

Choice of Low Spot

If leading low, which low card should we chance?

The time-honored fourth-highest lead has the advantage of giving East a reasonably good count. Unfortunately, it also gives declarer the count. It is our experience that on average the count information is at least as useful to declarer as it is to East. Furthermore, as we are leading high spot cards from suits we are not interested in having continued, it is not often important for East to be given a good count early in the play — this defense has already been guided.

We suggest *leading the lowest card from a long suit no matter how many cards are held.*

In addition to concealing the count from declarer, this lead has the advantage of removing as much ambiguity as possible from the original lead of a spot card. West will choose his lowest spot card if he wishes to encourage the return of his suit. If a "middle card" spot card is led, East can often mark it as a high spot, knowing the declarer would have all the missing lower spots if the lead were intended as "low."

Two advantages sometimes claimed for old-fashioned fourth-best leads are: (1) The "Rule of Eleven" sometimes guides East to proper handling of the suit led. (2) A count, or a partial count, of the suit led is sometimes helpful to East.

Advantage (1) is at most minuscule. No doubt situations can be constructed in which suit-length information or limitation would be immediately helpful to East. But studies of matches, including world championship events, have repeatedly failed to turn up cases from actual play. Indeed, it is quite possible that the declarer is the one more likely to profit. But either way, the frequency of occurrence is so small that the matter is inconsequential.

Advantage (2) is undoubtedly significant at times, mainly when East learns that West's suit is too short to be worth continuing. But against that must be placed the gains that accrue to *declarer* through the count information. Declarer is often well placed to determine his best line of play if he knows the extent of the long-suit threat against him. It is difficult to measure who profits more from immediate count information, partly because each bridge player has a different set of experiences and thus a different "feeling" about how many times it has helped each side. Thus, opinions can be found on either side. Perhaps we are unable to be totally objective, but we feel South is more likely to profit from count information than East. (Furthermore, although deceptive leads are available to fourth-highest leaders, the side conditions necessary for a safe deceptive spot-card lead are much more stringent than those for a

safe deceptive honor lead.) Anyway, even if we concede that count information breaks even over the long run, giving count gives up much of the opportunity to show relative interest in the suit led, information from which the defenders clearly profit much more often than the declarer.

Here is a typical situation in which the count, if reliable, will tend to help declarer.

Example 21

North (dummy)

♠ 8 6 3

♥ A J 10

♦ K 7 4 2

♣ Q 9 5

South (declarer)

♠ K Q

♥ Q 9 2

♦ A Q J 9 6

♣ K J 10

West leads a low spade against three notrump; East plays the jack. If declarer can rely on West's lead of the deuce to show a four-card suit, he can safely knock out the ace of clubs. If West has more than four spades, a heart finesse is the best chance — but what a foolish move if spades are 4-4!

Journalist spot-card leads against notrump conceal the count, and even world-class declarers have gone wrong in these situations. In some cases, declarer can try to get additional information. For example, with Ax of spades instead of KQ in this example South can hold up his ace, hoping to get a further clue from the spade East returns. (It behooves East to be alert to situations of this kind, and return the "incorrect" card part of the time that variation from standard procedure is feasible!)

The conventional lead of the *lowest* card is important to help distinguish between leads of good suits and "high" leads from

moderate or poor suits. The fourth-best card in a suit may well look like a second highest; but if length is held, the lead of the lowest card will very rarely be misread.

The lead of the lowest card also removes ambiguities when certain honor combinations are held. Thus, we can avoid an ambiguous lead of the eight from KJ983, as we do not lead fourth-best but lead the lowest card, here the three.

Summarizing our overall treatment of spot-card leads against notrump: the choice between leading high and leading low depends on judgment; the choice of *which* spot to lead depends on convention.

Within the framework of highest feasible or lowest, several techniques are available. One idea is to set minimum suit standards for the low lead. Some feel the suit should be headed by the jack; others feel it should usually include at least the jack, but might be headed by only the ten. (Interestingly, just about everyone agrees that West should be allowed to lead high, to suggest a shift, even when holding more than whatever minimum requirement might be set for a low lead.)

We are loath to adopt any of these judgment-limiting suggestions. We believe the best approach to this problem is to agree that a low lead need not show at least one honor in the suit, under appropriate circumstances.

Example 22

<i>South</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>
			1 NT*
Double	2 ♠	3 ♣	Pass
3 NT	Pass	Pass	Pass

*weak

If we had to lead from one of these hands

- (a) ♠8xxxx ♥Jxx ♦xxx ♣xx
 (b) ♠8xxxxx ♥Jxx ♦xx ♣xx

we would lead a high spade from (a) but a low spade from (b). We do not want to be inhibited by convention from making the low lead in (b), which in our opinion is clear-cut.

A different suggestion concerns leading lower the more you like the suit, leading lowest from a five-card suit only when you want to encourage its continuation strongly. It seems to us that as East will sometimes not get precise information about the suit led until it is too late to act on it, this can accomplish little more than adding ambiguity.

However, we are willing to allow one formalized exception (which we bring forward with a warning not to use unwarrantedly): West *may* lead his second-lowest from four or more when both these conditions are satisfied: (a) West wishes to create doubt in East's mind as to whether the lead is "high" or "low"; (b) there is minimal danger that the lead will be misinterpreted as necessarily high. Condition (a) arises when West is leading from a moderate suit and is not sure whether he specifically wishes to encourage a shift. For condition (b) to be satisfied, the second-lowest card must be likely to *look* low to East. For example, the 7 from J872 is not appropriate, while the 3 from J832 is acceptable (if the other condition is satisfied).

If West leads second-lowest he can later decide whether to show his original lead as high (by leading or playing his original lowest) or low (by leading or playing any higher card). The later lead or play of the lowest card shows he *now* wants his original lead to be interpreted as "high," and this message takes precedence over others.

This deal from an all-expert match shows a typical situation in which Journalist notrump spot-card leads are helpful. Note that the advantage gained is not absolute — it's *not* that we *must* gain — just that life becomes easier for the defenders.

Example 23

♠ Q 9 6 2		♠ 5 3
♥ A Q 10 6		♥ 8 4
♦ 10 9 3		♦ K 4 2
♣ 9 6		♣ A Q 8 7 5 4
	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> N W E S </div>	
		♠ K 8 7 4
		♥ J 7 5 3
		♦ Q 6 5
		♣ K 10
		♠ A J 10
		♥ K 9 2
		♦ A J 8 7
		♣ J 3 2

In both rooms, the bidding was:

<i>South</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>
1 \diamond	Pass	2 \clubsuit	Pass
2 NT	Pass	3 NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

In one room, the defenders used old-fashioned leads. There was no particular advantage to West to leading the spade six, because this would look more like a five-card suit to East than the lead of the deuce. And the spade nine was too dangerous a lead in any event. So West led the spade deuce. Declarer captured East's spade king and led a club to dummy's queen, deliberately rejecting the safety play (of playing the ace to guard against a singleton king in the East hand) to conceal his positional weakness in hearts. East won the club king and had to guess what to do. In the actual event, he guessed wrong, returning a spade. His "correct" play is not clear.

In the other room, West made the Journalist lead of the spade six. Upon winning the club king, East shifted to the jack of

hearts. There is no sensible reconstruction of the unseen hands under which this play will cost the contract.

The next deal stumped some defenders at a New York tournament.

Example 24

		♠ A 6 4 3 2	
		♥ J 9	
		♦ A Q J 3	
		♣ 4 2	
♠ 9 8 5			♠ Q J 7
♥ Q 10 8 7 2	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: black; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">N W E S</div>		♥ A 5 4
♦ 10 9 7			♦ 5 4
♣ J 10			♣ A Q 7 5 3
		♠ K 10	
		♥ K 6 3	
		♦ K 8 6 2	
		♣ K 9 8 6	

South

2 NT

Pass

North

1 ♠

3 NT

When West led an old-fashioned seven of hearts, East had a tough decision after winning the ace. If the lead was from only a four-card suit, or if it was high from a weak holding, or second-high from a ten-high suit, a club shift was the indicated defense. Some Easts guessed to continue hearts; others guessed to shift to clubs. In the latter case, South had little choice but to climb up with the king of clubs and try to split the spades which, somewhat luckily, worked out well for declarer.

When West made the Journalist Lead of the deuce of hearts, East continued hearts at trick two. Declarer had to hold up and *now* the (marked) club shift by West doomed the contract.