

National Imp Pairs --- Opening Lead Problem

Opening leads is one of my favorite parts of the game. Trick one is the most important trick in the play of the cards, and the opening lead is the most challenging part of the first trick.

This month's hand comes from the IMP pairs at the Dallas spring nationals last month. I played with Ed Schulte, and, while after 3 sessions we were below average, we were having a good final session when this hand came along.

Nobody vulnerable, I held: ♠QJ1073 ♥852 ♦KJ ♣KQ5. After 2 passes, my RHO opened with 1NT (good 14 to 17 points). Some people might overcall 2Spades with my hand, but I don't like marginal overcalls with 5332 distribution, so I passed. After the following Stayman sequence, I had to choose an opening lead.

P-1NT; 2♣-2♥;3NT-P.

What would you lead?

If dummy had not shown a 4-card spade suit, it would be easy to lead the spade queen. But with dummy having 4 spades, you would set up a spade trick for the opponents if you lead the queen and declarer has either 3 spades or declarer has 2 spades while the dummy has the spade 9-8. And if declarer has only 2 spades, you will still have to give declarer a third spade trick if you want to set up your long suit.

It is reasonable to assume that the opponents have something near 26 high card points, so partner would typically only have about 2 HCP. You have to figure out the best chance to defeat the contract.

One option is to go for a passive opening lead, and hope that declarer doesn't scramble 9 tricks. While that could be the winning action, it is hard to envision what would be a successful passive lead and to imagine a layout where declarer would take losing options that you would not give him with your attacking opening lead.

Another option is to try to set up winners for the defense. In that case, you could either lead your suit, or try to find partner's suit. And you might be able to choose a relatively safe lead with the hopes of setting up winners for the defense.

Leading a small spade can work if partner has at least the 9 (or the 8 if dummy has the 9), but does risk giving declarer his 9th trick. Or leading the spade queen might keep declarer to only 2 spade tricks, and perhaps the defense might scramble 4 tricks passively in other suits.

Attacking in hearts is unappealing, as you might be finessing partner while you lead into declarer's 4-card heart suit and even if partner has a decent heart suit, you will not get many heart tricks. Attacking in hearts usually helps declarer.

Attacking in diamonds is unappealing, as even if you find your partner with the queen, you don't have very much hope to get more than 2 diamond and 2 club tricks. And a diamond lead could easily help declarer set up his diamond suit.

Attacking in clubs is possible, as partner could easily have the jack amongst his limited points. But leading clubs could also give declarer extra club tricks. A club lead would work if partner has 5 clubs to the jack, and declarer has the ace doubleton. But that combination of factors is not very likely.

On a hand like this, I think it is usually best to look for the best suit that might work out best for the defense. And that suit is spades. The easiest way for the defense to score 5 tricks, is if you can get 3 spade tricks. And all you need is for partner to have the spade nine. Partner will have either 1 or 2 spades on this bidding. You can expect partner to have the 9 about 20% of the time. Partner will have the 8 or king about 20% of the time. And sometimes partner will have no good spades but dummy will have the Ace and King, and declarer will go up with dummy's high honor, perhaps to avoid what appears to him to be a dangerous club shift. This being IMPs, you don't have to worry about giving away an overtrick. Leading a small spade seems like the most likely lead to succeed in this defense.

Now, what small spade should you lead? Your system is to lead 4th best, so systemically you should lead the 7. But that 7 is very revealing to declarer. And, on a hand when your partner is very weak, it is reasonable to violate system and take control of the defense. So I led the spade 3.

This was the entire hand:

	North	Nobody Vulnerable
	♠AK94	
	♥Q3	
	♦Q107	
West	♣9642	East
♠QJ1073		♠82
♥852		♥J1076
♦KJ		♦6432
♣KQ5	South	♣J107
	♠65	
	♥AK94	
	♦A985	
	♣A83	

Now, put yourself in declarer's shoes. You count your immediate tricks: 2 spades, 3 hearts, 1 diamond, and 1 club. Obviously your best chance for 2 more tricks is to double finesse in diamonds. If you consider playing the spade 9 at trick one, you will expect that to lose that trick, and you will probably face a club shift, and now the defense can easily score 3 clubs, 1 diamond, and 1 spade. No, it is not declarer's best chance to finesse the spade 9 at trick one. Declarer did nothing wrong, but went down one.

The lead of the spade queen would also have worked with careful defense. Dummy would win the king, lose a diamond finesse, win the spade return with the ace, and lose another diamond finesse. Declarer now has only 8 tricks. The defense cannot cash the spade ten, and with any other lead, since East has the heart ten, declarer cannot get a 9th trick before the defense scores the 5th trick. The defense only has to make certain that West wins the second club trick in order to cash the 5th defensive trick in spades.

With the lead of a small spade, we would have beaten the hand even if declarer held the heart 10.

Ed and I placed 20th overall in the event, climbing over 100 rankings in the last session. We gained 5.42 IMPs on this hand. As the hand ended, Ed asked me about our leading agreements, and I commented that I held 12HCP and took control of the defense. He replied that this was the type of hand to do that. I have played about 15 sessions with Ed, and this was the first hand that I took control of the defense from the opening lead.