

Trump Tricks for the Defense

Consider leading a short suit when

- Your short suit is partner's bid suit
- Your short suit is an unbid suit
- You can win an early trump trick and you can expect an entry to partner
- You have no better line of defense
- You can predict partner's shortness and you can give him the ruff

Do not lead a short suit when

- You have a natural trump trick that you will win without ruffing
- Your singleton is a king or queen
- Your doubleton is king-small or queen-small, and maybe not even ace-small

Seek
trump promotions

Creating Defensive Trump Tricks

The lead of a singleton can be a very aggressive form of attack, but it is a lead that is frequently overrated.

--Hugh Kelsey, Killing Defense at Bridge

Trump tricks typically are the privilege of the declarer, who usually holds strong honor control of his suit, and who freely indulges in ruffing your best suits. Perhaps this explains that added little jolt of self-satisfaction many players feel when they turn the tables and win a trump trick as a defender, especially if the trick they win is a ruff. Eager to gain the triumphant feeling of acquiring a defensive ruffing trick, defenders may turn to leading their shortness at every convenient moment, forever pressing forward for the satisfying kill. But leading short suits can cost your partnership many a matchpoint, many a masterpoint.

Singleton leads can often be easily read by the declarer. He instantly can place all missing cards in your partner's hand. That's fine if there is nothing declarer can do about it. But very, very often he can, and your oh-so-brilliant lead creates an overtrick or two for the declarer, and a bottom board for you.

Only when you are confident that you can hold declarer's feet to the fire can you feel safe leading your shortness. Is it a suit bid by partner? Good. Then if it misfires, declarer learns nothing new. Is it an unbid suit, and do you hold the trump ace, and are you certain that you can reach partner's hand on the first try? Then again it may be right to roast the declarer. Or, are you so weak that you think you have no other defense, so any risk is fully justified? That may work out okay as well.

But wholesale leading from shortness is a poor idea. We will examine some of the holdings and circumstances concerning shortness and your hand in the pages ahead. Soon you will understand something more about the right and wrong times for the lead of short suits.

But leading a short suit and getting an early ruff is only the most obvious and least interesting way for defenders to win trump tricks. Far more intriguing possibilities, and I dare say more fulfilling,

arise when you and partner can poke a hole in declarer's trump suit and pluck out an unexpected trick. Doesn't this sound much more fun?

We are discussing the concept of trump promotion. Burt Hall, in his book How the Experts Win at Bridge, refers to trump promotion as "the magic of creating trump tricks where none exist." The basic concept is simple enough: declarer is put in a position where to win the trick he must ruff high, thereby promoting one of the defender's trump to winning status. Yet the ways in which this can be exercised can at times be clever and surprising. Often one of these surprising moments will come into view just when you think you have exhausted all means of winning defensive tricks. In fact, at such a moment, when the darkness is moving in, allow the concept of trump promotion to arise in your mind, and examine its possibility.

Leading Short Suits

Here are the times when leading short suits and ruffing declarer's tricks may be right:

- **Your short suit is partner's bid suit**
 - **Your short suit is an unbid suit**
 - **You can win an early trump trick and you can expect to reach partner's hand**
 - **Your situation is desperate, and there is no better line of defense**
 - **You can predict partner's shortness and you can give him the ruff**
-
- **Do not ruff with a natural trump trick that you will be winning anyway**
 - **Do not lead a singleton king or queen**
 - **Do not lead doubletons with kings or queens in them, except partner's suit**

Take a look at our first sample hand and decide on your lead:

West	S	W	N	E
♠ A J 9 5 4	1♣	1♠	dbl	*P
♥ A 5	2♥	P	4♥	P
♦ 9 7 6 3 2	P	P		
♣ 2				*negative

Your singleton is not an unbid suit. However, you do have the ace of trump. That means you can control trump before declarer can run any club tricks. But can you reach pard's hand, so that he can give you a ruff? Well, North-South have around 26 and you have 9. That leaves partner only with about 5. He needs to hold either the ace of clubs, the ace of diamonds, or the king of spades. If he doesn't have any of those, you cannot set this contract anyway. But if he has even one of them, and you can find it, then your singleton lead is the only way that you have to set it. Therefore, lead your two of clubs.

I'm sure you have stolen a peek into the East hand and observed that he has one of the cards needed to set four hearts. But when West wins the ace of hearts, how will he know to lead a spade and not a diamond? He will know because East has been reading ahead and has studied signals. What's more, East has asked himself what West's lead could mean. He remembers that South opened 1 club. Even if West did have three clubs to the queen or jack, he would never choose to lead from that into declarer's suit. Therefore the lead must be a singleton. That being the case, West will need to get to East's hand, so East needs to indicate that spades is the only hope.

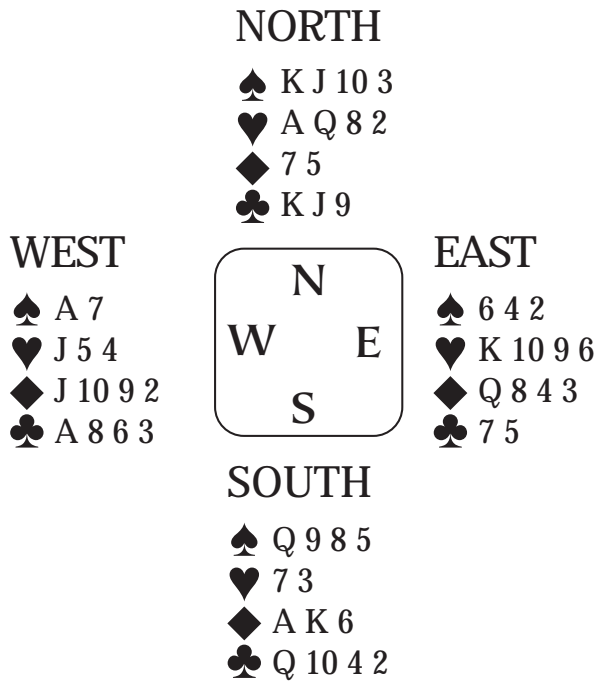
How can East signal that? He plays the 9 of clubs, his highest club. He expects West to understand that he is playing unusually high in order to show a possible spade entry, as opposed to a diamond. This kind of signal is called a suit preference signal, and we will discuss them more in the future. Isn't it comforting to West to have such a thoughtful partner? West will win the ace of trump immediately and lead a spade. He may cash his ace first, or not.

Check out your next hand and determine your lead:

	NORTH	
	♠ 3 2	
	♥ Q J 10 9	
	♦ K J 5	
	♣ A K 10 4	
WEST	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">N</div> <div style="text-align: center;">E</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">W</div> <div style="text-align: center;">S</div> </div>	EAST
♠ A J 9 5 4		♠ K 8
♥ A 5		♥ 4 3 2
♦ 9 7 6 3 2		♦ Q 10 8 4
♣ 2		♣ 9 7 6 5
	SOUTH	
	♠ Q 10 7 6	
	♥ K 8 7 6	
	♦ A	
	♣ Q J 8 3	

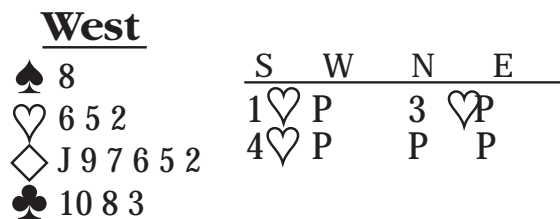
West	S	W	N	E
♠ A 7			1♣	
♥ J 5 4	1♠	P	2♠	P
♦ J 10 9 2	3♣	P	4♠	P
♣ A 8 6 3	P	P		

Are you always transfixed by the top of a sequence? If so, you are going to miss the boat on this one. What's needed is just to pay attention to what your opponents just told you. North-South have bid and raised clubs, and you have four of them yourself. How many does partner rate to have? That's right, only one or two. Lead the ace of clubs and another. If partner doesn't ruff, then pop up with the ace of trump when declarer leads spades, and then send back a third club. Partner will ruff that one for sure. If there's a setting trick available, partner will have to take care of it.



When declarer sees the club ace followed by another, he clearly perceives your plan, but he is helpless to prevent it. He watches forlornly as you win the ace of spades and give partner his ruff. Declarer still hopes to make his contract by winning the heart finesse, but today that hope is dashed.

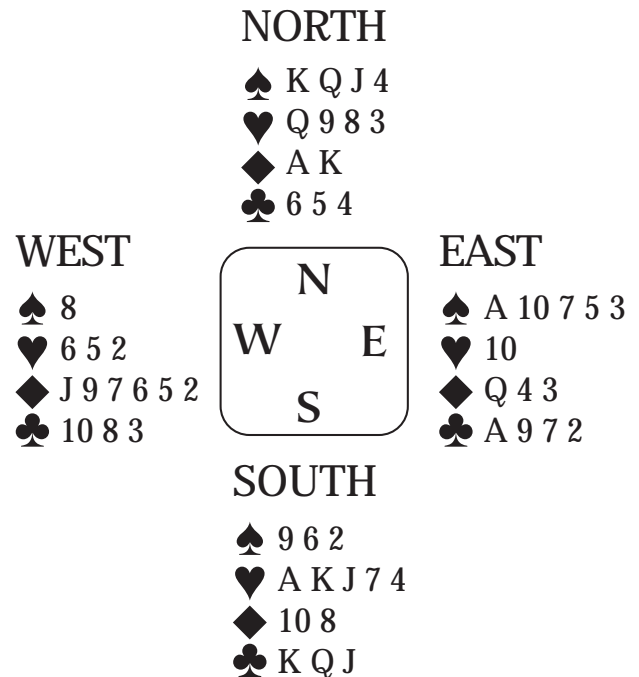
Here's the next one. Decide your lead:



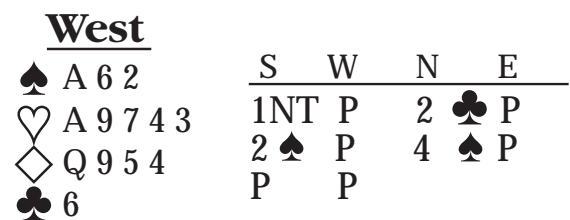
The lead of the singleton spade leaps instantly to mind, and no other plan suggests itself at all. What's more, partner will have some points in this hand, probably at least 10. That means there's a chance he can win a trick in time to give you a ruff. Go for it. This is the time to lead a singleton.

Now check out the layout in the next column. You hit the jackpot. Partner has the spade ace. He's ready to give you your ruff. But what spade should he lead for you to ruff? He should lead the 3. This, too, is a suit preference signal. It tells you to lead the lower of the other two side suits. It tells you to lead back a

club. Thanks to your desperation, partner's aces, and a suit preference signal, declarer is down before he even gets started.



Are you getting into the swing of this thing? Let's try another:



It's true that clubs in an unbid suit. But what do you expect partner to hold? Partner will have no more than 4 points. It isn't likely that he can get in to give you a ruff. Your best chance is to attack in diamonds. If partner has even the jack, you're on the right track.

Trump Promotion

The basic idea of trump promotion is to make declarer ruff high. This may promote one of your trump or one of partner's to a standing high enough to win a trick. But this simple idea can take place in various forms. Let's start with an easy one

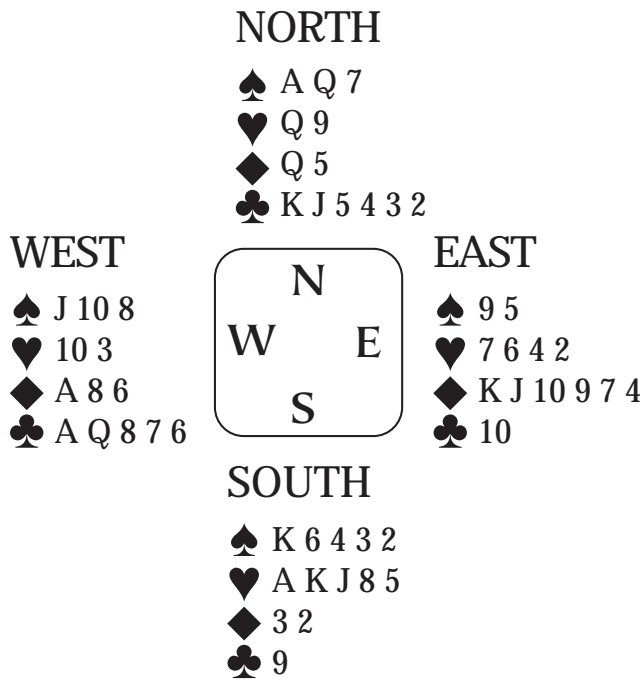
	NORTH											
	♠ K Q J 4											
	♥ 10 2											
	♦ K 8 3											
	♣ A J 7 2											
WEST	<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td>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

The diamond lead finds its mark. West will return diamonds when he wins the ace of spades, and he'll cash the queen when he wins the ace of hearts. As luck has it, partner will eventually win the club queen, down one.

If West had lead the singleton club, South would make his contract. South, who knows the rule of eleven, will let the lead come into his hand. When East shows the 10, South knows that the 6 was not fourth best. Was it from the Q 8 6? If so, a club finesse will allow South to avoid a club loser. So South sets about drawing trump. When West takes his ace right away, declarer throws dummy's king underneath it, so he can win the last round of trump in his hand to try the club finesse. West gets out with the 4 of diamonds, which declarer rides to his hand. He leads to the queen of spades, and then he plays another round of trump back to his hand. Now when South leads a small club toward dummy's A J, all becomes clear. South puts up dummy's ace and plays a small club toward his 9. East gets his queen, but dummy's jack is now good, and declarer will throw his losing diamond away on it.

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

North-South have bid 6 spades, and West leads the king of hearts. East should leave nothing to chance. He should overtake the king with the ace and return a heart. Declarer must ruff with an honor from dummy, and after that East's 10 has been promoted to a winning trick.

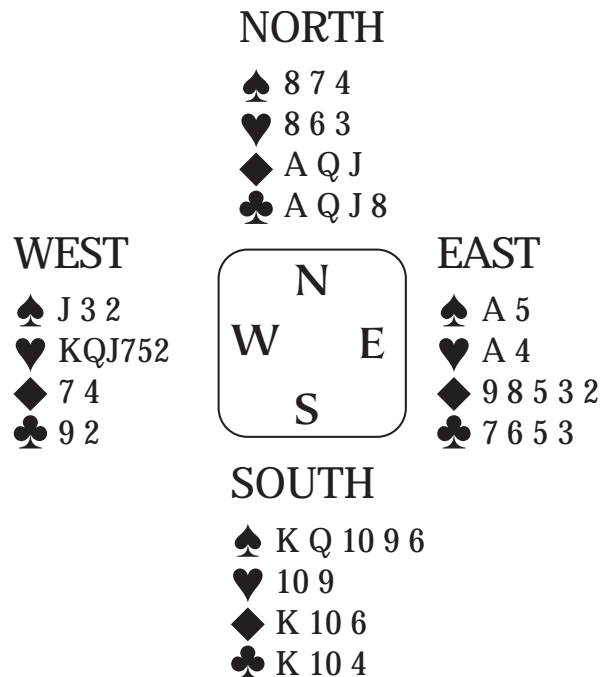


S	W	N	E
1 ♠ P	P	2 ♣ 3	♦
3 ♥ P	P	4 ♠ P	
P	P		

West leads his partner's suit, the ace of diamonds. East encourages, and West continues a diamond to East's king. East returns the 10 of clubs, and West wins the ace. Here now comes the key play. West knows that both East and South can ruff the club. So is there any point in leading one? Yes!! East ruffs with the 9 of spades, and this forces South's king. West's jack of spades has been promoted to a trick!

If you had been East, would you have ruffed with the 9 or the 5? How would anyone know to ruff with the nine and not with the five? Here's the answer. You do not know that South is going to overruff you. But you do know that you will only get one ruff. If you are going to win that one ruff only, then it doesn't matter to you if you use the 9 or the 5. But **just in case** it is a trump promotion play, you should use the 9. The 9 will not have any other use. This may be a surprising observation, a surprising lesson to learn, but it isn't difficult. Let it's surprising

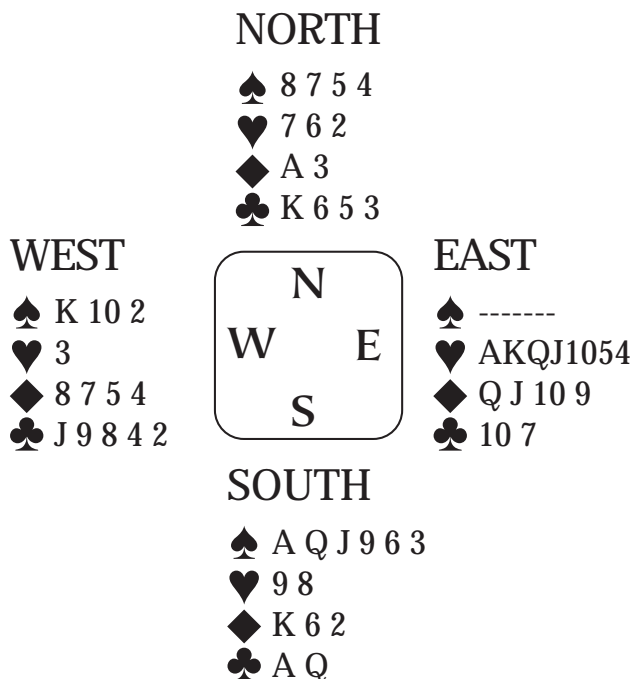
nature be the key that helps you remember it. Who knows how many times you may ruff with high one, only to simply win the trick, no one the wiser. Ruff high and win, ruff high and win, ruff high and win. And then, one day you ruff high again, and it's the day it promotes a trump. What a hero! What a terrific play! Everyone will want to ask you, "how did you know to use the high one?"



Your partner opens the bidding 2 hearts, but the opponents proceed to spades. Partner leads the king of hearts. How should you defend?

You can count three winners. You will win two heart tricks and the ace of trump. Forget clubs and diamonds. If declarer doesn't have one of the kings, he will finesse your partner out of it. The only other possible trick for the defense is a trump trick by partner. It's unlikely he has the king, and it's a longshot, perhaps, that he have the queen, but what if he had three trump to the jack? Is there any way it could be promoted? Remember, whenever the defense seems to be out of tricks, think about a possible trump promotion. Well there is a way to promote the jack. Can you see it?

The answer is simple and shocking! Overtake partner's king, and then return the suit. When he continues it again, ruff his good jack with your ace of trump!! Partner's jack of spades will promote! Think about this one the next one you form the opinion that you should never trump with the ace!



S	W	N	E
1 ♠ P	P	2 ♠ 4	♥
4 ♠	P	P	P

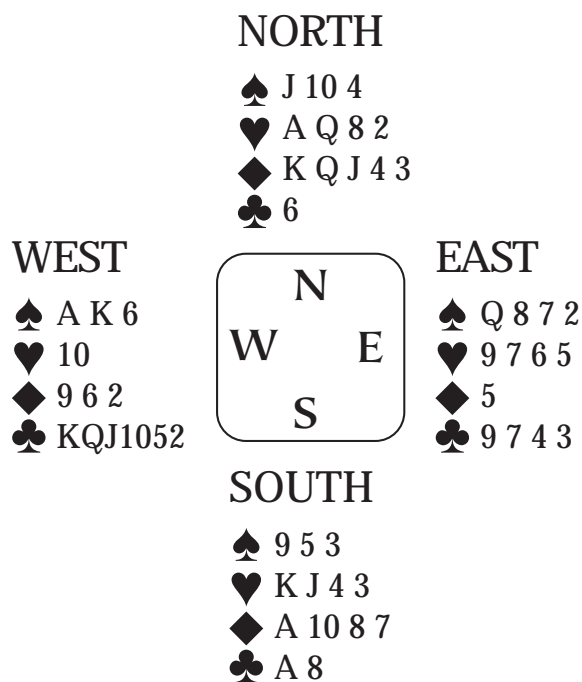
Here is the easiest lead of the day. Partner has bid hearts and it is your singleton. Partner wins the lead, he cashes a second heart trick, and he leads a third high heart. South ruffs with the queen. What should you play?

Play anything except a trump. Simply by not ruffing with your king, you promote your 10. If you **do** overruff, you will not promote your 10. Do you see it?

This type of play is not uncommon. There is no particular sense in overruffing declarer with a trick you are going to get anyway. In this case you can work it out that by discarding instead of ruffing, your 10 will become good. Well, what if, instead of the 10, you had only the 9? Even so, you might just

as well discard. Maybe some other opportunity will arise that will allow you to promote the 9. But if not, you have lost nothing by waiting.

Trump tricks promote in various guises. To take advantage of their possibility, you must remain conscious of their existence and stay vigilant to exercise them. And remember, very often the time to use them is when you think you may have won the last defensive trick possible. There just might be one more.



North-South have bid to 4 hearts, and West is on lead. He leads the the ace and king of spades, while East encourages. Now West continues with a third spade, and East's queen holds. What should East lead next?

He should lead the 13th spade. If partner has either the king or the jack or even the the 10 of hearts, he can play it to force a second high honor from dummy. We see he has the 10. It brings down dummy's queen. East's trump 9 has been promoted to a winning status. Remember, seek trump promotions.