

Defensive Strategy – Trump Leads

A lot of misconceptions surround trump leads. Here are the times when it is most attractive to make an opening lead of a trump:

- When the opponents have taken a sacrifice and suggested fewer HCP than your side. Sacrifices are usually bid on distribution; if the opponents don't have much distribution, they will usually just let you play your contract for fear of going set a ton of tricks. Therefore when they do sacrifice, it is often vital to lead trumps early to cut down the opponents' ruffing potential.
- When the opponents have bid three or four suits and wind up playing in one of them. If they can't reach notrumps, and they can't support each other's side suits, they usually have distributional hands that need to garner tricks by ruffs. Leading trumps in this situation is often correct.
- When partner has doubled the opponents' part-score contract for penalty. Low-level penalty doubles usually indicate a big trump stack and it is therefore very attractive, if not mandatory, to lead a trump when partner has advertised a powerful trump holding.
- When a passive lead is desired but leading any of the side suits is too dangerous. For example, if the auction goes:

RHO You LHO Pard
1♠* Pass 3♠^ Pass
4♠ Pass Pass Pass

- * Promising 5+ spades.
^ Limit raise, showing 10-12 points and 4 spades.
- It would probably be best to lead a spade from

♠87
♥Q953
♦Q1042
♣Q63

Note that the opponents' 9-card fit makes a spade lead totally unlikely to blow a trump trick, because you know spades are splitting 2-2 for declarer. If partner has Qx and a spade is not led, declarer's percentage play will be to cash the ♠AK anyhow. If partner has Kx, he is either getting one trick or he isn't. No other trump holdings in partner's hand are of interest. It would be reasonable to lead a spade from this hand even if the opponents only showed an 8-card trump fit. If partner holds Qxx - bad luck.

When to Not Lead Trumps

When none of the above conditions are present, seriously consider NOT leading a trump, especially with a singleton which often costs partner a trump trick. Even leads from apparently safe trump holdings may prove painful. I once wanted to make a passive lead against a suit contract and decided the ace from the A2 of trumps was sufficient. The result was a game swing, for the trump layout was:

	Dummy	
	K1043	
Me		Partner
A2		J95
	Declarer	
	Q876	

Had the ace not been led, declarer would have led a trump to the queen and ace, and then finessed into partner's jack later. The lead of the ace solved his problems.