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This Week in Bridge

(214) Always Return Partner's Suit?

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Level: 2, 4

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General

As in many places in life, the word “always” is a dangerous one to use in bridge. There are few things that are true on every bridge hand. One of the most important things to learn in order to develop into an excellent bridge player is to collect all the information available to you and then make use of that information to make the best educated guess possible. One place where this process very much applies is on defense when we gain the lead as 3rd hand (behind the dummy) and we must decide whether to return partner's opening lead suit or shift to another suit. It is often a good idea to return partner's lead (they did lead it for a reason), but when to choose to shift to a different suit is a difficult and important decision. Let's look at what to consider and when not to return partner's opening lead.

Suit Contracts - Ruffs

Level 2

The first situation where we will not return partner's lead is when we started with a singleton in their suit. Clearly, we cannot return their lead when this is the case. If we are defending a suit contract and we regain the lead while we still hold a trump, we want to find a way to get partner on lead so that they can give us a ruff in the suit they originally led.

There are other situations where we may want to focus on getting ruffs for our side as well. One may be that we think that partner has led a singleton and in that case, we want to return partner's lead and attempt to give them a ruff. We can often recognize that partner's lead was from shortness by the length and strength of that suit in the dummy or in our hand. This can help us make a decision about shifting or trying to give partner their ruff. It is important to get this situation right, because partner is usually not very happy if they had a chance to get a ruff and we failed to give it to them.

Yet another time when ruffing comes into our decision-making process about returning partner's lead is when we have a singleton of our own in another suit. In this case, we may choose to shift to our singleton, especially if it looks possible that partner may hold the Ace of this suit. This may be the case if we win the opening lead (choosing to shift at trick 2) or if we get on lead later in the hand, while we still hold a trump.



Suit or NT Contracts – Facing Danger

Level 2

We may choose not to return partner's lead when the suit is still controlled by the opponents (for example, the Ace is still in the dummy) and there is a source of tricks ready to go for declarer. In this case, we must get any tricks we are going to take now; with the Ace of partner's suit sitting in the dummy, we know that there are no immediate tricks available there. Thus, we should shift to another suit (often dummy's weakest suit) and try to collect tricks there.

Suit or NT Contract - Positional Honors

Level 2

We also may choose not to return partner's lead when the suit does not look right to attack from our side. Let's look at an example of this kind of situation:

Example

 K32
JT76 A98
 Q54

Here, when partner leads the Jack and declarer plays low from the dummy, we encourage but do not win our Ace at Trick 1. When we gain the lead, we hold the A9 behind dummy's Kx, and do not want to lead this suit from our side. So, instead of returning partner's lead we shift to another suit, trying to get them back on lead, so partner can lead through dummy's honor and allow us to take two tricks in their suit.

Suit Contracts – Partner Bid a Suit and Did Not Lead It

Level 2

When partner overcalls or opens the bidding with a suit and then chooses to lead a different suit against a suit contract this is often because (assuming they did not lead a singleton) they have a holding in their suit they could not lead away from – often a holding containing the Ace. In this case, partner would like us to gain the lead and shift to their suit, not return the suit they have led. Partner will often lead a high card (like the top of nothing) in another suit to let you know not to return that suit, but instead to shift to the suit they bid in the auction.



Getting More Information from Partner – Cash A Side Winner

Level 2

When you have a winner in a side suit (like AK... or even just Ace) then you have another option than to just guess whether you should return partner's lead or shift to a new suit when you first gain the lead. This is especially true if you think that partner led a singleton, but you are not certain. In this case, you can cash one of your side winners and see what partner tells you do. If partner encourages this suit then they are telling you to keep playing this suit (they did not lead a singleton) and are not unhappy with your shift. But if partner discourages this new suit they are saying, please return to my original lead (for example, if they may have led a stiff, then they did and they want their ruff!) Getting this signal from partner can be very helpful in directing your defense while you are on lead.

Partner Signals You What to Play

Level 4

In some situations, partner may have been able to signal us what to do by making a discard before we gain the lead. But unfortunately, this is not always the case. Partner may have other tools (if you play them) available to help us make a decision about whether to return their lead or shift to another suit:

- In notrump contracts a common tool for helping direct partner is *Smith Echo*. This is a tool that allows partner to tell us if they like their opening lead (and would like it returned) or if they would like us to shift to another suit.
- In a suit contract partner also has a tool for helping direct us in what to do when we gain the lead. This is *Trump Suit Preference*. Partner can use their little spot cards to help direct us in what suits they prefer. This can help us determine if it is better to return their opening lead or shift to the suit that seems most attractive. If partner does not signal for dummy's weakest suit with their Trump Suit Preference then they often want their opening lead returned.

Conclusion

When you are 3rd hand, sitting behind the dummy, and you gain the lead, either at trick 1 or later in the play, partner will expect you to return their lead. But do not just blindly do so. You should consider the situation and all the information that is available to you to help you make a good choice between returning partner's lead or shifting to a new suit. Be sure to use all your tools and take into account any signals from partner to find the best play for your side!