

## Short Suit Leads

### Singletons

By Don Patterson

**Hand #1** Imagine that you are a newer player and you have very recently started playing in the open game. You know there are some very strong players in the club and you eventually come to a very good pair sitting N-S. You are a little nervous but are determined not to be intimidated. You pick up this uninspiring collection sitting West:

♠973	South	You	North	East
♥J932	1S	P	2H	P
♦8	2S	P	3S	P
♣Q9762	4S	P	P	P

The stiff diamond seems like as good a lead as any so you try that. You are delighted when your partner plays the ♦Ace, N and S both following low. Your partner goes into a huddle and you worry that he is not going to return the suit, but finally he returns the suit! Yes you are going to get your ruff after all!

You are off to a good start, but now what? Did you remember what diamond your partner returned for you to ruff? After a little soul searching you think it was the three of diamonds, so you return a club. Partner produces the ace of clubs and promptly returns another diamond for the setting trick.

♠ AQ1042  
♥ A5  
♦ KQ72  
♣ 108

If you ruffed the first diamond with the 3, your partner will believe you started with only 2 trumps (declarer could have started with 6 spades) and upon winning the A ♠, will not continue diamonds and 4 spades will make. If you ruffed the first diamond with the 9 or even the 7, partner will know you started with 3 trumps and will give you a 2<sup>nd</sup> diamond ruff to defeat the contract.

In the trump suit a high low echo shows an odd number of trumps. For those who play trump suit preference, you might want to make an exception when partner leads an obvious stiff. What suit would West show a preference for? Isn't it more important to know how many trumps he has? On this auction South can have either 5 or 6 spades.

So, you have just set probably the strongest pair in the room. Is this a great game or what? You are already feeling pretty good when South says "Nice defense, it is the only defense to beat the contract."

When the lead of a singleton works, it can work spectacularly well. I had an experience similar to this as a new player. After that if I was on lead against a suit contract and had a singleton, the lead was automatic. That stiff was hitting a table. So is that a good rule? If you have a side suit singleton when on lead against a suit contract you should lead it? If the answer is "yes", then this will be the shortest lesson in the unit's history.

When the lead of a singleton doesn't work well, it can be an extremely bad lead. So maybe there is more to think about.

When you lead a singleton, whose suit are you leading? By definition, it is not your suit. Assuming you lead a spot, the ace, the king, the queen, the jack and the 10 are there among your partner's hand and the two opponents' hands. Someone has values in the suit.

Before leading a singleton ask yourself the following:

- 1) How many points do you expect your partner to have? If the opponent have confidently bid to game they probably have about 26 points or so add your point to 26 and subtract the sum from 40, this will be a reasonable "guestimate" of partner's points. If they stopped in a part score but made a game try, figure they have around 23 points. If they stopped in a part score without making a game try they probably have around 21. If they stopped in game but made a slam try they probably have around 30 points. Keep in mind they could have less if the auction showed shortness like a splinter bid. Can your partner have enough points to get in before trumps are drawn and give you a ruff? If not, don't make a short suit lead.
  
- 2) Has anyone bid the suit where your singleton is? **If your partner bid the suit it is probably a good lead.** If your left hand opponent bid it but his partner did not support it there is still hope. Your partner may well have values sitting behind the opponent. If you right hand opponent bid the suit, leading your stiff will almost surely be a disaster. You will finesse whatever honor(s) partner has.

If instead you lead the J♥ from your near perfect sequence, declarer will win per force (partner encouraging). Declarer is likely to go to dummy with a spade and with limited entries to dummy may well finesse the Q♦. When that works he may well play the A♦ planning to ruff the 3<sup>rd</sup> diamond in dummy to establish the suit. It will be a nasty surprise when you ruff the A♦. The play might not go this way but you stand a much better chance of scoring a diamond ruff if you don't lead a diamond!

3) Do you have a trump honor? Are you going to be ruffing with a natural trump trick?

#3	♠ K87			
Dlr S	♥ KQ8		West	North
Vul N/S	♦ J1042		-	East
	♣ J87			South
♠ Q103		♠ 95	Pass	2♠
♥ 10932		♥ J76	Pass	Pass
♦ 8		♦ A9653	Pass	Pass
♣ KQ962		♣ 543		
	♠ AJ642			
	♥ A54			
	♦ KQ7			
	♣ A10			

If you lead your singleton 8 of diamonds you'll get your ruff (partner returning the 6). No matter what you lead now, declarer will win the return and bang down the ace and king of spades and claim 11 tricks when your Q♠ falls (pitching a club on the 4<sup>th</sup> diamond).

If you lead the K of clubs, you won't get a ruff but will hold declarer to 10 tricks. Your side will score a spade, a club and the A♦. The Q10x is a very strong spade holding, if you lead a stiff you will very likely be ruffing with a natural trump trick.

4) Do you have trump length?

#4	♠ K107			
Dlr S	♥ QJ108		West	North
Vul N/S	♦ 854		-	East
	♣ J87			South
♠ 5432		♠ 8	Pass	2♠
♥ 9		♥ A7632	Pass	Pass
♦ KQ102		♦ J963	Pass	Pass
♣ A962		♣ 543		
	♠ AQJ96			
	♥ K54			
	♦ A7			
	♣ KQ10			

You have the four smallest trumps in the deck, what good can they possibly do but to score a ruff or two? You lead the stiff 9H, partner wins A♥ and returns the 6♥ which you ruff. Now what? You'll score the A♣, but that's it declarer will draw trump and pitch his small diamond on dummies 4<sup>th</sup> heart. Declarer makes 4S.

#4 take2

Dlr S

Vul N/S

♠ 5432  
♥ 9  
♦ KQ102  
♣ A962

♠ K107  
♥ QJ108  
♦ 854  
♣ J87



♠ AQJ96  
♥ K54  
♦ A7  
♣ KQ10

♠ 8  
♥ A7632  
♦ J963  
♣ 543

West	North	East	South
-			1 ♠
Pass	2 ♠	Pass	4 ♠
Pass	Pass	Pass	

**Take 2.** This time try leading the king of diamonds. Declarer wins and starts drawing trump. He looks a little annoyed when your partner shows out on the 2<sup>nd</sup> trump lead but continues drawing trump in 4 rounds and leads a heart which your partner wins with the ace. Partner now leads another diamond which you win with the 10 and lead the 2 to partner and declarer ruffs with his last trump. He continues with 3 more hearts on which you pitch your three small clubs. Declarer now has to lead a club to your ace and you win the last trick with your remaining diamond. Your side has taken 2 diamonds, the ace of hearts and ace of clubs for down one. Strange, but if you score a trump trick the contract makes and if you get no trump tricks declarer fails by a trick. **A holding of four trumps, even small ones, is a powerful defensive weapon.** With 4 or more trumps it is best to establish you own suit and force declarer to ruff. **Exception:** If the auction has shown that declarer has 6 or more trumps, your 4 small trumps are not as likely to be a problem to declarer.

5) Do you have a trump control? If so a trump lead is much more attractive.

#5	♠ Q107		West	North	East	South
Dlr S	♥ AQ86		-			1 ♠
Vul N/S	♦ 85		Pass	3 ♠ *	Pass	4 ♠
	♣ K875		Pass	Pass	Pass	
♠ K32		♠ 84				
♥ 5		♥ J10732				
♦ J10642		♦ A973				
♣ A962		♣ J3				
	♠ AJ965					
	♥ K94					
	♦ KQ					
	♣ Q104					

\*Limit raise

If you lead the 5 ♥ declarer will likely win in dummy and lead the Q ♠, you win the K ♠ and if you guess to put partner in with a diamond you will get your heart ruff for down one. Partner will often not have the Ace of your short suit, but having a trump control such as your K ♠ gives you another chance to get partner in before declarer can draw all of your trump.

#6	♠ Q107		West	North	East	South
Dlr S	♥ AQ86		-			1 ♠
Vul N/S	♦ 85		Pass	3 ♠ *	Pass	4 ♠
	♣ K875		Pass	Pass	Pass	
♠ 832		♠ J4				
♥ 5		♥ J10732				
♦ KJ642		♦ A973				
♣ A962		♣ J3				
	♠ AK965					
	♥ K94					
	♦ Q10					
	♣ Q104					

\*Limit raise

This hand is almost identical to hand #5. There are the same number of high card points in each hand and the distribution is the same but the one difference is most significant,

6) Even if you have a singleton in an unbid suit is it your best lead? Do you have a strong sequence?

\*Forcing

**In conclusion**, the lead of a side suit singleton can work very well indeed and it should be on your radar screen, but it can also work very poorly. It is important to consider the bidding and the hand as a whole to judge whether it is likely to be a good lead. It is also important to consider your other possible leads and also your own trump holding.

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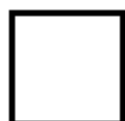


**Extra Credit:** You are in the final of the Vanderbilt Cup Played in New Orleans at the Spring NABC earlier this year. Your opponents Geoff Hampson (sitting West) and Eric Greco (sitting East) bid to the minor suit slam on this auction:

#8

Dir W

Vul Both



♠ KQ8  
♥ QJ10862  
♦ 875  
♣ 9


West	North	East	South
1 ♣*	Pass	1 ♦*	1 ♥
Dbl*	Pass	3 ♦*	Pass
3 ♠	Pass	4 ♦	Pass
4 ♥*	Pass	4NT*	Pass
5 ♣*	Pass	6 ♦	Pass
Pass	Pass	Pass	

\*1 ♣ = strong artificial and forcing, 1 ♦ = 0-7 HCP artificial, Dbl = Takeout, 3 ♦ is maximum and a good suit, 4 ♥ = RKCB for diamonds, 4NT = 1 keycard, 5 ♣ = do you have the Q ♦?, 6 ♦ yes I have it but nothing else.

Do you lead the 9 ♣? E-W have most of the keycards, but they could be off one ace. The club bids were all artificial, so your partner could have the Ace. If so you will beat the slam out of the gate.

Do you lead the Q ♥? You have a strong sequence and this lead is unlikely to give a trick away, but is it realistic to think you can set up a heart trick. You do have a possible entry with the KQ ♠, as long as East has at least two spades.

Choose carefully; one of the leads will set the contract the other one will not. A national title may well be on the line, as this will be a swing board one way or the other. So which is it? The 9 ♣ or the Q ♥? The singleton or the sequence? Decide now and then go to the next page.

#8	♠ 753			
Dlr W	♥ K3			
Vul Both	♦ 943			
	♣ J8754			
♠ AJ962		♠ 104		
♥ A7		♥ 954		
♦ A2		♦ KQJ106		
♣ AKQ6		♣ 1032		
	♠ KQ8			
	♥ QJ10862			
	♦ 875			
	♣ 9			

West	North	East	South
1 ♣*	Pass	1 ♦*	1 ♥
Dbl*	Pass	3 ♦*	Pass
3 ♠	Pass	4 ♦	Pass
4 ♥*	Pass	4NT*	Pass
5 ♣*	Pass	6 ♦	Pass
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Did you do better than Agustin Madala representing the Lavazza team? He lead the 9♣. Greco won in dummy drew trump and led the 10♠. Madala split his spade honors, but Greco had all the timing he needed to set up spades for heart pitches.

In the other room E-W (Giogio Duboin and Zia Mahmood) bid and made 4 spades for +620 but this was a 13 Imp loss for the Lavazza team. Had Madala lead the Q♥, the slam would have failed by a trick and Lavazza would have 12 Imps, so the lead cost a net 25 Imps. Lavazza came back to win the event in spite of this hand.

This was taken from this months ACBL Bridge Bulletin (June 2015) pages 14 and 15.