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# A WELL PRO- GRAMMED LEAD

**SOFTWARE** Plenty of books have been written on opening leads. Suppose you flip one open and the learned author tells you: 'The best lead against 4 Spades here is a low Club.' Several reactions may spring to mind: 'Oh yeah, why?' or 'A Heart lead looks better to me.' The writer is giving you a personal opinion, one that may be difficult to explain logically. Computer analysis is necessary to give a scientific answer to the countless questions that arise on opening leads.

Taf Anthias and I, contemporary mathematics students at Cambridge University back in the 1960s, set out to investigate this approach. How does computer simulation work? You choose an auction, such as 1NT-3NT, and a particular West hand that is on lead. You fix the West hand and vary the North, East and South hands randomly. From the very large number of resultant deals, sometimes over a million, you retain the first 5000 that match the chosen bidding. The software then tests all 13 possible leads from the fixed West hand against each of the 5000 deals. It then announces which lead works best overall.

After bidding of 1NT-3NT, is it better to lead a major suit or a minor? We will fix

this West hand: ♠QJ103 ♥K972 ♦QJ103 ♣5. Our computer software returns these results:

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠Q	31.5%	3.80
♥2	24%	3.43
♦Q	26.9%	3.63
♣5	24.9%	3.52

Identical holdings in Spades and Diamonds, but the Spade lead is a better prospect (both at IMPs and matchpoints). Why is that? When North does not bid Stayman, his average suit length is 2.44 in each major and 4.06 in each minor. East (and West) have 3.59 in each major and 2.91 in each minor.

## Nota bene

The 200-page book 'Winning Notrump Leads', by David Bird and Taf Anthias, is published by Master Point Press.

## LEAD TIP 1

When the bidding is 1NT-3NT, or 2NT-3NT, prefer to lead a major rather than a minor.

Which of these leads makes the most promising lead against no-trumps: KJ75, KJ752 or KJ8752? The answer is the 5-card suit. Leading from any suit headed by one honor, or broken honors, will cost around half a trick on average. When you lead from four cards, you have a relatively poor expectation of later tricks from the small cards. Your expectation is higher from a five-card suit. When you have six cards, partner is all too likely to hold a singleton, and the suit will be hard to establish.

After bidding of 1NT-3NT, what do you lead from: ♠J86 ♥95 ♦KQ72 ♣KJ72? These are the, perhaps surprising, simulation results:

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠6	21.3%	3.43
♥9	20.6%	3.41
♦2	14.1%	3.16
♣2	15.7%	3.25

'Fourth best from your longest and strongest' suggests one of the minors. Leading away from honors in a four-card suit is generally unproductive. Here, a major-suit lead has a good chance to hit a five-card suit with partner. Also, you will be leading towards any honors he might have, rather than away from your own honors.

## LEAD TIP 2

Leading from a five-card suit is the most promising. When you have only four-card suits, consider leading from shortage in the hope that partner has five cards there.

After bidding of 1NT-3NT, what do you lead from: ♠102 ♥KQJ8 ♦A106432 ♣8?

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠10	24.8%	3.37
♥K	41.6%	4.2
♦4	24.5%	3.38
♣8	19.9%	3.29

The King of Hearts is an overwhelming winner, both at IMPs and (more predictably) at matchpoints. Leading from the six-card Diamonds, where partner is likely to be very short, is no better than leading from the doubleton Spade.

## LEAD TIP 3

Leading from a broken six-card suit can be disappointing. Partner's expected length is 2.0 (major suit) or 1.7 (minor suit). When he has a singleton, even a big honor may not help you.

After bidding of 1NT - 3NT, what do you lead from: ♠1086 ♥KQ ♦109852 ♣984?

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠6	8%	2.6
♥K	18.3%	3.09
♦10	6.2%	2.54
♣9/8	5.1%	2.50

The King of Hearts is a majestic winner. Just look how bad the Diamond lead is!

## LEAD TIP 4

Doubleton leads, particularly from a major, can be good. The strongest such leads are those from touching honors.

When your hand is weak, you can expect partner to be quite strong. This may affect your choice of lead. After bidding of 1NT-3NT, what do you lead from: ♠10 ♥9765 ♦1098 ♣Q9853?

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠10	13.1%	2.81
♥7/6/5	8.1%	2.69
♦10	6.1%	2.53
♣5	8.2%	2.52

If you are aghast to find a singleton lead at the top of the rankings, let's see the expectation of the Spade and Heart lengths in partner's hand, opposite this particular West hand. A profile of the 5000 deals revealed that East held an average of 5.4 Spades, and at least five Spades 83% of the time. He held an average of 3.2 Hearts, and at least five Hearts only 6% of the time.

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David  
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### LEAD TIP 5

When your hand is weak, try to find the length in partner's hand. He may well have potential entries if his suit can be established.

Do the odds change when North bids Stayman but South denies a major? Only by a small amount. There is still a bias in favor of major-suit leads.

The opponents bid 1SA-2♣-2♦-3NT. What would you lead from: ♠Q♥95♦KJ93♣KJ9874?

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠Q	21.5%	3.67
♥9	20.4%	3.63
♦3	10.1%	3.23
♣8	16.2%	3.37

That's a big advantage for the short-suit leads in the majors. A profile of the simulation tells us that East held the Ace of Clubs 3.4% of the time and the Queen of Clubs 8.9%. East's average suit lengths are: ♠5.4♥4.5♦1.8 and ♣1.3. This explains why a Club lead is likely to be disappointing.

### LEAD TIP 6

When dummy has bid Stayman, not finding a fit, you should still prefer a major-suit lead to one from a minor suit. On average, your partner will hold 3.47 cards in each major and 3.03 in each minor.

Let's end by looking at leads against 6 No-Trump. The general dictum 'Lead fourth-best from your longest and strongest' is the worst possible advice! You should look for a safe lead. After an auction of 1NT-6NT, what would you lead from: ♠9765♥KJ82♦84♣K73?

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠7/6/5	14.1%	0.86
♥2	2.4%	0.58
♦8	13.8%	0.86
♣3	5.3%	0.64

A Heart lead is easily worst. Even if 6 No-Trump has been bid on 31 points, perhaps with a long minor in the dummy, the chances are tiny that East holds the Queen of Hearts. Meanwhile, a Heart lead will often give away a trick.

### LEAD TIP 7

Do not lead from honors against 6 No-Trump. When the opponents hold 32+ points, your partner will hold very little; if you lead from a King, the Ace and Queen will be in hostile hands.

I will end with a valuable tip when leading against a matchpoint 6 No-Trump.

After a match-point auction of 1NT-6NT, what would you lead from: ♠AQ82♥974♦J73♣842?

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Average tricks (MPs)
♠A	1.9%	1.02
♠2	1.8%	0.27
♥9/7/4	14.8%	0.8
♦3	14.4%	0.79
♣8/4/2	15.3%	0.8

Well, that's a first! Cashing the Ace of Spades is hugely worst at IMPs, but best by a fair margin at match-point pairs. By cashing the Ace, you prevent a costly potential overtrick.

### LEAD TIP 8

Against 6 No-Trump, cashing an Ace is very poor at IMPs. It is an excellent idea at matchpoint pairs.

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