Lead a passive top-of-three-small against 1NT instead of a broken four-card suit

PAIRS TACTICS

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CONTRACTS of 1NT are just as important as any other (the same number of match-points are available on each and every deal). Indeed, because that is the contract you will be declaring or defending at least as often as any other, mastering the tactics will be highly instrumental to your success as a pairs player.

A 1NT contract is not a sprint. It is a long haul. The key is to stay in the game, and try to control the latter stages. Because you will typically have a second (and third?) chance to find the right defensive attack, you do not need to take risks on lead at trick one before you have a sight of dummy.

Watching (at ninety degrees to) the Poles and other top bridge-playing nations, you see the lead-style versus 1NT that has been prevalent for years. They'll lead from three small cards – giving nothing away – in preference to strong, broken four-card suits such as A-Q-6-2, K-J-8-4 etc. These latter leads give away cheap tricks so often, requiring partner to have a filling high-card, and, as I say, defending 1NT you normally have time to switch.

E/W Game. Dealer South.

	♠ K 8 4 ♥ 9 8 4 ♦ A 7 3 ♣ Q 8 5 2	
♠ A Q 7 6 ♥ Q 7 ♦ 8 5 4 ♣ K J 7 4	N W E S	♠ 10 5 3 ♥ J 10 5 3 ♦ Q 10 9 6 ♣ A 9
	♠ J 9 2 ♥ A K 6 2 ♦ K J 2 ♣ 10 6 3	

West	North	East	South
			1NT
All Pass			

Let's analyse the four leads for West. First, spades. They say of A-Q-x-x-x (that's five cards) that it's the best lead *versus* no-trumps: give one trick up and the suit will often run. A-Q-x-x (four cards) is an entirely different proposition: the worst (they say). You give up a cheap trick (and often more – as on the deal) with little payback.

Let anyone who leads a heart, hoping to find partner at home, play against me for large stakes for a long time. Such aggressive leads are heavy long-term losers. Say no more.

Clubs is another strong but broken four-card suit that is best avoided. Here partner has the ace, yet a club lead gives declarer two tricks (♣4, ♣2, ♣A, ♣3; later ♣10 led through West, pinning East's ♣9]. Left to his own devices, declarer is likely to make no club tricks.

So lead a diamond. Yes, this gives declarer a third diamond trick with his jack. But it is a finesse he could always take for himself – you have given him nothing. On a diamond lead – around to the jack, declarer is likely to lead ace-king and a third heart*, hoping for a 3-3 split. He will be disappointed and although he will score the king of spades later, he will probably go down one. On any other lead, I'm betting declarer will score eight tricks.

A final point: make that diamond lead be the eight – a clear *'high-for-hate'* lead. Don't lead a murky 'MUD' five. (The reason for leading second-top from small cards is so that you can follow higher next time, eliminating the possibility of a doubleton and a ruff. Ruffing is not a factor in no-trumps.) ❐

*Study the heart pips. How about declarer starting with a small heart, to the seven, eight and ten? On regaining the lead, he cashes the ace, felling West's queen (unblocking dummy's nine). He can now finesse against East's ♥J-5, holding ♥K-6 over him, so scoring a third heart trick.

IN the 10th European Youth Pairs Championships held in Opatja, Croatia, in July, the best performance by an English pair was that of Tommy Brass and Alex Roberts, who came seventh in the Youngsters A Final.

In the Junior series, only Ben Paske and Graeme Robertson qualified for the A Final, where they finished 22nd. In the B Final, the highest-placed English pair were David Faria – James Paul who came 18th.

In the Girls series, neither of our pairs qualified for the final.