

My last few articles have been about having a bidding conversation with partner. But when opponents are declaring the contract, our conversation with partner takes place with the cards we play. Just like bidding, we need defensive agreements about how to hold that conversation. Look at this hand where right hand opponent opens 1NT, raised to 3NT.

♠ Q J 10 5 3
♥ 8 6 4
♦ 10 9 8
♣ K 7

Which card do you lead from this hand and why?

Spades are your best suit and so offer the best chance to create enough winners to beat the contract. That's the first message you send with your lead. But you also send a message with the size of the card you lead?

It has to be one of the ♠Q ♠J or ♠10 because you want to drive out declarer's ♠A and ♠K if he has them. Leading ♠5, the fourth highest, won't drive out declarer's big cards; it has to be an honour. When declarer's big spades are driven out, your hand will have three winners to cash. It doesn't matter whether you choose ♠Q or ♠J or ♠10, in that either would drive out a high card in spades. But the card you choose sends a message to partner and our agreement is that we lead the top card from a sequence. So you must lead ♠Q which says 'I hold ♠J and probably ♠10 too' If your partner is looking at the ♠K or ♠A it will help in deciding how to defend, as partner will know that declarer has only one stopper in spades.

♠ A 4
♥ K 10 2
♦ Q 7 3
♣ Q J 10 8 4

You lead ♠Q from the hand above and dummy goes down with this hand – five clubs but only 12 points. Declarer hasn't got many values to spare on this deal – perhaps 3NT can be beaten. Declarer wins ♠A in dummy and leads ♣Q. With only two clubs you win ♣K, but what do you play next?

Before answering that last question, you should ask me one first – what card did partner play at trick one? Just as you sent a message with ♠Q, so partner begins answering that message using the card with which he follows suit. Did you notice it? Most players just quit the trick without examining the small cards played, but they too send a message.

Watch the cards your partner plays. They should carry a message for you.

The card partner plays depends on your agreements, but using Standard English leads and signals, the first card played shows your attitude to the suit led. A high card is encouraging, saying 'I like this lead' whilst a low card is discouraging and says 'I have nothing in this suit to help you take spade tricks'. You can remember these meanings with the word held:

HELD = High Encouraging, Low Discouraging.

Which card do you think partner should play with each of these hands on your ♠Q lead?

♠ 8 2
♥ J 9 7
♦ A K J 5 2
♣ 9 6 2

With this hand, your partner has nothing exciting in spades and sends that message by playing ♠2. Partner would very much like you to switch to a diamond and seeing no future in spades you might well play ♦10 when you win the ♣K.

♠ K 8 2 ♥ J 9 7 3 ♦ A J 2 ♣ 9 6 2	With this hand partner knows you have found a good lead. Playing ♠8, a high card, sends the message 'You have found a good lead, please continue spades if you get the lead'.
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♠ K 8 ♥ J 9 7 ♦ A J 6 5 2 ♣ 9 6 2	With this hand too, partner knows you have found a good lead. But playing ♠8 is not enough. Whilst partner can win ♠K on the next round, he won't have a third spade to play back to you. He must play ♠K under ♠A. Partner has to hope your spades are good enough to set the contract.
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♠ 8 6 2 ♥ J 9 7 3 ♦ K 6 5 3 ♣ A 2	Without a useful spade, this hand plays the discouraging ♠5 at trick one. But at trick 2, when declarer leads a club, partner should pop up with ♣A and play back the ♠8. This will drive out declarer's ♠K and establish winners for you to cash when you win the ♣K.
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♠ 8 7 6 2 ♥ Q J 7 ♦ A 6 2 ♣ 9 6 2	You might think that this hand should play a discouraging ♠2, but you would be wrong. With four spades, partner would want you to continue spades and set up winners to cash later. Holding red suit stoppers, he hopes he will get the lead before declarer can cash nine tricks. The correct signal is ♠6 encouraging you to continue spades if you get the lead.
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♠ 8 6 2 ♥ J 9 7 3 ♦ K 6 2 ♣ 9 6 2	With this hand your partner knows you have a good hand, since declarer has at most 26 HCP between his two hands. Holding only 4 HCP, partner can work out that you have at least 10 and maybe 12 points. Not wanting a switch, it is probably best to play ♠6
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Suppose declarer doesn't play the ♠A at trick one, will it alter the meaning of the card your partner plays? Probably not. With ♠K 8 alone partner will still play ♠K and return the ♠8 to drive out the ace. With ♠K 8 2, partner should also play ♠K to make the spade position quite clear and set up the spade winners. It doesn't actually hurt to play the ♠8, but ♠K must be dropped under the ♠A to unblock the suit.

When partner leads an honour card, use the information to unblock the suit and make sure partner's winners can be cashed.

♠ 9 8 ♥ J 9 7 ♦ A K J 5 2 ♣ 9 6 2	And every now and again partner will have to play a high card when they don't want to. This hand has to play its lowest spade, ♠8, but it may prove misleading. No system is perfect!
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