

Improve your bridge with me

By Migry Zur Campanile

After having looked over the last few issues at the problems facing declarer it seems only right to jump on the other side of the fence and try and approach what is for sure the most difficult side of a difficult game: defense.

The first hurdle defenders need to overcome is the opening lead. The subject of opening leads is a lot like the problem of searching for your first job. You're likely to be told: "We would hire you if you just had experience." "But how can I get experience if no one will hire me?" And so you go from door to door, being constantly turned away and never acquiring the experience you need - until you get lucky. So it is with opening leads. Until you learn what defense is about, you're not likely to select a good lead. But unless you start with a good lead, you defend under a great handicap and it will take you longer to improve your defensive skills. A vicious circle that is hard to break.

My personal tips to those who ask my advice on this tricky subject are:

1. Avoid laying down aces.
2. Lead from the combination that has more high cards in sequence.
3. Don't lead a trump unless the bidding strongly suggests declarer will need ruffing tricks to make his contract.
4. When you have four trumps including an honor, don't lead a short suit looking for ruffs. Lead a long suit in an effort to weaken declarer's trump holding.
5. Short suit leads are best if you have reason to suppose you will actually get the ruff you are looking for. This means that partner can be relied to have the points which make the lead a good bet.

However the best tip of all concerning opening leads is to **try and look not for the best lead but for the worst one. Then consider what would be next worst, then what lead would be bad but still somewhat better. When you have eliminated all the bad leads, the only one left in your hand must be right.**

Let us look at an instructive hand to show what I mean:

Suppose South is the dealer and you are West (East-West vulnerable) and you hold:

♠ A104
♥ A
♦ AJ842
♣ 9632

The auction proceeds:

West	North	East	South
			1♥
Dbl	Rdbl	Pass	Pass
2♦	3♥	Pass	4♥
Pass	Pass	Pass	

What do you lead?

The worst card you could possibly lead is the ♥A, "to see dummy" one might say (one of the most disastrous maxims ever to plague bridge). Declarer is always anxious to locate the ace of trumps. When he drives it out, control of the play usually passes from the defense to declarer and by leading it, you will make life a lot easier for him.

The next worst lead is the ♠A. The probable effect of this lead will be to set up declarer's king and queen and again cost whenever declarer would normally need to guess the layout of the suit.

What about underleading the ♠A?

Terence Reese, the late British champion, used to say that underleading an ace is an excellent idea if you plan to look for a new partner. Occasionally, very occasionally, such a lead may work for its deceptive factor but not here, since the bidding pretty well marks us with all the remaining high cards.

Leading or underleading the ace of diamonds is open to pretty much the same objections, although it is slightly more likely to lead to a ruff by partner. However, if partner had been very short in diamonds, you might have been doubled in two diamonds, or the opponents might have bid notrump.

We are left with a club. The ♣9 may prove too valuable to waste on opening lead. Whether you lead the ♣6 or the ♣2 is more a matter of partnership style and tactics than of any firmly established principle. Personally I like to lead second from a bad suit so at the table I led the ♣6.

This was the entire hand:

	♠ Q982	
	♥ Q95	
	♦ KQ6	
	♣ K105	
♠ A104		♠ 765
♥ A		♥ 7642
♦ AJ842		♦ 1097
♣ 9632		♣ QJ8
	♠ KJ3	
	♥ KJ1083	
	♦ 53	
	♣ A74	

For once, declarer did not look at my lead and break into a big smile. He played the ♣5 from dummy, captured partner's ♣J with his ♠A, and led a diamond toward dummy. I played low, and dummy's ♦Q held the trick. Now declarer wanted to return to his hand to lead another diamond toward dummy's ♦K, but because I still had both major suit aces, he could not do this. He led a heart to the ♥J and I was in with the ♥A. I continued with a second club which declarer won with dummy's ♣K.

Declarer drew the outstanding trumps and led his remaining diamond toward dummy. This time I took my ace. I led a club to partner's ♣Q and she returned a spade to my ♠A. Declarer was down one in a contract that most defenders would have allowed to make. He had the material to assemble ten tricks, but the defense did not give him the time.

A simple hand, but very instructive, for it puts the spotlight on the most important aspects of card play, both for the defense and declarer: timing and communication. Note that the defense did not actually increase declarer's problems. It simply did not help him solve the problems he began with - disposing of his third-round club loser. The diamond ace was favorably positioned for declarer, enabling him to set up two diamond winners. But because the defense did not release its aces prematurely, declarer did not have sufficient communication to take advantage of the favorable lie of the diamonds before the defense had taken the setting tricks in clubs.