



*David Bird &
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**WINNING
NOTRUMP
LEADS**

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INTRODUCTION

The opponents' bidding is 1NT - 3NT, let's say, and you look down at this hand: ♠ A Q J 8 ♥ 9 6 ♦ J 9 7 6 4 ♣ A 2. How do you decide what to lead? Do you rely on past experience of leading from similar hands? Even if you play several sessions of bridge a week and somehow record in your memory what happens to each opening lead, you will have nowhere near enough data to assist you on future occasions. Many players rely on general guidelines, such as 'lead the fourth-best of your longest and strongest suit', but this is often far from a winning strategy.

In this book we will look at various opening lead situations against contracts in notrump. To discover which opening lead is best for a given West hand, we will use computer software to create 5000 deals that match the given North-South bidding. (The West hand will remain the same and the other three hands will be chosen randomly.) The software will then play the deals automatically, seeing which of the 13 possible opening leads works out best — at both IMPs and match-point pairs. By analyzing the results we will be able to draw some conclusions as to which types of lead are the most successful.

The results for the particular West hand above are shown as:

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Avg. tricks (MPs)
♠A	36.7%	4.37
♠Q	33.6%	4.29
♥9	32.1%	3.66
♦6	33.6%	3.78
♣A	27.5%	3.55

When you play an IMPs match, rubber bridge or Chicago, the main aim is to beat the contract. The first column ('Beats contract') tells you how often the various possible leads will allow you to do this. You can see that the ♠A is the best opening lead at IMPs, beating 3NT 36.7% of the time.

When you play match-point pairs, your aim is to do better than the other players holding the same cards as you and your partner, whether or not the contract can be beaten. Preventing an overtrick may be worth an enormous

amount, allowing you to beat all the defenders who let declarer make a trick more. We will assess the various opening leads at match-points by calculating the average number of tricks that the defenders can then make. On this West hand, the ♠A lead is best at match-points too. It will allow the defenders to score an average of 4.37 tricks per deal. As you see, a fourth-best diamond lead is nowhere near as good, trailing the top-spade lead by a massive 0.6 tricks per deal.

The chapters in this book will look at 1NT, 2NT, 3NT and 6NT contracts. They address the difference that it makes when the opponents bid one or more suits on their way to a notrump contract, also how your best lead is affected if they used Stayman or a transfer bid. Special criteria apply when your hand is particularly weak, or particularly strong. You need to think differently when the opponents have used a limit bid of 2NT, either stopping there or advancing to 3NT. We will also address auctions where your partner opens the bidding and the opponents end up in a notrump contract. Should you always lead partner's suit or perhaps try some suit of your own?

By the time you reach the end of the book, you will have accumulated more knowledge about notrump opening leads than would be possible in a lifetime spent at the bridge table. Make the opening leads advocated by our computer simulations (the automated play of 5000 deals containing the chosen West hand), and you will improve your results at both IMPs and match-point pairs. We think that some of the recommended opening leads will surprise you!

David Bird and Taf Anthias

Many thanks to Bill Daly for checking the proof of this book.

Chapter 1

Should I lead a major or a minor?

The auction 1NT-3NT gives you valuable information about the responder's hand. He does not hold a 5-card major or he would have started with a transfer bid. He is also unlikely to hold a 4-card major, since he did not use Stayman. Some players raise directly to 3NT when they have a 4-card major and 4-3-3-3 shape. The majority of your opponents bid Stayman with this shape (we are assured by North American bridge colleagues) and that is the assumption that we will make.

What about the opener's hand? We assume the most popular style around the world: a strong 1NT of 15-17 points. We will see later that there was hardly any difference in our results and recommended opening leads when we assumed a 12-14 1NT instead. It is standard practice to open a strong 1NT on 5-3-3-2 hands containing a 5-card major, otherwise you can run into rebid problems. The opener will hold a 5-card major roughly 10% of the time. Nevertheless, declarer and the dummy, between them, are likely to hold fewer cards in the major suits than in the minor suits.

	♠ 2.44		
	♥ 2.44		
	♦ 4.06		
	♣ 4.06		
♠ 3.59	Average	♠ 3.59	
♥ 3.59	Suit Lengths	♥ 3.59	
♦ 2.91		♦ 2.91	
♣ 2.91		♣ 2.91	
	♠ 3.38		
	♥ 3.38		
	♦ 3.12		
	♣ 3.12		
West	North	East	South
pass	3NT	all pass	1NT

Our computer software created 100,000 deals conforming to a 1NT - 3NT auction. The resultant average suit lengths are shown in the diagram above. Between them, declarer and the dummy hold an average of 5.82 cards in each major, while East/West hold 7.18. The flipside of this is that East/West hold an average of 5.82 cards in each minor against North/South's 7.18.

This has a huge implication: after an auction of 1NT-3NT, it is usually better to lead a major suit than a minor suit. In the present chapter we will look more closely at this situation, seeing the effect of the major-suit bias. For the first four chapters, you should assume that South deals and opens 1NT, raised to 3NT by North. There is no further bidding and West has to choose an opening lead.

(If North/South would not use Stayman on 4-3-3-3 shape, their average length in each major increases from 5.82 to 5.94. This marginally reduces the major-suit lead bias, as we will see.)

The major-minor bias

Hand 1

What would you lead from: ♠ Q J 10 3 ♥ K 9 7 2 ♦ Q J 10 3 ♣ 5 ?

First thoughts This West hand will allow us to assess the major-suit bias, by comparing the results for the spade and diamond leads.

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Avg. tricks (MPs)
♠Q	31.5%	3.80
♥2	24.0%	3.43
♦Q	26.9%	3.63
♣5	24.9%	3.52

At IMPs, rubber bridge or Chicago, the ♠Q lead beats 3NT 4.6% more often than the ♦Q. A profile of the deals in the simulation tells us that, opposite this particular West hand, East will hold an average of 3.3 spades and only 2.7 diamonds. The chance of East holding a top spade is ♠A (13.4%), ♠K (21.2%). In diamonds the prospects are not so good: ♦A (11.0%), ♦K (16.7%).

Leading from four cards to the king is rarely a good lead. You can see from the table that the humble ♣5 is a better bet than a heart, despite being in a minor suit.

We mentioned in the introduction that we would assume a 15-17 point 1NT throughout this book. However, all the results and lead recommendations apply equally well when the opponents are playing a weak 1NT of 12-14 points. For example, when we ran a simulation on the same West hand, with North-South playing a weak 1NT that would not include a 5-card major, these were the results:

(12-14 1NT)	Beats contract (IMPs)	Avg. tricks (MPs)
♠Q	30.5%	3.84
♥2	23.2%	3.48
♦Q	25.8%	3.65
♣5	24.2%	3.55

The ranking order of the four leads is the same. There is no appreciable difference to the major-minor bias, because in the strong 1NT case South would rarely hold five spades when West holds four. The fact that South will hold around three points fewer and the dummy three points more may slightly improve declarer's communications (reducing the 'Beats Contract' numbers by a small amount) but it will not affect the recommended opening leads.

To complete the picture, we will revert to a 15-17 1NT and set the simulations to include all 4-3-3-3 hands in the auction 1NT - 3NT, even when the 4-card suit is a major. We will then be able to see how the major-suit bias is affected when you play against opponents who do not use a Stayman enquiry on 4-3-3-3 shape. Here are the results:

(No 4-3-3-3 Stayman)	Beats contract (IMPs)	Avg. tricks (MPs)
♠Q	29.5%	3.75
♥2	22.8%	3.39
♦Q	26.2%	3.61
♣5	23.1%	3.47

There is a dip in the major-suit bias, as one would expect, but the overall effect is minimal.

Hand 2

What would you lead from: ♠ 5 2 ♥ A J 10 7 ♦ Q J 9 4 ♣ J 9 2 ?

First thoughts The broken sequence in diamonds catches the eye but will the major-suit bias deprive it of victory? Let's see:

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Avg. tricks (MPs)
♠5	25.1%	3.47
♥J	22.6%	3.48
♦Q	23.2%	3.37
♣2	22.7%	3.37

The Q-J-9-x holding (a 'broken sequence') is normally rated as an attractive lead, but the major-suit bias lifts the spade doubleton to first place.

Hand 3

What would you lead from: ♠ J 8 6 ♥ 9 5 ♦ K Q 7 2 ♣ K J 7 2 ?

First thoughts Leading from an honor combination often costs a trick and the compensating rewards are limited when you hold only a 4-card suit. Perhaps the major-suit bias means you should choose one of the short suits?

	Beats contract (IMPs)	Avg. tricks (MPs)
♠6	21.3%	3.43
♥9	20.6%	3.41
♦K	13.2%	3.16
♦2	14.1%	3.16
♣2	15.7%	3.25

The ♠6 lead is 7% better than the ♦2, with little to choose between the major-suit leads. So that we can judge the bias in favor of major-suit leads, we will swap the majors and minors on this hand. What would you lead here:

♠ K Q 7 2 ♥ K J 7 2 ♦ J 8 6 ♣ 9 5 ?

COMPUTER ANALYSIS OF OPENING LEADS

To discover which opening lead is best from a given West hand against a particular auction, the authors use computer software to generate 5000 deals that match the North-South bidding. (The West hand remains the same and the other three hands are chosen randomly.) The software then plays these deals automatically, seeing which of the 13 possible opening leads works best at both IMPs (rubber bridge/Chicago) and match-point pairs. By analysing the results, the authors pass on to the reader the secrets of finding the best lead against notrump contracts on a wide range of different auctions.

Suppose the bidding goes 1NT - 3NT and you have to find an opening lead from

♠ J 8 6 ♥ 9 5 ♦ K Q 7 2 ♣ K J 7 2

You may be surprised to hear that the ♠6 is the best lead at both forms of the game and the ♥9 is the second-best lead!



DAVID BIRD (top) and **TAF ANTHIAS** were contemporaries at Cambridge University, both reading mathematics. They carried out research and development on software systems for over 30 years at IBM's UK Laboratories. In the 1970s they formed a successful bridge partnership, winning a number of national events.

David is now one of the world's top bridge writers with 110 books to his name. Taf moved on to the USA, where he became a vice president of Cisco Systems. They have joined forces on this ground-breaking book.

