

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
			1♣
Pass	1♦	Pass	1NT
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	
♠	T 8 7 6 4 2
♥	J 2
♦	J 7 3
♣	J 4

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

The same auction as last time but now the spades are even longer. There are two problems with spades. (1) We will need a lot of help from partner to establish the suit and (2) even if we can establish spades, we have no entries to cash the winners. With such a woeful hand, the best chance is to lead a heart, hoping to find partner's suit.

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.