

Tips for the improver – opening leads

This month's article is the first of a series devoted to **opening leads**. The previous series on the finesse and safety plays were intended to be of help in declarer play. This series aims to help defenders find the opening lead most likely to help them defeat the contract. The importance of that choice can be illustrated best by the reader thinking back to how many times he/she has benefitted as declarer from an unwise choice of opening lead. You've lost count, haven't you!

The key to making the choice most likely to succeed lies in careful analysis of the bidding (and absence of bidding). Let's start with the following hand from which West has to find an opening lead to a 3NT contract reached when South has opened 1NT (15-17 – yes some at Worthing do play a strong NT) and has been raised to game. Before reading further, select your opening lead from:

S 1096
H J8632
D 1098
C 74

The bidding is not very informative but the absence of hcp in your hand suggests that partner has some strength unless the opposition have undervalued their hands and a slam is on. At the table, this West had read somewhere that when leading against NT, if you have a five card suit, look no further for your opening lead. Accordingly, he selected H3 without further thought and the following dummy went down:

S J43
H Q104
D QJ
C A10965

Declarer played low from dummy, East won the first trick with HA and returned a heart. Declarer won with HK and advanced CQ, running it when you failed to cover. East played low but won with CK when declarer repeated the finesse and switched to D6 whereupon declarer claimed the rest of the tricks. The full hand was:

North
S J43
H Q104
D QJ
C A10965

West
S 1096
H J8632
D 1098
C 74

East
S KQ72
H A5
D 6532
C K82

South
S A85
H K97
D AK73
C QJ3

Let's go back to the opening lead selection. What was your choice? West's recall of what he had read was incomplete because I am sure that the book in question will have added somewhere that whilst a lead from a five card suit is a good choice in many situations, it is only a good choice if you can see that there is a prospect of not only establishing the suit but also subsequently gaining entry to cash those winners. In this case, there was clearly little prospect of that outcome and West should have looked elsewhere. Either S10 or D10 would be better choices and given that the opponents had not used Stayman, S10 looks like the better choice. That establishes three spade tricks and with CK and HA results in one off.

One other point: East knew from the bidding (South had advertised at least 15 hcp) that West could not have more than a K and he was effectively end-played at trick one! Even if West did have HK, when East got in with CK he would not have a heart to continue. When in with CK, his only hope was that West held DK. Sadly this was not the case.

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