

July, 2024

To: Fellow Bridge Players

From: Bill Voedisch

**Re: A Tutorial on "Opening Leads" and "Signals"**

I have put together the attached tutorial on what I think is the most mysterious part of the convention card for many players: the bottom of side 2, "OPENING LEADS" and the companion section on "Signals."

There are many card combinations shown featuring honors ("honors in combination"), and one of the cards is highlighted as the correct opening lead "Versus Suits" and "Versus No Trump." At No Trump, do you know why the J is the correct lead from AJTx? What should partner play with K73 with the Q in dummy? What about with **no** Q in dummy?

Do you know why the J is the *wrong* lead at a suit contract?

The attached answers these and many other questions on "Opening Leads" and "Signals." It is meant to be a complete, stand-alone document that can be used at your own pace. I encourage partnerships to review this together. *Print it out and takes notes right on the document.*

If you have questions or comments, you may email me, or TXT to 651-303-0225.

Our goal is to eventually hold a "Q and A" session at the Woodbury Bridge Club on this topic, where you bring your questions. It would take place at a Monday 11 AM "coaching" time.

If you and your partner(s) can get in synch on Opening Leads and Signals, your game, and your results, will improve.

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NOTE: We know this is a lot for the Woodbury "Chat" group to tackle. We will therefore hold learning sessions on this topic during the normal Tuesday "Chat" time, where we go thru it step by step at whatever pace works best.

Cordially,



## OPENING LEADS

<p><b>LEADS (circle card led, if not in PURPLE)</b></p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <th style="width: 50%; text-align: left;">Versus Suits</th> <th style="width: 50%; text-align: left;">Versus NoTrump</th> </tr> <tr> <td>Xx    xxxX</td> <td>Xx    Xxxx</td> </tr> <tr> <td>xxX    xxxXx</td> <td>Xxx    xxxXx</td> </tr> <tr> <td><span style="color: purple;">AKx</span>    T9x</td> <td>AKJx    AQJx</td> </tr> <tr> <td><span style="color: purple;">KQx</span>    KJTx</td> <td>AJT9    AT9x</td> </tr> <tr> <td><span style="color: purple;">QJx</span>    KT9x</td> <td>KQJx    KOT9</td> </tr> <tr> <td><span style="color: purple;">JT9</span>    QT9x</td> <td><span style="color: purple;">QJTx</span>    QT9x</td> </tr> <tr> <td><span style="color: purple;">KQT9</span></td> <td><span style="color: purple;">JT9x</span>    T9xx</td> </tr> </table> <p><b>LENGTH LEADS:</b></p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td>4<sup>th</sup> Best</td> <td>vs SUITS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> <td>vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>3<sup>rd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Best</td> <td>vs SUITS <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>vs NT <input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>Attitude</td> <td>vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>	Versus Suits	Versus NoTrump	Xx    xxxX	Xx    Xxxx	xxX    xxxXx	Xxx    xxxXx	<span style="color: purple;">AKx</span> T9x	AKJx    AQJx	<span style="color: purple;">KQx</span> KJTx	AJT9    AT9x	<span style="color: purple;">QJx</span> KT9x	KQJx    KOT9	<span style="color: purple;">JT9</span> QT9x	<span style="color: purple;">QJTx</span> QT9x	<span style="color: purple;">KQT9</span>	<span style="color: purple;">JT9x</span> T9xx	4 <sup>th</sup> Best	vs SUITS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3 <sup>rd</sup> /5 <sup>th</sup> Best	vs SUITS <input type="checkbox"/>	vs NT <input type="checkbox"/>		Attitude	vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Primary signal to partner</b></p> <p>Attitude <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Count <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Suit Preference <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p><b>DEFENSIVE CARDING</b></p> <p>Standard vs SUITS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> vs NT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Except <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p><b>Upside Down</b>    Count <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Attitude <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p><b>FIRST DISCARD</b></p> <p>Lavinthal <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Upside Down <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Odd / Even <input type="checkbox"/></p>
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### OPENING LEADS at No Trump

We are using the LEADS section at the bottom of the back of the Convention Card. Our general approach is "Standards Leads, Standard Signals." We lead 4<sup>th</sup> best at No Trump so we mark the box for "4<sup>th</sup> Best vs NT" at the bottom.

We also check any "Attitude" boxes since we generally show attitude, not count. Exceptions where count is important are covered later.

The proper lead is shown in purple but the examples for leading from all small cards are not correct. We will cover these later.

When your suit contains "honors in combination" (remember this term) there are many exceptions to 4<sup>th</sup> best, and you will be leading a high card. These are shown in the "Versus Suits" and "Verses No Trump" portion of the card and will be covered later, one at a time.

If the opening lead is an honor card, 3<sup>rd</sup> chair is generally signaling, that is, showing "attitude." For signals, when playing to a trick, generally high cards encourage, low cards discourage. There are also "unblock" plays that 3<sup>rd</sup> chair should make.

**When we discuss opening leads we also consider what partner should play to the trick. They are part of the same trick and both plays should be considered together. Also, what is in dummy will often dictate what card 3<sup>rd</sup> chair plays.**

When we lead 4<sup>th</sup> best we *usually*\* want partner to play their *highest* card, "3<sup>rd</sup> hand high."

\* NOTE: “**Rule of 11**” is a special topic and goes like this: When the opening lead is 4<sup>th</sup> best, if you take the lead card, for example the 6 of clubs, and subtract 6 from 11, you arrive at 5, which is the number of club cards in the other 3 hands ... dummy, 3<sup>rd</sup> chair and declarer ... that are *higher* than the 6. Properly understood and used, the Rule of 11 can help declarer make the best play from dummy and also help 3<sup>rd</sup> chair make the best play ... and it may not be the 3<sup>rd</sup> hand’s highest card.

*We will go no further with the Rule of 11 at this time; it needs to be a separate discussion. For now, play 3<sup>rd</sup> hand high if partner starts 4<sup>th</sup> best.*

**Of course we play the lowest of equal honors in 3<sup>rd</sup> chair, and as declarer we play the highest of equal honors when winning a trick.**

Use “BoSToN” to help make your opening lead, or any lead during the play of the hand. BoSToN is “Bottom of Something, Top of Nothing”

“Bottom of Something” means we lead small (might be from 3) from an honor: A, K, Q or J

“Top of Nothing” are not quite right as shown on the card for both Versus Suits and Versus No Trump. Versus No Trump lead top of 3 so that’s correct on the card. From 4 or 5 small cards don’t lead 4<sup>th</sup> best; partner will assume you have an honor. Generally, lead the top card.

There is an important exception to leading top from 4 or 5 with no honor, and that is, if the top card is the T or 9. In these cases lead your second highest card: T8xx 96xx

Why? Your T or 9 may win a later round of the suit. Don’t waste it!

What about new suit leads later in the hand by the defense? It can be frustrating when the defense starts a new suit and they give away a trick, so it is often not best to start a new suit on defense. But if it makes sense to start a new suit, remember BoSToN again. Starting a small card promises something.

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What if your side bids a suit? What card do you lead at NT?

If you bid a suit, partner did not raise and are on lead, decide if you want to lead it. RHO is declaring at NT and they may not fear your suit, thus 4<sup>th</sup> best might not be right. If partner raised your suit lead 4<sup>th</sup> best or if you have honors in combination consider one of those leads, remembering that the opponents honor (s) in the suit likely reside with declarer.

Leading from honors in combination is often right whether partner supported you or not. More on this later.

If partner bid a suit and you hold an honor, lead low: Q62, K763.

If you hold 3 or 4 and no honor, lead top: T63, 9742, 832

Of course, lead top from a doubleton in partner’s suit.

## Opening Leads vs No Trump, left hand column

We have covered what to lead from weak holdings. Starting on line 3 we are now considering what to lead from strong holdings; "honors in combination." What partner plays in 3<sup>rd</sup> chair becomes very important as do dummy's cards.

**AKJx** If you lead the K, partner may well envision this holding, AKJx. The Q is what matters. If partner has the Q they will signal high: Q83. If they don't have the Q they will play their lowest card.

The above holding differs from AKJT and AKJxx, or AKQT and AKQTx where we lead the A asking partner to play a face card if they have it. This is the "**Ace asks for unblock**" opening lead at NT and demands partner play their *highest card if it's an honor*. If partner holds Q82 or J82 they don't play the encouraging 8, they must play the honor! Folks, sometimes the opponents get to 3NT and in one suit they hold NOTHING.

If partner does not hold a face card, they give count: 863 or 83

Continuing, there is no honor dummy, and partner does not play an honor, then the missing honor is with declarer. Now what? If opening leader has a 5 card suit and partner played a high spot card suggesting a doubleton, and there are 3 in dummy, declarer started with Qxx. Opening leader will switch suits. If partner gets in later they will come back in the opening lead suit and declarer's Q will be sunk, and the contract goes down.

But if partner played low on the opening lead suggesting 3 and there are 3 in dummy, then declarer started with Qx and here comes the K, and the defense takes the first 5 tricks! Whee! All because partner gave proper count.

Count also helps if declarer leads the A from AKQTx. If partner does not have the J they give count. Suppose partner plays the 3 and the 72 are in dummy, suggesting partner has 3 and therefore, declarer has 3, specifically Jxx. Keep going to run the suit.

But if your opening lead is the A from AKQT and dummy cards and partner's carding are the same, then declarer started with Jxxx. Play the K then switch. If partner gets in they will send back their last card in the suit. NOTE: If it looks like, from dummy's cards and the bidding, that they have the rest of the tricks, then play the Q and hold them to 10 tricks.

AJT9 or AJTx or longer. This is the first of several leads from "honors in combination," specifically a holding with an "interior sequence," in this case in interior sequence is headed by JT. (Note the other interior sequences on the card.) With AJT- we are trying to capture the opponent's Q in either dummy or declarer's hand. If the Q is not in dummy and partner signals high suggesting the Q, declarer's only card can be the K and they will win it for fear of losing it later. If the K or Q are in dummy, declarer doesn't know what to do since you could be leading from AJT- or your partner has the A. If declarer holds Kx or Qx in dummy, with Qxx or Kxx in their hand, they will call for dummy's doubleton honor and if it holds, they will try to keep your partner, the dangerous hand, out of the lead. But with honor 3<sup>rd</sup> in dummy and honor doubleton in their hand, declarer will win in the hand and try to keep the LHO (the opening leader) out of the lead.

What should 3<sup>rd</sup> chair play when the opening lead is the J? If the Q is in dummy and as 3<sup>rd</sup> chair you hold the A or K, play an encouraging card: A63 K82. If the Q is not in dummy play the A and return one

hoping to capture declarer's Q if partner started with a KJT- holding. If you hold the K play it and if it holds, return one and you will be capturing declarer's Q if partner started with an AJT- holding.

And if opening leader started the J with a weaker holding such as JT9x, then it makes no diff what you do with the A or the K; declarer gets 2 tricks.

**KQJx** or longer. Here the A is what matters. If partner of the opening leader doesn't have the A they will play their lowest card. If they have **A83** they will play the encouraging 8. If 3<sup>rd</sup> chair holds Ax they will *unblock* by playing the A and then return the x.

**QJTx** or longer. If partner doesn't hold either high honor they will play their lowest card. If partner holds **A8x** or **K8x** they will play the encouraging 8. If partner holds Ax or Kx they will *unblock* by playing their honor and return the x.

**KJT9** or **KJTx** or longer. Here's one not on the card and it is similar to AJT9 and AJTx. If the Q is in dummy, declarer calls low and partner holds the A, partner will signal a high card as you win the J.

NOTE 1: If you started AJT9 or KJT9 and your opening J holds, continue the T. But if you hold AJTx or KJTx, and your J holds, continue your small card; partner has an honor.

NOTE 2: If the opening lead is the J and as 3<sup>rd</sup> chair you hold a high honor along with the 9, do NOT play the 9. On opening lead, partner might have started with AJTx or KJTx and your side may need 9 as play goes on in the suit. Play the next card down. If opening leader's J holds the first trick, they will know you have an honor.

**JT9x** or longer. Here if partner has the A and the K or Q are in dummy, they will not play the A and will signal a high card. Likewise, if the Q is in dummy and partner holds the K, they will not play the K but will signal a high card. These are "Attitude" plays.

**AQJx** or **AQJxx** is a special case. With no outside entry lead the Q. Declarer may take the K right away or fear losing it later, and if partner gets in, back comes the suit for perhaps 3 or 4 more tricks.

But if you hold **AQJxx** and an outside entry, start the A, the "Ace asks for Unblock" opening lead. Partner must play the K if they have it.

## Opening Leads vs No Trump, right hand column

**Xxxx** From our earlier discussion, top of nothing is a proper lead at NT. However, from **T8xx** lead the 8 and from **96xx** lead the 6. In both of these situations, your highest card may win a later round. Do not lead 4<sup>th</sup> best from nothing; partner will assume you have an honor.

**AQJx** and **AT9x**. These are similar to **AJTx** from the left hand column. Note that when you lead the Q from **AQJx**, if the K is in dummy declarer may duck, and might duck again thinking your partner has the A. If the Q holds continue the J even if you lack the 9.

**KQT9**, or **KQTx** or longer This is another “unblock” lead. When you lead the Q at NT *partner must play the J if they have it*. Partner does *not* signal high with the 9 from J93, they play the J!

**QT9x** You are trying to capture the J in dummy or declarer’s hand if partner has a bigger honor. With nothing in dummy, partner with the A will play it and send one back. Partner should also play the K and if it holds send one back.

**T9xx** You would like to also hold the 8 but they didn’t deal it to you. It’s not the best lead but T from **T9xx** might be right. If partner has the A or K they will play it (see **QT9x** above) and declarer gets the honor tricks they deserved anyway.

**AKQT** or **AKQTx** Let’s Same thing, the A demands partner’s highest card. This time you are looking for the J. Here again, if partner lacks the J and gives count, opening leader may learn that declarer started with **Jxx** and just keep leading them for 5 tricks.

## Opening leads vs Suits

We lead 4<sup>th</sup> best vs Suits so mark the "4<sup>th</sup> best vs SUITS box. As in NT 4<sup>th</sup> best should be from an honor: the J or better. NOTE: We are doing standard leads, standard signals. Thus no "upside down," Lavinthal or odd-even carding. Some lead 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> best against suit contracts. We aren't going there either.

As we have seen, leading away from an A vs No Trump is fine, but it's *not* ok at suits! You may easily give away a trick and also you risk making partner angry, and not trust you. Just don't do it.

Other than that, opening leads vs Suit contracts are not all that different from opening leads at No Trump. Looking at LEADS vs Suits you see the same examples where you hold "honors in combination" when the top honor is NOT the A. You are leading top of an interior sequence, KJT<sub>x</sub>, just like you would do at NT. Thus we will not separate the discussion for opening leads vs Suits, by first with the left hand column and then the right hand column.

OK, some examples:

KJT<sub>9</sub> KT<sub>9x</sub> QT<sub>9x</sub> The highlighted card is the same against suits as against NT.

Also as in NT, when signaling, high cards encourage, low cards discourage ("Attitude.") You are doing "standard signaling," also called standard carding. However, count is sometimes more critical at suit contracts than at NT, so we need to determine when count is the thing we need to show.

BoSToN still applies: lead Bottom of Something, Top of Nothing.  
As in NT the "Something" should be the J or better.

As with leads against NT, there are some problems with the convention card for lead examples when no honor is involved. (By the way, I have *no* idea what a red "x" means.) We don't lead 4<sup>th</sup> best from nothing, so top of nothing is the preferred lead vs Suits.

Thus: X<sub>xxx</sub> or X<sub>xxxx</sub>

The exceptions are the same for suits as in NT where we lead 2<sup>nd</sup> highest if the top card is a T or 9:  
T<sub>8xx</sub> 9<sub>6xx</sub>

Lead top from a doubleton. 83 This is generally not a good lead, but if you are stuck, lead top of a doubleton. *For sure lead top of a doubleton if partner bid the suit!*

The convention card is not helpful when it comes to leading from 3 small at suit. Low is wrong as you have no honor. Top is wrong since you will be showing high-low, a doubleton. Imagine partner's anger when you fail to ruff the 3<sup>rd</sup> round if you start the 8 from 852. Grrr.

Lead middle from 3 small, then top on the second round. 863 Think MUD, Middle-Up-Down.

The card failed to mark the lead from AK<sub>x</sub> so I have circled it on the card.. Lead A from AK<sub>x</sub> or longer. If partner has a doubleton they will play high on the A and low on the K. The opening

leader then leads the 3<sup>rd</sup> round and partner ruffs. If the opening lead is the A (from AKx or longer) play small from 3 without the Q. 762 T73 J83

If the opening lead is the A (from AKx or longer) play high (middle card) from Qxx. Q63 Q52 When you go high-low (6 then 3; 5 then 2) as you would with a doubleton, partner may expect you to ruff the 3<sup>rd</sup> round. But you produce the Q, usually just as good. Playing high-low shows 3<sup>rd</sup> round control, either a ruff, or Qxx.

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NOTE: If you have AKxxxx, that is, 6 of the suit, and have bid them once (opening bid or over call), and partner raises, then the 3<sup>rd</sup> lead gives declarer a ruff-sluff since partner has 3. If you bid them twice partner may raise with a doubleton ... so take heed.

Lead K from KQx. Hear the important cards that may be in partner's hand are the A or J. In 3<sup>rd</sup> chair, play high from Axx or Axxx, and high from Jxx or Jxxx. Examples: partner starts the K (KQx or longer), play the highlighted card: A83 J62 NOTE: partner may not be able to figure out if the 6 is encouraging and may switch. Why would they switch? Because declarer might have played low from AJx, wanting opener to continue the suit.

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NOTE: Holding up with AJx when LHO starts the K has a name: the "Bath Coup." Declarer may do this at Suit or NT.

If partner starts the K from KQ-, with Ax, overtake with the A and send one back. Partner may have started with KQJ- or KQT- and your side will score 3 tricks right off the top. If partner has only KQx- no J or T, they will win the Q and give you a 3<sup>rd</sup> round ruff.

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NOTE: As covered earlier, if partner starts the Q, play the A from Ax and return one. Further, if partner bids a suit and starts the Q you hold Axx or Axxx, rise with the A. Declarer may have the stiff K.



## BONUS:

A rare but important signaling play is showing COUNT when dummy has nothing but a long suite at NT, KQJxxx of a minor for example, and no outside entry. If declarer holds the A and at least one more, there is nothing to discuss, so the assumption is, the defenders hold the A. Here the defenders want to do two things:

- The first being the most important: prevent declarer from running the suit for 5 tricks if you can.
- Second: not to give declarer any more tricks in the suit than you have to.

To begin with, if either defender has Ax all they can do is duck the first lead and hope that partner has 3. In this case declarer has a doubleton and only gets 1 trick in the suit. If declarer has 3 they will get 5 tricks in the suit. Nothing you can do.

The problem then switches to the situation where one defender has Axx.

Dummy: KQJ874

You are left of declarer and hold A92. Declarer gets in and leads the 6, and of course you duck since you don't know anything about the distribution of the outstanding cards. Declarer calls the K and partner contributes the 5. Declarer next calls for the Q and partner plays the 3, showing a doubleton. You now know declarer started with only 2 and you win the second round. That's it, just one trick for declarer in the suit. Declarer started with T6.

If partner's second play is a discard, then you must duck again since declarer started with 3, T62. This 2<sup>nd</sup> duck holds declarer to only 2 tricks in the suit.

Suppose partner plays the 3 at trick one. When declarer then calls for the Q and partner contributes the 5 showing 3, declarer had only 1 and will take a discard, and you will win the A. Declarer let's you win since you now have to lead into declarer in another suit. Yes, declarer actually deserved NO tricks in the suit but you would have to peak in his hand to see the singleton and know to rise with the A on the first lead.

Not happening. Declarer gets a trick.

Similarly, if declarer wins the K and shifts to another suit, they only had 1 club and are taking advantage of their only trip to dummy.

What if you are sitting after dummy holding A92? Here you have additional information during the play since you see partner's first card before you have to play. If partner plays the 5, when declarer calls for the K, duck. When declarer next calls for the Q you are at a crossroads. If partner started with 53 doubleton, it is right to rise as declarer only deserved 1 trick in the suit. But it's a coin flip since, if partner shows out at trick 2 declarer will then get 5 clubs. The odds of a specific card being stiff is less than the odds of a doubleton in partner's hand so it's right to rise.

What if partner's first card is the T? Then assume partner started with Tx and rise on the second round Q.

Finally, what if partner's first card is the 3? If you guess that partner started with three, T53, then win the first trick. If you're right, declarer gets ZERO clubs as you switch suits. But if you're wrong and partner held the stiff 3 and discards on the lead of the Q, you have given declarer 5 tricks when you could have held them to 2 tricks by ducking the Q.

This game can seem impossible at times.

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Now there should be a bidding question here like: How the heck are they not in part score in the minor?

The bidding may have gone 1NT all pass. Not me! With the long minor hand I will use whatever convention partner and I have agreed upon to get us to 3 of the minor.

Or it might have gone 1H by partner - 1S overcall -P -P and opener rebids 1NT showing 18-19 and spades stopped perhaps 1.5 times. Again, the minor hand must then have passed, as did the opps. Again, the minor hand needs to get the contract 3 of the minor and it's up to the partnership to decide in advance whether systems are on over the 1NT rebid ... as if they opened 1NT ... or if new suits by the passing res\ponder are natural.

You will be in 3 of the minor or 2 of the minor depending.

Or opener might have re-opened with a double. 1H-1S-P-P-X-P-2C-P-2NT all pass. Here again, I bid 3 of the minor, I don't pass 2NT.