

LEADING AGAINST BLIND NOTRUMPS WHEN ALL ELSE IS EQUAL

A blind notrump auction is an uncontested auction in which no suits have been shown en route to a notrump contract. The simplest examples occur when the opening bid is a natural 1NT, 2NT or 3NT and responder passes or raises.

Sometimes the opening lead stands out (you have a long suit or a sequence). At other times, however, you face a close choice between leads in suits of equal length and comparable strength. Conceivably, you may have identical holdings in each. Here are some tips to help you decide when all else is equal. Ordinarily, your suits are only four cards long; when you have two five-baggers, somebody (perhaps you) is usually bidding a suit, so the auction is seldom blind and you have some clues.

Tip 1. Prefer a major to a minor. You don't want to hit dummy's or declarer's long suit. When responder doesn't use Stayman or Jacoby, he's far more likely to have a four- or five-card minor than a four- or five-card major. Most players are far more likely to open 1NT with a five- (perhaps even six-) card minor than a five-card major.

Tip 2. Prefer a black suit to a red. Opener is more likely to have five hearts than five spades, for opening 1♥ in a hand otherwise suitable for 1NT risks a nasty rebid problem if responder bids 1♠. Opener is also far more likely to have four hearts than four spades when he has a balanced hand with a four- or five-card minor. With four spades and a four- or five-card minor, opener can bid one of his minor, and no response will embarrass him---except when he opens 1♦ with four spades and four diamonds and partner responds 2♣. No such exception can occur when opener has four spades and four clubs, however, which is why you should prefer a club lead to a diamond lead.

Tip 3. Prefer the suit that is *headed by the lower honor*. Notrump play is a game of suit *establishment*, and you want to drive out the opponent's high honors to set up your low ones. Leading the suit in which you have the higher honor may let declarer score a low honor in the suit without having to drive out your high one. Also, if you establish a trick or tricks in the suit headed by the lower honor, your higher honor in the other suit may serve as an entry. Although a lead from a five-card suit is fine, a lead from a four-card suit headed by the ace is undesirable (unless you have AKJ2 or better, in which case you should lead whichever high honor your partnership methods indicate), so undesirable that you should prefer to lead from a short major suit.

Tip 4. Prefer the suit whose *second-highest card is higher*. You have a better chance of establishing a *second trick* in that suit.

Tip 5. Prefer the suit whose *third-highest card is higher*. (The rationale for Tip 4 still applies.)

Tip 6. Prefer the suit whose *fourth-highest card is lower*. In case it's right for partner to switch when he gets in, he'll find it easier to read you as having led from a four-bagger rather than a five-bagger.

Tips 3 and 4 add up to (what else?) Tip 7:

Tip 7. Use your imagination. Picture your partner with identical mediocre holdings in each of your suits. Then ask yourself which lead figures to work better facing those holdings. For example, suppose your choice is between K972 and Q1072 suits. Picture your partner with J83 in each, and you'll know to lead from Q1072 rather than K972.