



# Adventures in Bridge

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## *This Week in Bridge*

### **(501) Return Partner's Lead? If Shift, then How?**

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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#### **General**

As in many places in life, the word "always" is a dangerous one to use in bridge. There are few things that are true on every bridge hand. One of the most important things to learn to develop into an excellent bridge player is to collect all the information available to you and then make use of that information to make the best bridge decision possible. One place where this process very much applies is on defense when we gain the lead as 3<sup>rd</sup> hand (behind the dummy) and we must decide whether to return partner's opening lead suit or shift to another suit. It is often a good idea to return partner's lead (they did lead it for a reason), but when to choose to shift to a different suit is a difficult and important decision. Let's look at what to consider and when it may be best not to return partner's opening lead.

#### **Suit Contracts - Ruffs**

The first situation where we will not return partner's lead is when we started with a singleton in their suit. Clearly, we cannot return their lead when this is the case. If we are defending a suit contract and we regain the lead while we still hold a trump, we want to find a way to get partner on lead so that they can give us a ruff in the suit they originally led.

There are other situations where we may want to focus on getting ruffs for our side as well. One may be that we think that partner has led a singleton, and in that case, we want to return partner's lead and attempt to give them a ruff. We can often recognize that partner's lead was from shortness by the length and strength of that suit in the dummy or in our hand. This can help us decide about shifting or trying to give partner their ruff. It is important to get this situation right because partner is usually not very happy if they had a chance to get a ruff and we failed to give it to them.

Yet another time when ruffing comes into our decision-making process about returning partner's lead is when we have a singleton of our own in another suit. In this case, we may choose to shift to our singleton, especially if it looks possible that partner may hold the Ace of this suit. This may be the case if we win the opening lead and choose to shift at trick 2 or if we get on lead later in the hand, while we still hold a trump.



### **Suit or NT Contracts – Facing Danger**

We may choose not to return partner's lead when the suit is still controlled by the opponents (for example, the Ace is still in the dummy) and there is a source of tricks ready to go for declarer. In this case, we must get any tricks we are going to take now; with the Ace of partner's suit sitting in the dummy, we know that there are no immediate tricks available there. Thus, we should shift to another suit (often dummy's weakest suit) and try to collect tricks there.

### **Suit or NT Contract - Positional Honors**

We also may choose not to return partner's lead when the suit does not look right to attack from our side. Let's look at an example of this kind of situation:

*Example*

	K32	
JT76		A98
	Q54	

Here, when partner leads the Jack and declarer plays low from the dummy, we encourage but do not win our Ace at trick 1. When we gain the lead, we hold the A9 behind dummy's Kx, and do not want to lead this suit from our side. So, instead of returning partner's lead we shift to another suit, trying to get them back on lead, so partner can lead through dummy's honor and allow us to take two tricks in their suit.

### **Suit Contracts – Partner Bid a Suit and Did Not Lead It**

When partner overcalls or opens the bidding with a suit and then chooses to lead a different suit against a suit contract this is often because (assuming they did not lead a singleton) they have a holding in their suit they did not want to lead away from – often a holding containing the Ace. In this case, partner would like us to gain the lead and shift to their suit, not return the suit they have led. Partner will often lead a high card (like the top of nothing) in another suit to let us know not to return that suit, but instead to shift to the suit they bid in the auction.

### **Getting More Information from Partner – Cash a Side Winner**

When we have a winner in a side suit (like AK, or even just Ace), we have another option than to just guess whether we should return partner's lead or shift to a new suit when we first gain the lead. This is especially true if we think that partner led a singleton, but we are not certain. In this case, we can cash one of our side winners and see what partner tells us do. If partner encourages this suit, they are telling us to keep playing this suit (they did not lead a singleton) and are not unhappy with our shift. But if partner discourages this new suit, they are saying "please return my original lead" (e.g., if it looked like they may have led a stiff, they did and they want their ruff!) Getting this signal from partner can be very helpful in directing our defense while we are on lead.



## Partner Signals Us What to Play

In some situations, partner may have been able to signal us what to do by making a discard before we gain the lead. But unfortunately, this is not always the case. Partner may have other tools (if we play them) available to help us make a decision about whether to return their lead or shift to another suit:

- In notrump contracts a common tool for helping direct partner is *Smith Echo*. This is a tool that allows partner to tell us if they like their opening lead (and would like it returned) or if they would like us to shift to another suit.
- In a suit contract partner also has a tool for helping direct us in what to do when we gain the lead. This is *Trump Suit Preference*. Partner can use their little spot cards to help direct us in what suits they prefer. This can help us determine if it is better to return their opening lead or shift to the suit that seems most attractive. If partner does not signal for dummy's weakest suit with their Trump Suit Preference, they often want their opening lead returned.

When we are 3<sup>rd</sup> hand, sitting behind the dummy, and we gain the lead, either at trick 1 or later in the play, partner will expect us to return their lead. But we do not just blindly do so. We should consider the situation and all the information that is available to us to help us make a good choice between returning partner's lead or shifting to a new suit. We try to use all our tools and take into account any signals from partner to find the best play for our side!

## Shifting to a New Suit

Most partnerships have many agreements about the meaning of their opening leads, but when we lead a new suit in the middle of the hand (after trick 1), then we also need to have good agreements about the meaning of these cards, which are often different than our opening lead agreements. Here we look at these agreements in more detail.

## Attitude Shifts in Middle of the Defense

When we lead a new suit in the middle of the hand, we attempt to let partner know our attitude in this suit. We generally lead high from a holding without any honors and low to show a holding that contains an honor. This is true when leading through the dummy or through the declarer.

Here are common lead agreements in the middle of the hand, from a variety of different holdings:

- 98x
- 732
- 7632
- Q543
- K743
- A73 - From this holding we may lay down the Ace, getting an attitude signal from partner (to help us decide if we want to continue the suit) or we may underlead our Ace (hoping to put the declarer to a guess.)



- **Q7643** – Here we lead low to show an honor. We could lead our lowest or our 4<sup>th</sup> best, whatever will help partner. Some partnerships agree to play 4<sup>th</sup> best, attempting to combine some attitude and count information.
- **J743**
- **T632** – Here we do not want to waste the Ten, so we save it and lead our second highest.
- **QTx** – Here we may need to lead an honor to stay on lead (and lead through the King). In this case we may lead either the Queen or the Ten, hoping to keep partner from getting endplayed.

The goal when leading these suits is to help partner visualize where the missing honors are located. We lead an honor (similar to when we are on opening lead) when we have touching honors.

Leads from touching honors in the middle of the hand:

- **KQxx**
- **AKxx**
- **QJxx**
- **JTxx**
- **T983**

With this lead agreement, partner can have an idea of where some of the middle honors are located, in our hand or in declarer's.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Leads in the Middle of the Hand**

Though these lead agreements can help partner work out what is going on, they still leave some complexity for partner. Some partnerships choose to use 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> best leads in the middle of the hand in an effort to help clarify some of these more complicated situations. These lead agreements are used to show both attitude and count. The idea is to lead 4<sup>th</sup> best from a 4+card suit that has a decent honor (Jack or higher). We also use the lead of 2<sup>nd</sup> best from a 3-card or longer suit without an honor.

*Note: We still lead top of a doubleton; some partnerships handle Hxx by leading low, while other partnerships choose to lead their middle card.*

Here are some leads we would make playing 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in the middle of the hand:

- **Q742** – Here the lead of the 2 tells us partner has a 4-card suit and an honor.
- **Q7652** – The lead of the 5 tells us partner likely has an honor and either a 4-card or 5-card suit.
- **T732** – The 7 is high enough for us to read that partner does not have an honor. We do not know if partner has a 3-card suit or a 4-card suit.
- **T72** - The 7 is high enough for us to read that partner does not have an honor. We do not know if partner has a 3-card suit or a 4-card suit.
- **862** - The 6 is high enough for us to read that partner does not have an honor. We do not know if partner has a 3-card suit or a 4-card suit.
- **JTx** – Most partnerships lead the Jack from touching honors, but some choose to lead 2<sup>nd</sup> best even from touching cards and thus would lead the Ten from this holding.



## Conclusion

Working together with partner to defend a hand is a challenge. We want to have agreements with partner that allow us to help clarify situations and make defending a hand easier. Having agreements about how we attack new suits is an excellent way to improve our communication with partner. Spend some time discussing these situations with your regular partners and see if having detailed agreements can make defending the hand easier for both of you!