

To return or not to return - that is the question

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Long ago, an apoplectic partner exasperatedly told me the key to defending notrump contracts. "When I lead my suit," he growled through clenched teeth, "play your highest card, and then return the suit as soon as possible." Since he was bigger, as well as more knowledgeable than I, subsequent efforts required little thought.

Of course, I now realise that the rule had been simplified to accommodate my limited knowledge. Whether or not a pair formally adopts conventional attitude leads, a low card usually denotes interest while a high spot lead suggests looking elsewhere. Smith peters* by the leader can sometimes clear up ambiguous situations. But in this quiz, there will be no doubt about partner's intentions. The lead will always be a low card from a suit headed by an honour. Still, the rule may not apply. You must find the winning defence by using pure bridge logic.

Problem 1.

Matchpoints	VUL: NS
♠ Q 5 3	
♥ J 7 5 3	
♦ Q 6	
♣ A Q 5 2	
	♠ 10 9 4
	♥ K Q 9 6
	♦ A 9 7
	♣ 10 8 7



WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
—	—	—	1NT (15-17)
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♦
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

West leads ♠6, and your ♠9 is won by declarer's ♠J. South plays a diamond to the queen, which you duck smoothly. Two more rounds of diamonds follow, partner playing up the line. What do you do when you win your ace?

Problem 2.

Matchpoints	VUL: All
♠ J 4	
♥ J 8 6 4	
♦ Q J 10	
♣ Q J 8 5	
	♠ 9 7 6
	♥ A 10 9 7
	♦ A 3 2
	♣ 10 4 3



WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
—	—	—	1♣ (16+)
1♠	Pass (0-7)	Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

West leads ♥3. How do you defend?

Problem 3.

IMPs	VUL: Nil
♠ A 10 9 8 5 4	
♥ 9	
♦ J 9 8 5 4	
♣ 5	
	♠ K 7
	♥ K 8
	♦ A 7 3 2
	♣ K Q 7 6 2



WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
—	2♠	3♣	3NT
All Pass			

West leads ♥5, and on your ♥K, South plays ♣2. Now what?

Solutions

Problem 1.

	♠ Q 5 3										
	♥ J 7 5 3										
	♦ Q 6										
	♣ A Q 5 2										
♠ A 8 7 6 2	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W	E			S		♠ 10 9 4
	N										
W	E										
	S										
♥ 4 2		♥ K Q 9 6									
♦ 8 5 2		♦ A 9 7									
♣ 9 6 3		♣ 10 8 7									
	♠ K J										
	♥ A 10 8										
	♦ K J 10 4 3										
	♣ K J 4										

You should play ♥K to establish a sure trick in the suit. Returning a spade gives declarer 11 tricks whether West wins or ducks. In addition, the correct return tells partner that he should not duck a spade should South try to sneak one by. However, if your heart switch is allowed to hold, be sure to play a spade next.

Problem 2.

	♠ J 4										
	♥ J 8 6 4										
	♦ Q J 10										
	♣ Q J 8 5										
♠ K Q 8 5 3 2	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W	E			S		♠ 9 7 6
	N										
W	E										
	S										
♥ K 5 2		♥ A 10 9 7									
♦ 8 5		♦ A 3 2									
♣ 7 6		♣ 10 4 3									
	♠ A 10										
	♥ Q 3										
	♦ K 9 7 6 4										
	♣ A K 9 2										

If you inserted ♥7, you made the best play in the heart suit alone; you'll hold declarer to nine tricks. However, that's worth only one matchpoint out of twelve. If instead you grab ♥A to switch to a low spade, South will win only five tricks. Before you castigate partner for not leading spades himself, note that a low spade lead gives declarer ten tricks.

Even if West has only a five-card suit, the spade switch by you is best. Leading a low one (to show count) protects partner from fearing South has a double stopper, in which case reverting to hearts

will be best. Be sure to unblock ♠9 on the second round of the suit. This defence will be successful whether partner's heart honour is the king or the queen.

Problem 3.

	♠ A 10 9 8 5 4										
	♥ 9										
	♦ J 9 8 5 4										
	♣ 5										
♠ J 3 2	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W	E			S		♠ K 7
	N										
W	E										
	S										
♥ A 10 6 5 4 3		♥ K 8									
♦ 6		♦ A 7 3 2									
♣ 9 4 3		♣ K Q 7 6 2									
	♠ Q 6										
	♥ Q J 7 2										
	♦ K Q 10										
	♣ A J 10 8										

You must switch to a minor. Either a low diamond or a high club is likely to suffice, although I lean to the former because it is not clear how many clubs South has. The disastrous return is a heart, because partner is sure to duck, since he is marked with no outside entry. You need to score two tricks in hearts to go with your trick in each other suit, but partner cannot be expected to divine that.

* A *Smith peter* is an attitude signal given at the first opportunity by the partner of the opening leader. It occurs against a notrump contract, when the defender has already contributed his highest card at trick one. E.g., a low spot card on the first suit played by declarer would signal discouragement in partner's suit.

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