

Leads against suit contracts by Sandra Landy

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Not everybody realises that we do not always lead the same card to a trump contract as we would lead to a no trump contract. For example, I say

Never underlead an ace against a suit contract – if you must lead that suit, lead the ace.

It's a good general rule that has very few exceptions. This deal came up only last week:

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

North opened 1NT and South bid Four Spades. West was on lead and chose to lead a fourth highest heart, the ♥3. Whilst that would be a normal lead to 3NT, it is wrong against 4♠ as this deal shows. After winning the ♥K, Four Spades made, losing one Spade, one Diamond and one Club. The second table wasn't any better when West led a fourth highest club. South won the ♣10 and now didn't have a club loser, again Four Spades made.

At the third table West led the singleton ♦6, hoping to get a diamond ruff. After winning the ♦A, South played the ♠Q and finessed. West won and hoping to get partner in for a diamond ruff, West underled the ♥A. But South won the ♥K, drew trumps and ducked a diamond to East. This time South made eleven tricks.

Only one West remembered my wise words about not underleading aces and led the ♣K. Now the defence could win a trick in each suit and Four Spades went one down.

But what clues are there that help West choose a lead?

Try counting points. West has 12 HCP, North has 12-14 HCP to open 1NT, expect North to have 13 HCP. South has bid game, so probably has at least 12 HCP. Together that makes about 37 HCP, leaving around 3 HCP for East. So N/S have all the missing high cards except perhaps for the odd Jack or Queen. On a singleton lead, West will need to give East the lead to get a ruff and it's unlikely that East will have a suitable high card to do so.

West should appreciate the need to set up some winners for the defence and lead a club. But that brings in my second bit of good advice.

Don't always lead the same card from a suit when leading to a trump contract as you would to a no trump contract.

When leading against a no trump contract, you often lead the fourth highest card in a suit without a strong honour sequence. Even if you give a trick away with your lead, you might set up winners in your long suit. But when opponents are playing in a suit contract, they can use their trumps to ruff your winners, so you need to cash your tricks more quickly. Against 3NT West might lead the ♣6, but against 4♠, West should lead the ♣K.

I will change the deal a bit, suppose the auction went:

North	East	South	West
1♦	pass	1♠	pass
2♠	pass	4♠	all pass

What card do you lead from:

♠ A 6
♥ A 8 5 2
♦ J 10
♣ K Q 8 4 2

This time, you have 14 HCP, so can't expect anything useful from partner, at most a couple of points. Against 3NT you would lead the ♣4 from this hand; partner might just produce the ♣J. Against a spade contract the third club might be ruffed, we must be sure to take our winner while we can. Best is to lead the ♣K, dummy goes down and partner plays the ♣9 at trick one.

When you win the ♠A, you cash the ♣Q and partner plays the ♣6. Remember that on your king lead, our agreement is that partner will play an encouraging card if they like the lead and don't want you to switch to another suit. So partner's play of the ♣9 followed by the ♣6 could show either ♣J 9 6 or just a doubleton ♣9 6. In either case partner is encouraging a continuation and it cannot hurt. You play a third club and partner ruffs. Your ♥A gets Four Spades one down. The full deal was

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

Since East has few points and opponents have stopped in game and not looked for a slam, East knows that West is likely to have some good high cards. There must be a reasonable chance that West holds either the ace or king of trumps, in which case East can score a club ruff.

Playing a high-low signal on partner's king lead against a suit contract is encouraging a continuation of that suit. You might have a useful high card or you might have a doubleton and be hoping for a ruff.