

# Opening Leads Against NT

Charles Durrin

Learn from the mistake of others. You won't live long enough to make them all yourself.  
*-Alfred Sheinwold*



# Opening Leads Against NT

- Objective: get the most tricks that you can and set the contract if possible
- Always think about the information available to you
  - The **AUCTION** is the most important source of information
  - What do I know from the bidding? What did the bids mean?
  - Is there anything important you didn't hear?
  - Try to figure out the opponent's distribution
  - What does my hand tell me about the bidding?
  - What can I surmise about partner's hand?

Example 1: (You & Partner Passing)

1NT - 2 ♥ \* (transfer to spades) - 2 ♠ - 3NT

- What do you know to be likely?
- There are no guarantees. Sometimes there are surprises.

Follow the principles herein and you will come up right 80% or more of the time.

The "Wild Man" will make strange leads and will occasionally hit a home run, but you will come out ahead in the long run.

# **Priorities for Leading against NT**

***Ask what the opponent's bids mean after the auction is over and when it is your turn to lead (but not earlier – unless it might change your bid). Then lead....***

- 1. Lead partner's bid suit (bid, double, takeout double)***
- 2. Lead fourth from your longest and strongest***
- 3. Lead top of a Sequence***
  - a) Lead top of an interior sequence***
- 4. Lead a suit that the opponent's have not bid***
- 5. Without useful entries to your long suit, guess which suit might be helpful to partner (opponent's unbid major, especially suits with honors)***
- 6. Against Gambling 3 Notrump, lead an Ace. If you don't have one, lead a King. Look at dummy and you will know what to attack.***
- 7. Make your best Guess from the bidding and your hand***

***These rules are in approximately "priority" order.***

# 1. Lead Partner's Suit

Partner bids a suit or doubles the opponent's artificial bid. Which card do you lead?

1. Lead fourth best if you have four or more
  2. Lead low from three
    - a) Exception: If you have touching honors, lead high
    - b) Exception: If you raised partner, (s)he knows you have three or four. Lead low with an honor and high without an honor.
  3. Lead high with a doubleton
- *"Years ago there were only two acceptable reasons for not leading partner's suit: (1) having no cards in the suit; (2) a death wish." Alfred Sheinwold*

Auction:

Opp	Partner	Opp	You
1 ♣	1 ♥	DBL*	Pass
2 ♣	Pass	3NT	3 Passes

What do you lead from.....

- ♥ Q742 \_\_\_\_\_
- ♥ 103 \_\_\_\_\_
- ♥ Q92 \_\_\_\_\_
- ♥ K9 \_\_\_\_\_
- ♥ 5432 \_\_\_\_\_

Auction:



Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1NT	Pass	2 ♦ *	DBL
Pass	3 ♦	3NT	3 Passes

What do you lead from.....


- ♦ K942 \_\_\_\_\_
- ♦ J103 \_\_\_\_\_
- ♦ 1072 \_\_\_\_\_

# Lead Partner's Suit (continued)

Auction (implied suits):


Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1 	Pass	1 	DBL
1NT	Pass	3NT	3 Passes

What do you lead from.....

 Q 9 7 4 3

 6

 8 6 3

 Q 6 3 2

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Lead Fourth from your Longest and Strongest

- You should usually have an honor or more
- You should have an entry to your hand outside of your suit
- Opponent's shouldn't have bid and rebid the suit

- EXAMPLES

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| ♠ KJ32  | Lead the 2   |
| ♦ Q964  | Lead the 4   |
| ♥ KQ73  | Lead the 3   |
| ♠ AQ832 | Lead the 3   |
| ♦ 97653 | Lead the 5; <b>BUT</b> since that usually promises an honor, some lead the 7 (second highest from 4 or more small).<br><i>Make an agreement with your Partner.</i> |

What do you lead from....

♠ 10 9 7 4 3

♥ K 10 8 6 2

♦ 3

♣ A 2

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

BONUS 1: Partner leads the ♥ 2.

- How many hearts does Partner have? \_\_\_\_\_
- You have three ♥'s and dummy has four ♥'s.
- How many ♥'s does Declarer have? \_\_\_\_\_

# The Rule of Eleven

- Applies only when you or partner leads fourth best
  - Subtract the number of the card led from 11
  - The result is the number of cards HIGHER than the lead in the other three hands

OPENING LEAD	NUMBER OF HIGHER CARDS IN OTHER THREE HANDS
♦ 5	_____
♥ 9	_____
♠ 2	_____; HOW MANY DOES YOUR PARTNER HAVE?

How can this help you?

Dummy  
♥ K 5 2

Partner leads the ♥ 7

You: ♥ A 10 9 3

- Declarer plays the 2 from Dummy. **What do you play?**
- Rule of Eleven:  $11 - 7 = \underline{\quad}$ ?
  - One in dummy (K). Three in your hand (A, 10, 9).
- How many of Declarer's Hearts are higher than the 7? \_\_\_\_\_
- What do you play? \_\_\_\_\_

# More Complicated Example from Chattanooga Regional

- Contract is 3NT

Dummy  
♠ Q 7 **3**

○ The circle shows Declarer's play.

Lead: ♠ 5

You: ♠ K 9 4 2

- How many Spades does declarer have? \_\_\_\_\_
- Rule of Eleven:  $11 - 5 = \underline{\quad}$  [Two in dummy (Q,7). Two in your hand (K,9).]
  - How many of Declarer's Spades are higher than the 5? \_\_\_\_\_
- Which cards can declarer have? \_\_\_\_\_ (Hint: six relevant cards are missing)

## Apply logic and think it through. Be patient.

- If declarer has the J or 10, declarer is going to get a trick.
- If Declarer has the A and the J or 10, she will get two tricks.
- You want to get the most tricks possible: Figure out what helps you!
- Your only hope to get the three or more tricks in the suit is that Declarer has two of (A, 8, 7, 6)
  - You play the 9
- In this real hand, declarer had A 8 and had to win the A or play low.
  - What if he plays low? How many spades does he have left?
- Partner later won a trick and led the J and we got three tricks in the suit.



### 3. Top of a Sequence or Interior Sequence

Your Convention Card shows “Standard Leads” against Notrump in **bold**.

Note: I prefer Ace from AK.

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

As an aside: When you are declarer, ask what the opponent's leads and carding are. It can make a big difference.

# Top of a Sequence or Interior Sequence

- Top of a sequence, preferably three or more in a row

- ♦ QJ 10 9

- ♣ 10 9 8 6

- ♥ QJ 9 6 (the GAP should not be more than one missing card)

- But not QJ53 without good reason (like partner bid them!)

- You may quickly set up their 10 or 9

- ♠ KQ 10 9

- But not from KQ74 without good reason

○ *Card you should lead*

- Top of an Interior Sequence

- ♦ KJ 10 9

- ♣ Q 10 9 7

- ♣ A 10 9 7

- ♥ A J 10 6

Lead: ♥ A J 10 6

Dummy

♥ Q 7 3

Declarer

♥ 9 5

Partner: ♥ K 8 4 2

***What happens if you lead fourth best (the 6)?***

## 4. Lead a Suit that has not been bid

Opp	Partner	Opp	You
1 ♥	Pass	1 ♠	Pass
2 ♣	Pass	2NT	Pass
3NT	Pass	Pass	Pass

Lead a Diamond ( ♦ )

If the opponents did not bid a suit, try to lead a major unless you have a far superior suit

Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1NT	Pass	3NT	3 Passes

- If your hand is OK (a possible entry or so), lead your best major unless you have a really good minor suit to lead
- If your hand is weak (less than about 5HCP), try to lead partner's major

♠ A532

♥ 6

♦ KQJ10

♣ 9432

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

♠ 102

♥ 86

♦ Q8762

♣ Q432

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

## 5. Without useful entries to your long suit, guess which suit might be helpful to partner (opponent's unbid major, especially suits with honors)

- This is the trickiest case. It is a matter of thinking and then doing your best.
- You have a long suit, but without magic, even if it can be set up, you will never get in the lead to take your tricks

Example:

♠ 9 8 7 5 3 2

♥ 10 9

♦ 10 7 4

♣ 5 4 2

There is not much value in leading Spades. Even if you can get them set up, how will you ever win a trick so you can cash your good spades?

- What should you lead? Unless the opponents have bid Hearts naturally, lead the ♥ 10.
- Consider leading Dummy's second bid suit (if there is one)

Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1 ♥	Pass	1 ♠	Pass
1NT	Pass	2 ♦	Pass
2NT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

Consider leading a Diamond, Dummy's second bid suit.

# 5. continued....guess which suit might be helpful to partner....

- Without evidence, a major is a decent bet.

Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1NT	Pass	3NT	3 Passes

Example:

♠ 9 8 7 5 3 2

♥ Q 9 3

♦ 10 7 4

♣ 5 4

There is STILL not much value in leading Spades. It is unlikely your ♥ Q will be an entry once spades are established.

- What should you lead? Unless the opponents have bid Hearts naturally, lead the ♥ 3.

Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1NT	Pass	3NT	3 Passes

Your hand:

♠ A J 9 2

♥ Q J 10 9

♦ K 8 5 3

♣ 5

What do you lead? \_\_\_\_\_ (you might get several different answers from a group of "experts"; that means that there isn't a consensus answer!)

## 6. Lead an Ace (preferred) or King against a Gambling 3NT

- When the Opponent's bid a **Gambling 3NT**, they promise a running minor suit (♣ or ♦) and NO HIGH CARD outside their running minor
  - **Ask to be sure.** Then lead an Ace to see Dummy. Attack!

Opp	You	Opp	Partner
3NT	Pass	Pass	Pass

Your Hand

♠ A J 10  
♥ K 8 6 4 3  
♦ Q J 9 8  
♣ 7

Lead \_\_\_\_\_ to see Dummy, which is....

♠ K 9 8 6  
♥ Q 5 3  
♦ K 7 3  
♣ 9 6 4

Switch to the \_\_\_\_\_

## 6. Make your best guess (similar to rule number 5)

- When the Opponent's don't give you much information AND your hand does not have a clearly "best" lead AND your partner has not bid...
- Sometimes there simply isn't a rule to follow:

Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1NT	Pass	3NT	3 Passes

Your Hand

♠ 9 8 7  
 ♥ 9 8 7  
 ♦ 9 8 7  
 ♣ 9 8 7 6

Lead: Your guess is as good as anyone's.  
 Nobody can rightly say you are wrong,  
 whatever you lead! In duplicate a lot of  
 other people are having the same problem

Opp	You	Opp	Partner
1NT	Pass	3NT	3 Passes

Your Hand

♠ K 9 8 6  
 ♥ Q J 7 3  
 ♦ K 7 3  
 ♣ 9 6

Lead: \_\_\_\_\_

# Review: Priorities for Leading against NT

Ask what the opponent's bids mean after the auction is over and when it is your turn to lead (but not earlier – unless it might change your bid). Then lead....

1. Lead partner's bid suit (bid, double, takeout double)
2. Lead fourth from your longest and strongest
3. Lead top of a Sequence
  - a) Lead top of an interior sequence
4. Lead a suit opponent's have not bid
5. Without useful entries to your long suit, guess which suit might be helpful to partner (opponent's unbid major, especially suits with honors)
6. Against Gambling 3 Notrump, lead an Ace. If you don't have one, lead a King.
7. Make your best Guess from the bidding and your hand

---

Problems to test your skills. Bidding was 1NT-3NT. What do you lead?

1 ♠ QJ32  
♥ K76  
♦ 876  
♣ 543  
Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

2 ♠ K82  
♥ 76  
♦ 9874  
♣ 6543  
Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

3 ♠ K8752  
♥ 76  
♦ A1074  
♣ Q3  
Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

4 ♠ Q82  
♥ K76  
♦ Q874  
♣ 543  
Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

5 ♠ K832  
♥ J6  
♦ 974  
♣ A543  
Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

6 ♠ J10  
♥ 109876  
♦ 853  
♣ 876  
Lead? \_\_\_\_\_



# Test your skills

7

Auction:

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
1NT	P	2♣	P
2♥	P	3NT	P

♠ A 4 3 2  
 ♥ K J 6  
 ♦ Q 7  
 ♣ J 10 8 3  
 Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

8

Auction:

1NT	P	3NT	P (You)
-----	---	-----	---------

Dummy: ♠ 10 9 6

You: ♠ K J 2

Partner leads: ♠ 5 How many spades does partner have?

What do you play? \_\_\_\_\_

9

Auction:

1NT	P (You)	3NT	All Pass
-----	---------	-----	----------

♠ A 8  
 ♥ A 5 2  
 ♦ A 4  
 ♣ 10 8 5 4 2  
 Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

10

Auction:

1NT	P	3NT	P (You)
-----	---	-----	---------

Partner leads: ♥ Q

Dummy: ♥ 5 4

Your hand:




♠ 8 4 2  
 ♥ K 9  
 ♦ A 6 5 3  
 ♣ 10 2


What do you play? \_\_\_\_\_

# Test your skills

11


Auction:

1 	P (You)	1 	2 
2NT	P	P	P

 832

 932


 A76

 J1043

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

12


Auction:

1NT	P (You)	2 	DBL
P	P	2NT	P
3NT	P	P	P

 K1092

 932

 J76

 J1043

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

13

Auction:

1NT	P (You)	3NT	P
-----	---------	-----	---

 QJ97

 K5

 10987

 K43

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

14


Auction:

1NT	P (You)	3NT	P
-----	---------	-----	---

 KJ108

 QJ9

 53




 J1083


Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

# Bonus Test Problems

15


Auction:

1 	P (You)	1 	2 
2NT	P	P	P

 9832

 K9


 J107

 J1043

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_


16


Auction:

1NT	P (You)	2 	2 
2 	P	3NT	P

 9642

 J2



 1076

 Q543

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

17

Auction:

1 	P (You)	1 	P
2NT	P (You)	3NT	All P

 97

 AQJ109

 Q964

 K4

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_


18

Auction:

2NT	P (You)	3NT	P
-----	---------	-----	---

 10762

 AK962

 104

 63

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

# Bonus Questions

19

Auction:

3NT	P (You)	P	P
-----	---------	---	---

♠ A432

♥ K9

♦ 742

♣ J1043

Lead? \_\_\_\_\_

# Answers

- 1) 2 ♠ . Your sequence is not strong enough to lead the Q
- 2) 7 ♥ . Opponents didn't try to play in a major. Your partner has at least four hearts. Try to help set up her suit.
- 3) 5 ♠ . Fourth from your longest and strongest
- 4) 4 ♦ . Fourth from your longest and strongest, although some may choose to gamble and lead a major since the opponent's showed no interest in playing in a Major suit.
- 5) 2 ♠ . Fourth from your longest and strongest
- 6) J ♠ . You have nothing. Try to help your partner.
- 7) J ♣ . Dummy has four spades. There's no chance to set up your 2, 3, or 4.
- 8) K ♠ . Declarer has one card higher than the 6. If it is smaller than the 10, your play doesn't matter. If declarer has the Ace, your play doesn't matter. BUT, if declarer has the Q, it matters. Play the K.
- 9) 4 ♣ . Your suit is pretty weak, BUT you have enough entries to eventually set up your suit.
- 10) K ♥ . Partner is leading from QJXX where the XX have to be from the 10, 8 and 7. If you play low and declarer decides to win the trick, your K is alone and you cannot get back to partner's hand easily. Playing the K allows you to lead the 9 when you get in.
- 11) 2 ♥ . Partner wouldn't (shouldn't!) bid without a suit good enough to tolerate a lead through her/him. Lead the 2 to show that you have three (or one).
- 12) 2 ♥ . Partner wouldn't (shouldn't!) bid without a suit good enough to tolerate a lead through her/him. Lead the 2 to show that you have three (or one).
- 13) Q ♠ . Top of a sequence.
- 14) J ♠ . Top of an interior sequence.

Feel Free to email any follow-up questions you may have: [Cdurrin@Knology.net](mailto:Cdurrin@Knology.net)

# Bonus Question Answers

15) K♥. Lead partner's suit. If you lead the 9, partner will have little or no idea what you have. Also, after leading the 9, you will be stuck with the singleton King and the suit will probably be blocked.

16) J♥. With a doubleton in partner's suit, lead your highest card. If you had three in partner's suit, lead low. If you have touching honors in partner's suit (such as J10 or QJ) lead the higher honor, independent of how many you have.

17) Q♥. Don't be afraid to lead the opponent's suit. You have a reasonable hope of having two entries. It is likely that your partner has at most one entry. If you wait for Declarer or your partner to lead the suit, you will be far behind. By leading the suit yourself, you can guarantee yourself four Heart tricks.

18) 6♥. This lead works if hearts are split around the table (3, 3, 2), or if partner has the Q, or if dummy has the Q and partner has the J.

With the auction as shown, do not lead the A or K. If you do, you have to lead them again to set up your winners. If partner only had two hearts and you lead the A or K first, then partner won't have any hearts left to lead to you when she gains the lead.

This is called, "keeping transportation open".

19) A♠. It is rarely correct to lead an unprotected Ace (an Ace with no King)! Aces are meant to take Kings and Queens! However, when declarer opened a Gambling 3NT, she promised a running minor and nothing outside of her suit. Lead the A♠ to see dummy. Figure out where Dummy is weak (meaning partner and you are strong) and attack there!

Feel Free to email any follow-up questions you may have: [cdurrin@knology.net](mailto:cdurrin@knology.net)

# The four hands in Test Question 18.

W	N	E	S
			P
2NT	P (You)	3NT	P

Dealer: South

♠ 10 7 6 2  
 ♥ A K 9 6 2  
 ♦ 10 4  
 ♣ 6 3

♠ A K 8 ♥ Q J 5 ♦ A Q J 6 ♣ K Q 4	<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">N</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">W   E</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">S</td> </tr> </table>	N	W   E	S	♠ Q 4 ♥ 10 8 3 ♦ K 7 5 3 ♣ J 10 8 2
N					
W   E					
S					

♠ J 9 5 3  
 ♥ 7 4  
 ♦ 9 8 2  
 ♣ A 9 7 5