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Lead Directing Doubles

As the name says, a lead directing double is one you make in an attempt to guide partner to a favorable opening lead. Often these take advantage of the opponent's artificial bids. A common example is:

1NT – P – 2D* - ?

*transfer to hearts

and you hold: S-xx H-xxx D- KQJxx C-xxx, you very much want a diamond lead against the opponent's likely heart or NT contract. In fact, a diamond opening lead may be the only lead that can defeat 3NT, but partner is unlikely to find it absent guidance from you. The solution is to double, asking for a diamond lead.

Your intent here should be clear to partner – everyone at the table knows 2D is not to play, so a double can't logically be penalty. Similarly, a double can hardly be for takeout, as you are sitting in front of the strong opponent's hand, and you will certainly have another chance to bid after opener makes their rebid.

A second example of a lead directing double of an artificial bid is the following:

1S – P – 3S – P

4NT* - P – 5D - ?

*Blackwood

The 5D bid is artificial, showing aces, and there is no chance the opponents are going to play 5D. Partner will be on lead against the coming 5S or 6S contract. With the same hand as above, a diamond lead may be the only one that defeats the contract. (Imagine that partner has the trump ace and declarer the diamond ace. If you can knock out the diamond ace at trick 1, partner can lead a second diamond and you may get your king before declarer can discard his losing diamond.

Even if a diamond lead does not immediately defeat the contract, a diamond lead may be the only lead that does not give up a trick by leading into one of declarer's tenaces.

If you and your partner become practiced at using these kind of lead directing doubles, an additional benefit comes into play – you can deduce something about partner's hand when they do not make a lead directing double in these kind of situations. For example,

after hearing the auction

1NT – P – 2D – P!

2H - P - 3NT – All Pass

you are on lead. You can pretty much assume that partner does not have a long diamond suit that he/she wants led. So unless you have a good diamond holding, you should probably pick a spade or club lead depending on your hand.

You also have to remember that lead directing doubles are not entirely without risk. A good declarer will also take note of your bid, and may be able to take advantage of the information. Also, particularly in NT sequences, there is the possibility that the opener may decide to redouble in the attempt to steal a cheap game with overtricks. For example, after:

1NT - P – 2C - X

?

holding S-Ax H-Kxx D-KJxx C-AJxx, opener may well redouble in the hopes of squeezing out a game when there is no ordinary game in the hand. (Remember that 2CXX making is a game as each trick counts for 80.)

There are also a couple of conventional lead directing doubles that date from the early days of bridge. Probably best not to spring these on partner without prior discussion!

The first of these is that the double of a 3NT contract by the partner of opening leader specifically asks for the lead of dummies first bid suit. So after:

1NT - P - 2C - P

2D - P - 3NT -?

double asks for the lead of clubs (dummies first bid “suit”. This particular auction is burned into my memory from my very first sectional (30 some years ago). I heard the above auction, and holding:

C-AKQJx, I doubled.

My partner after due thought – did not lead a club. She said she was going to lead a club until I doubled, and then thought I wanted an unusual lead. Aargh! Lack of discussion turned a top into a bottom!

The second conventional double, often called a Lightner double, asks for an unusual lead against a suit slam. Usually this is done by a doubler who has an undisclosed void

in a side suit, and hopes to get a ruff on trick one. (This is a rare situation but feels very good when it works!) For example:

1S - P - 3S - 4H

6S - P - P - ?

And you hold: S-x H-AKQJxxxx D - C-Axxx

Based on this bidding it is clear that the distribution is wild, and one of the opponents is almost certainly void in hearts. Left to his/her own devices partner will naturally lead your suit (hearts). The only likely chance to defeat the slam is that partner leads a diamond which you can ruff, and then cash the club A. A double here says "don't lead my suit, lead something unexpected". You are hoping that partner can look at his hand and deduce your diamond void. On this auction partner should lead from his longer minor suit.

The logic of this type of double is that it is almost never a good idea to double the opponent's slam simply because you think they can't make it. Such "power" doubles are risking a lot against a small gain. If the opponent's voluntarily bid a slam and go down, you likely to get a good score with or without a double. On the down side, your double may well declarer how to make the slam, giving you a bottom. For this reason, at expert level of play, doubles of freely bid slams are almost always lead directing. (This of course does not apply if the opponents are sacrificing; in this case you may need to double for penalty.)