is denying four hearts and four spades. Most likely, South has two or three cards in each of them.

It looks like West should lead a major but which one? Spades is longer but hearts is stronger. It may be possible to establish several tricks in spades but it will need a fair bit of help from partner – and partner may have as few as six HCP. On the other hand, a heart lead may well set up three heart tricks. After that, not a lot is required from partner to beat the contract. Perhaps the ♣J and an ace or a king somewhere may do the job.

A heart lead is your best chance.

Of course, if it's not your day, partner will have ♠AKxx. You discover you could have taken five spades straight away and partner will say "why didn't you lead a spade?" Oh well. You can't win them all.

| |
|-----------|
| West |
| ♠ Q T 8 2 |
| ♥ K 9 |
| ♦ Q T 8 2 |
| ♣ J 7 3 |

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | Pass | Pass | 1NT |
| Pass | 3NT | All | Pass |

South has 15 to 17 HCP. North has at least 10 HCP having bid game. North probably does not have as many as 12 HCP since North is a passed hand. So, North has 10 or 11 HCP.

North has shown no interest in the majors and most likely has only two or three cards in each of them. South has two to four cards in both majors, having a balanced hand. Between them, North-South will have four to seven cards in each major.

Most likely, the defence will have more cards in the majors than the declaring side. Given that, lead a spade rather than a diamond.

| |
|-----------|
| West |
| ♠ Q T 8 2 |
| ♥ K 9 |
| ♦ Q T 8 2 |
| ♣ J 7 3 |

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | Pass | Pass | 1NT |
| Pass | 2♣ | Pass | 2♥ |
| Pass | 3NT | All | Pass |

This is similar to the last example but now, North has used Stayman before bidding game.

The points are the same. South has 15 to 17 HCP and North has 10 or 11 HCP.

North has four spades but not four hearts (having used Stayman but not supported partner's hearts). South has four hearts but not four spades (having not supported partner's spades implied by the use of Stayman).

It is likely that the declaring side will have six or seven cards in each major. That being the case, prefer a diamond lead.

| |
|-----------|
| West |
| ♠ Q T 8 2 |
| ♥ K 9 |
| ♦ Q T 8 2 |
| ♣ J 7 3 |

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | 1♦ | Pass | 1♥ |
| Pass | 1♠ | Pass | 1NT |
| Pass | 3NT | All | Pass |

South's 1NT showed 6 to 9 HCP. Therefore, North must have 18 or 19 HCP to justify the jump to game.

North bid diamonds before spades so the spade length is not greater than the diamond length. If North had five spades, then six diamonds would be needed to justify the 1♦ opening. This cannot be the case since North is happy to play in 3NT. North has four spades and four or five diamonds. North did not support hearts and so cannot have four hearts. Most likely North has one to three hearts.

South has four or five hearts. It is unlikely to be six or more hearts as South would have bid 4♥ over partner's 3NT. South did not support spades and so has less than four. Most likely, one to three.

When the opponent's have bid three suits it is usually a good idea to lead the fourth one. Try a club here. There is every chance partner has five of them.

| |
|-------------|
| West |
| ♠ J 8 6 3 2 |
| ♥ 9 7 5 |
| ♦ Q 2 |
| ♣ K Q 9 |

| West | North | East | South |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | 1♦ | Pass | 1♥ |
| Pass | 3♦ | Pass | 3NT |
| Pass | Pass | Pass | |

To jump to 3♦, North almost certainly has six or more of them and at least 16 HCP. North is unlikely to have four hearts (did not support partner) or four spades (did not bid own major) or four clubs (did not bid a second suit).

South's initial response showed at least 6 HCP. The 3NT bid suggests a couple more. With 16 HCP, South would surely look for slam. So, South has 8 to 15 HCP. South has four or five hearts but not six. Surely, with six hearts, South would have bid 3♥ over 3♦.

South's bid of 3NT sounds like "I would sooner play in game rather than three of a minor. With partner's diamond length we should be able to take nine tricks." The trouble with a gambling bid like this is that there is a weak spot somewhere. It is up to West to find it.

The weak spade suit will take too long to establish. Try the aggressive lead of a club. Hope that partner has five clubs and an entry.

Which Card do you Lead?

Once you have selected the suit you wish to lead, you need to choose which card to play. This is an important decision because you are trying to give your partner information about the suit you are leading. How else will partner know whether to continue the suit or try something else?

With a Short Suit (Two or Three Cards)

When you lead a short suit, you are most likely looking for partner's long suit. It may be that partner has bid the suit or you have deduced partner's suit from the auction.

With a **two card suit** it is easy. Lead the higher card.

With a **three card suit**, it is not so easy.

- With **three worthless cards** such as 9 4 3, lead the highest card.
In general, leading a highish card but not an honour tells partner you have no good cards in the suit. (Some people play a system called middle-up-down or MUD. They lead the middle card and when the suit is played again, the highest card. If you are doing this, you need to discuss it with your partner.)
- With **one honour and two low cards** such as Q 4 3, lead the lowest card.
By leading a low card, you are telling partner you have an honour in the suit.
- With **two adjacent honours** such as Q J 3, lead the higher honour.
If you lead the low card first, you are in danger of blocking the suit. Imagine partner has K 8 7 6 5 and no outside entry. If you lead the three, partner plays the king to force out declarer's ace. That leaves the queen and jack as winners but partner's last two cards in the suit go to waste.
- With two **non-adjacent honours** such as K J 3, usually lead the lower honour.
If the non adjacent honours include the ten as in K T 3, lead the lowest card instead. In the first case, the lead of the jack is an attempt to avoid blocking the suit. This is a difficult lead for partner to recognise but it is the best you can do.

With a Long Suit (Four or more Cards)

Now, you are trying to establish your own suit.

- If the suit is headed by a **perfect honour sequence** such as K Q J or Q J T, lead the highest card.
To be considered a sequence, there must be at least three adjacent cards.
- If the suit is headed by a **near perfect honour sequence** such as K Q T or Q J 9, lead the highest card.
Note that "near perfect" means that the top two honours are adjacent and there is a gap of just one to the next card.
- If the suit has an **internal honour sequence** such as A Q J or A J T or K T 9, lead the second highest honour.
Internal honour sequences can be hard to recognise. They start with a high honour. Then there is a gap of one or two cards. Then another honour and an adjacent card. A holding like Q 9 8 3 is not an internal honour sequence because the nine is not an honour.
- If you have one or more honours but don't have one of the honour sequences, lead your **fourth highest** card in the suit. As before, a low card promises an honour.
- With **four worthless cards**, usually lead the highest card. If the highest card is a nine, lead the second highest instead; the nine is too valuable to waste.

Deal 1

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | North | |
| | ♠ K J T ♥ A T 9 8 ♦ T 9 ♣ A K 8 4 | |
| West | | East |
| ♠ A 9 8 ♥ Q J 7 6 5 3 ♦ 6 5 3 ♣ 2 | | ♠ Q 6 5 4 2 ♥ 4 ♦ A 4 ♣ Q 9 7 6 5 |
| | South | |
| | ♠ 7 3 ♥ K 2 ♦ K Q J 8 7 2 ♣ J T 3 | |

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| West | North | East | South |
| | 1NT | Pass | 3NT |
| Pass | Pass | Pass | |

East should lead the ♠4. North-South have shown no interest in the majors so prefer the major to the minor.

The ♦A is the entry to cash the winning spades.

On a club lead, the contract makes with ease.

Deal 2

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | North | |
| | ♠ T 9 8 ♥ T 9 ♦ K Q 3 ♣ A K 6 3 2 | |
| West | | East |
| ♠ K J 3 2 ♥ A K 6 3 ♦ 9 6 ♣ J 9 7 | | ♠ A Q 5 ♥ J 4 ♦ A J T 5 4 ♣ Q 5 4 |
| | South | |
| | ♠ 7 6 4 ♥ Q 8 7 5 2 ♦ 8 7 2 ♣ T 8 | |

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| West | North | East | South |
| | | 1♦ | Pass |
| 1♥ | Pass | 1NT | Pass |
| 2NT | Pass | 3NT | All Pass |

Note North's disciplined pass. The five card suit and two honours doesn't pass the suit quality test.

East has shown 13 or 14 HCP and West 11 or 12. That leaves North with 12 to 14 HCP.

With a very poor hand, South should look for partner's suit. North has values but didn't overcall in spades at the one level. Because of that, clubs look the best bet. South should lead the ♣T.

When west leads a diamond, north should play Q or K to force the ace. That will guarantee an entry to the winning clubs.

Some players would overcall in clubs notwithstanding the failure of the suit quality test. That makes it even easier for South to find the right lead.

Deal 3

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | North | |
| | ♠ 8 3 ♥ 6 4 ♦ A Q J 7 6 5 2 ♣ J 3 | |
| West | | East |
| ♠ J 6 5 4 2 ♥ A T 5 ♦ 8 ♣ Q 7 5 4 | | ♠ Q 9 7 ♥ K 8 7 3 2 ♦ K 4 ♣ T 9 8 |
| | South | |
| | ♠ A K T ♥ Q J 9 ♦ T 9 3 ♣ A K 6 2 | |

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| West | North | East | South |
| | 3♦ | Pass | 3NT |
| Pass | Pass | Pass | |

When the opponents bid a speculative 3NT based on a long suit, an attacking lead is called for.

An ace is particularly good, because you still have the option of shifting to another suit.

Lead the ♥A.

Deal 4

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | North | |
| | ♠ K J 6 3 ♥ J 8 5 2 ♦ A 5 ♣ T 5 3 | |
| West | | East |
| ♠ A 7 4 ♥ A 9 4 ♦ Q T 4 2 ♣ A J 6 | | ♠ T 8 5 ♥ Q T 7 ♦ K J 8 7 ♣ K Q 9 |
| | South | |
| | ♠ Q 9 2 ♥ K 6 3 ♦ 9 6 3 ♣ 8 7 4 2 | |

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| West | North | East | South |
| 1NT | Pass | 3NT | All Pass |

Once again, the declaring side has shown no interest in the majors.

North should lead from the stronger of the two majors, spades.

Declarer is unlucky to have the same shape in both hands. Still, on any lead except spades, the contract makes. Indeed, on a heart lead, ten tricks are possible.

If North leads the ♠3 and East plays low, South must play the nine and not the queen. That guarantees three spade tricks. The ♦A is the fourth and the defence should get a heart trick when declarer tackles that suit.