



Strong King Leads vs No-trumps

by Neil Rosen

THIS subject is an advanced defensive technique; this type of lead is used only by partnership arrangement, of course, and when defending against no-trump contracts. Also, the approach applies specifically at trick one only.

The basic principle is that because the lead of a king is now known to be 'strong' the partner of the leader must play as follows:

- Unblock* an honour (A, K, Q, J, 10) if one is held; or:
- If no honour is held, *give count*, i.e. play low then high from an odd number of cards, or high then low from an even number (highest from a doubleton, but second highest from four cards).

Holdings to lead a Strong King from

The idea is to have a very powerful suit, rather than just the classic top of a sequence, so that partner will jettison the vital fitting honour should he hold it: e.g.

A K J 10 x
K Q J 10 x
K Q 10 9 x

In all these scenarios you are very happy for partner to play an honour if he has it, and of course if he doesn't, you have the totally *solid inference* that declarer holds it instead!

Leading from a 'Soft' King-Queen Holding

Leading against no-trumps from K-Q-x-x or the like has always been a subject to divide the experts. Many swear by the traditional fourth highest style – whereas many experts now favour leading a top card. I have found personally that from:

K Q 10 x
K Q 9 x

and even:

K Q 8 x

it often works best to lead high, whereas with smaller pips leading low works best.

The problem with adopting the Strong King lead as part of your armoury is that you *cannot* now lead the king with the above holdings, as partner will start to liberally throw away aces and jacks like confetti – much to the detriment of your defensive prospects!

The idea therefore is to lead the *queen* from these holdings rather than the traditional king, which would be misconstrued.

Thus the lead of a queen vs no-trumps is now from one of the following:

- A standard Q-J-10-x or Q-J-9-x etc.
- A standard A-Q-J-x etc.
- A 'soft' king/queen holding (K-Q-9-x etc.)

Signalling on the Lead of an Ace or Queen vs No-trumps

The idea now is that partner should always signal attitude and not count, e.g. holding J-x-x, if you see partner lead the queen, you can rationalise that he is *extremely* unlikely to have led a doubleton unsupported queen vs no-trumps (it would be bordering on the bizarre to do so in fact); thus he is likely to hold a soft K-Q holding. You should therefore encourage the lead holding the jack (or indeed the ace, of course) whereas you should discourage if your holding is any worse.

Actions by the Partner of the Strong King Leader

Another point to note is that when you see your partner lead a Strong King vs no-trumps you now know he has an excellent holding in that suit. All your senses should be heightened and indeed working overtime to try to give the best defence; for

example, no longer will a good declarer be able to slip a trick past your ace in another suit and then claim his contract: you will now be in a position to fly in with your ace on the first round to 'cash out' the suit partner led at trick one with his Strong King.

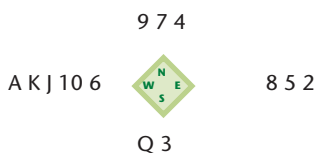
Let's see a Strong King lead in action:



Defending 3NT as West you lead your Strong King:

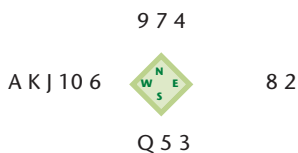
- a) if partner has the queen, he will drop it under the king as instructed and your problems are over;
- b) if partner does *not* have the queen, he will give count.

If he plays a very low card (you will of course be studying the pips in your hand and dummy with eagle eyes!) he will have an odd number – either one or three here.



So if partner plays the two you know that he either has a singleton (in which case nothing matters) or, more importantly, he has three – in which case you can cash the ace dropping declarer's queen as if by magic. Easy, huh!

If, however, the layout is as here:



Now partner will drop the eight suggesting an even number (clearly two on this occasion) but of course this denies the queen as he would play that as his primary duty. It is now imperative not to continue this suit but to switch suits and hope that partner will gain the lead at some stage to fire his remaining card through declarer's guarded queen, thus defeating the contract.

Holdings from which *not* to Lead the King if Playing Strong Kings

- K Q 10 x
- K Q 9 x
- K Q x x
- K Q x
- A K J x
- A K 10 x
- A K x x
- K Q J x

As an aside, I am often asked about whether to lead the ace or low from an ace-king holding. I generally recommend as follows:

- A K x – lead the ace
- A K x x – lead the ace
- A K x x x – lead your low card (fourth highest if applicable).

In summary: the use of Strong Kings will give you a distinct advantage over standard methods when defending no-trump contracts. Care should be taken, however, to use Strong Kings at the appropriate time and also to know when to lead the queen instead.

Next time we will start to look in detail at the Suit Preference Signal. □

CORWEN TROPHY

Dave Robinson and Graham Jepson (Yorkshire) have won the Corwen Trophy, held in Birmingham. The Corwen Trophy is open to the leading pairs in the pairs championship of each county association of the EBU.



Dave (left in the photo, with EBU Vice-Chairman Ian Payn presenting the trophy) and Graham finished with 61.49%, aided by a final round of 71.68%. Runners-up were Andrew Southwell – Ian Lancaster (Sussex) on 60.69%.