

# NO TRUMPS PARTNER?

## Chapter 10: Leading Questions

Let me now examine the questions posed in Chapter 9 and some of the panelists' answers to the questions. While our panelists are not all Grand Masters, they have all been around for a long time and should be able to offer the average reader some good advice. But even so, the readers should still consider all the advice in the full context of their own learning experience, and make up their own minds and do what they themselves find is best, armed with the helpful advice of the more experienced.

To avoid any embarrassments or arguments, the perpetrators of the quoted advice shall all remain anonymous for the purposes of this exercise. Maybe the reader will see why.

### Lead problem 1

Dealer West NIL VUL

After three passes, South opens 1NT (12-14) and all pass. Your lead from

♠ Q 6 5

♥ K J 6 2

♦ Q 8

♣ Q 10 6 3

Brief assessment of the situation:

The points appear to be fairly evenly split, with South being the only one with an opening bid. It seems probable that partner has about 9 HCP. Your hand has such smattering of values that you can not expect to take too many tricks at once, and you will have to work pretty hard to take your fair share, in cooperation with partner.

Giving a trick or two away because of an unfortunate lead could be costly. The PLAY, as far as you can judge, will involve BOTH sides trying to create extra tricks and as a result giving up tricks where necessary.

So, looking at your hand and envisaging partner to have about 9 HCP and dummy about the same, where would YOU start on the basis of that assessment?

To help our readers come to some sensible conclusions, let me quote some of the panelists from the Bridgefun magazine. My own comments, as they are in the magazine, appear in italics.

**Al Lansem:** “H2. I think that the C3 might on a very slight probability be a safer/better lead on average at match points, but I’m leading the H2 because I’m assuming that is the majority decision for the opening lead. I’m hoping that we can defend better than the field after trick 1 to gain on the field. The reason that I think the C3 might be safer or better is that it works reasonably well whenever partner has ANY club honour (out of A K or J), whereas the heart lead is likely to work well only when partner has either the A or Q of hearts, which is a bigger risk.” *Amazing. With such a clever analysis (albeit somewhat redundant in parts), why do you want to be a sheep and try and catch up later? I’m afraid that sort of schizophrenic approach to defence is anathema to me. I like to beat the contract at trick one, and even good old Terence Reese once said that most contracts are broken at trick one or not at all.*

**Linus:** “H2. Obviously, the three of clubs could work out better, but I’m going with the major.” *This is a ONE No Trump contract, so what possible indication can there be that a major suit lead is preferable to a minor suit lead, other than that dummy PROBABLY won’t have five or more hearts but MIGHT have five or more clubs.*

Now let’s hear from the club leaders, who seem to be more convinced, and also convinc-*ing*, than our heart leaders.

**Tigerboy:** “C3. Normally, one leads the suit in which one does not have, or is less likely to have, an entry, and I go along with that. So, I trust the heart suit to give me more chance of an entry than the clubs. In clubs I need as little as the jack to help set up set suit, whereas I need the HQ or HA if I start with a heart.” *The difference is DEEP tricks, but the reference to ENTRIES is a very important one often ignored by many, and one that needs more said about at a later stage.*

**Martin:** “C3. I want to make a sound and normal lead against what rates to be a normal contract. Partner needs to have one of three club honours as against one of two heart honours. There are no particular inferences to lead a major against a minor in the absence of Stayman or transfer.” *Other than that many people will take out or transfer to a five card major, but can’t take out to a five card club suit.*

I’m pleased to see that there were no panelists who felt that a lead in either spades or diamonds was warranted. But then, both hearts and clubs provide an obvious choice. The only difference is that the clubs will require less from partner and provide slower tricks, the hearts require more from partner but will provide quicker tricks.

This, being a ONE No Trump contract, I suggest the clubs are a far better choice. Against bidding like 1NT-2NT, I would certainly choose a low heart, and against 1NT-3NT, PROBABLY a low heart. But then, I suppose, those who have been advocating a heart lead on this problem will claim that a club lead is safer and a heart much too risky. This problem provides a good illustration of why the opening lead could, and often should, be different, from the same holding, against No Trump contracts of different LEVEL. Against 6NT your lead from this hand would be absolutely horrible as you might expect to give a trick away with ANY lead you make since partner would be marked with a zero count, or less! If the opponents have bid sensibly but optimistically, your best hope of not giving anything away would be to lead a low club, hoping partner has the ONLY useful card partner could have, the jack. So you see, the important thing to recognise, before we examine opening leads against No Trump contracts even more closely, is that the LEVEL of the contract plays a very significant part in your decision of which card to lead. The BIDDING should give you some idea of what PARTNER may be able to contribute.

## Lead problem 2

Dealer East ALL VUL

The Bidding:

W	N	E	S
		NB	1C*
1H	DBL**	NB	2C
NB	2S	NB	3C
NB	3D	NB	3NT
NB	NB	NB	

\*Precision, 16+ HCP

\*\*8+ HCP All other bids are natural.

Your lead from

♠ 8 5 2

♥ A J 9 5 4 2

♦ K 4

♣ 8 4

Brief assessment:

Declarer has 16+ HCP and dummy will have 8+. You know that from opponents' bidding. Dummy has bid spades and then diamonds, the diamond bid suggesting that he is looking for three card spade support from opener. Opener has shown a club suit, almost certainly SIX of them. As well as that, opener has at least one certain HEART stop, and PROBABLY both the king and queen. You can just about pick opener to have 2-3-2-6 distribution, can't you?

With opponents having told you they have a MINIMUM of 24 HCP between them, and more than likely a few more than that, partner can be relied on for 8 HCP at MOST. You expect that partner will have those points in spades, and HOPE that partner will have two or three in clubs, otherwise there seems to be little hope. So, your analysis is that partner may get the lead once only before declarer establishes sufficient tricks for the contract, either in spades or clubs. YOU may get the lead once, with the king of diamonds if declarer needs to develop that suit. That, however, is unlikely, as diamonds is declarer's shortest combined suit.

You, the defenders, have one long suit, hearts, and POSSIBLY another, diamonds. But to hope for the diamond suit to produce four tricks immediately, the strong hand (declarer) would need to produce NO points in it, and partner would need specifically a minimum of AJ10x sitting over dummy's queen. Possible, yes, but how probable?

That analysis should give you a very good indication of what your best lead might be, should it not? Now let us look at what our panel recommend.

This, being a 3NT contract, presents a different sort of problem. It surely sounds like the only source of enough tricks for the defence is in HEARTS. Therefore, you should start with a heart lead. The 'advice' is, as before: "Fourth highest of longest and strongest". In leading a heart, you are hoping that partner will produce a card high enough to force either the king or queen from declarer, and that when partner gains the lead for the first, and probably only time, a heart through declarer's second honour will kill the contract. If you don't lead a heart, you should realise that, unless partner has BOTH the queen and ten, partner will need to be able to lead the suit through declarer TWICE before your tricks are set up. That is a tall order. It must be far more sensible to give away a heart trick first to declarer's king or queen, because then partner will need only ONE entry. That is why I believe a spade lead is far too optimistic.

There is also another alternative, and that is to look for the even more optimistic long shot of diamond tricks in partner's hand. But leading the diamond king, in the face of declarer's 16+ HCP, would be too optimistic even for me.

Now let's look at the more realistic heart lead, and some reasons.

**Al Lansem:** "H5. There aren't any sure outside entries (the DK may be a bit slow), so hopefully this gives us the best chance of setting up the suit while partner still has one to lead." *I'd say partner must have at least two hearts. What you really mean is while partner has an entry?*

Getting a bit closer to my own preference for a lead is...

**Tigerboy:** "H5. The room will lead hearts so I will not go against them, and I am not disposed to try and find an esoteric effort like the HJ in order to make the headlines." *What's so esoteric about the HJ, why would a good lead make headlines, and what's so special about playing with the room on opening lead? Were you not aware of the fact that the worst part of the games of the majority of people who will be playing in the room will be their opening leads?*

**Linus:** "H5. The standard recommended lead, but I suspect that since this is a set problem, the winning lead is the DK. That would be a headline grabbing lead but I'm not prepared to try such a long shot just for the headlines." *No, neither would I be, and set problem or not, that wasn't the winning lead when I came across the problem.*

Let me now say that a clear majority of the more experienced players would a LOW heart lead and that, as far as it goes, certainly seems the best lead. However, if you lead a low heart, what do you hope to find in partner's hand? Are you so optimistic as to hope for the king or queen, or are you realistic and, having listened to the bidding, know that the best you can hope partner has is the TEN. And if partner does not even have the ten, what is the ONE thing that you can try and insure against? Given that it is realistic to expect declarer to have both the king and queen of hearts, the ONE thing that could go wrong on a heart lead is that partner does not have an honour AND dummy turns up with a singleton TEN. That is actually what happened when I defended this hand. Fortunately I did think about what might happen and led the heart jack. Esoteric? I didn't think so. Headlines? No, there weren't any. Result? Yes, it was a top board. Difficult? You be the judge.

After that small exercise in lateral thinking, or maybe just ‘thinking a bit further’ than the end of your nose, let us now look at something quite ‘revolutionary’. Perhaps that is because such a simple contract as 1NT seldom attracts much examination.

## Lead Problem 3

Dealer North NIL VUL

The Bidding:

W	N	E	S
	NB	NB	1NT
NB	NB	NB	

Your lead from

♠ A Q 10

♥ J 7 6 4

♦ A 9 2

♣ 8 7 4

Here we have another lead problem against a 1NT contract. And again, apart from slightly different bidding, the same balanced ‘rubbish’ to lead from, and the same hopes and expectations as in problem 1.

Once more you can take an educated guess at partner’s point count, but this time partner may not be as sure about YOUR point count since, not being a passed hand, you could have up to 14 HCP and not have had a suitable bid over the 1NT opening. That is something worth keeping in mind, but in this case, is of little relevance.

Here are some facts to base your decision on.

South has opened 1NT and North has chosen to play there.

Partner passed in the first place and has not chosen to compete (you will see later that, even as a passed hand, there is good reason to compete in such situations on SUITABLE hands).

You have 11 HCP, opener 12-14 and dummy fewer than 11. Partner therefore has between 5 and 11.

What would YOU lead against the 1NT contract? What cards would you hope partner might have that would help your cause best? What cards might partner have that would get damaged if you make an ‘unfortunate’ lead? Well, based on those thoughts, what would YOU begin your defence with?

The panel were a bit more divided on this one, with the majority suggesting the lead of the four of hearts. There is, after all, no other lead if you are to lead the recommended 'fourth highest of longest and strongest', since there is no other LONG suit to lead from. But STRONG? Hardly, this is about as awful a suit as you could have and you will have read elsewhere my opinion (and that of many others) that the lead from Jxxx or Jxx is the worst lead in bridge. Let's hear from one who agrees, but the only one who tries something really esoteric.

**Simon Simple:** "D9. I hate leading from Jxxx against such bidding. I want to retain the spade tenaces, and a club lead will certainly find partner's honour(s). Wouldn't blame partner for suggesting he become ex partner if I led a club. Only one left is a diamond and I don't want to cash the ace in case it's needed later, and the two will mislead partner and possibly block the suit. Only one answer, isn't there?" *No, not according to the panel, and not according to me either, but a good try!*

Now let's hear from those who seem determined to pick up any club cards in partner's hand. At least they won't be giving away anything obvious, like the heart leaders might.

**Martin:** "A club. The spot card according to your lead agreements. Not an attractive lead, but I don't like leading from the Jxx(x) or either of the other suits."

**Tigerboy:** "C7 or C8 depending on whether we play MUD or not. The worst this will do is solve a 2 way finesse, while a lead from any other suit can give a bundle of tricks. Leads like SQ at trick one are for ex-partners as far as I am concerned." *So is a club lead according to Simon, I guess you two better not get together at the bridge table! As for the SQ I completely agree, just imagine the effect of THAT when declarer has the king and dummy the jack. But you're getting closer, Tiger.*

Interestingly, the spade suit has been mentioned only once, and that in jest. It is certainly true that with such a holding in a suit, you should 'always' sit and wait for your ace, queen, and ten to kill any card above them. They also provide entries to your hand. But the problem is: entries for WHAT? A heart suit after it has been set up, but after how many rounds? Nevertheless, most of the panel are either hopeful of setting up heart tricks, or lead the suit simply because it IS their longest.

**Al Lansem:** "The fourth highest of my longest suit! I'm using the same reasoning as Q1 to aim to start off the same as the rest of the field, and hopefully out defend them after trick 1." *Unfortunately, often there is no defence that will do you any good after trick one. Once declarer takes the first nine tricks, he will be happy to concede the rest. The good news for Al is that 'being with the field' in this case would have scored him 40% on the board, like everyone else who led a heart. The bad news is that a couple of the more inventive 'non sheep' who neither liked leading from Jxxx nor wanted to kill partner's club suit scored 90% on the board.*

**Danube:** "H4. Clear case for me. I will lead the heart and hope we can make at least three spades, two hearts and two minor suit tricks." *If you are sitting OVER the KJ of spades, you will ONLY make three spades if partner has entries AND can lead hearts and spades at the same time! But at least you did mention the spade suit.*

Our last panelist was much closer to the mark with the mention of spades than he thought. You see, in his hopes of making three spade tricks, he was hoping to make them all when they turned out to be sitting over declarer's KJ. But that requires entries to partner and spade leads through declarer, and a specific holding in partner's hand in the other suits, as well as in spades in declarer's hand.

Would it not have been far more reasonable to hope that partner had just ONE card? That is the KING OF SPADES. Not only that, the chances are pretty good that partner has at least FOUR spades. When I had the problem, I must say that it took a lot of self persuasion to lead the ACE OF SPADES, and I did that ONLY because every other lead was far worse. At least the Q10 provided further protection against things going wrong and I could switch if necessary/. After we took the first NINE tricks we found that nearly all the other declarers had received a heart lead and also made nine tricks. A difference between making three and three down. Rather than just put it down to good luck rather than good management, it got me thinking and I made some very interesting observations that have clearly not been made before. If they had, we wouldn't have a panel of experienced players, including quite a few internationals, completely ignoring the ace of spades lead.

*The method in my madness will be more closely examined in the next chapter.*