



Ask Jerry

BY JERRY HELMS ✉ askjerry@jerryhelms.com 🖨 jerryhelms.com

Dear Jerry,

During one of your tournament pre-game mini-lessons, you discussed both when and when not to lead singletons. Could you elaborate?

Edie

Hi Edie,

I often start this topic with the following question: When do most players lead a singleton? Answer: When they have one!

Against a suit contract, what are you trying to achieve by leading a singleton? I suspect it's the hope of getting the singleton out of your hand, and hopefully have the suit led again, so that you can use one of your trumps to take a trick. The player who most often cooperates with this defense is your partner.

With this in mind, consider the following example where you hold:

♠2 ♥A 5 3 ♦K 5 4 3 2 ♣K Q 9 8.

The auction goes 1NT on your right, 2♣ (Stayman) on your left, 2♥ on your right and 4♥ by LHO, ending the bidding.

If you follow the general rule of leading a singleton because you have one, the defense rests! The entire layout:

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

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♠ A 10 8	
♥ K 10 4 2	
♦ A 7 6	
♣ A 7 6	

As the cards lie, declarer must lose a heart, a diamond and a club. The success or failure of the contract depends on whether declarer loses a spade. But if left to his own devices, he has a two-way guess. If you lead your ♠2, your partner's 50/50 chance of taking the setting trick evaporates. You should know this is possible!

Listening to the bidding that suggests the opponents hold 25 or more points, and looking at the 12 HCP you hold, makes it a virtual impossibility that your partner could ever gain the lead to return your singleton lead. The ♣K would be a reasonable alternative. An even better possibility would be a low trump, retaining the chance of effectively being on opening lead a second time, when you gain the lead with your trump ace. Your intent should be to defend passively, and let declarer do all the work. For a lot of reasons, an expert might guess how to finesse in spades, but not everyone you play is an expert. Look at it this way: If you lead your singleton, every declarer rates to

take 10 tricks, but if you don't ...

The point: Leading a singleton when your values suggest your partner can't possibly hold enough high cards to ever gain the lead is usually wrong.

Another way to look at it – the weaker your hand, the more likely the lead of a singleton is to be effective. If the opponents bid to a normal-sounding spade game, either of the following hands would likely be a good holding to lead a singleton:

♠8 4 3 ♥6 ♦9 8 6 5 3 ♣8 5 3 2
 ♠A 4 3 ♥6 ♦9 8 6 5 3 ♣8 5 3 2

On the first layout, your partner rates to hold an opening bid. Plenty of chances for him to win a trick and return your lead for a ruff. The second layout is actually one of the best. Your partner rates to hold 9 or 10 points, and could possibly win your original singleton lead. If, however, this does not happen, you know you are going to win an early round of trump, and may well be able to guess or be guided by partner to a suit where he holds an ace, so that he can give you a ruff.

Another time to not lead a singleton against a spade game:

♠J 10 9 4 ♥5 ♦J 10 9 5 ♣7 6 5 4

True, your partner rates to hold the values to gain the lead at some point, but you don't need to ruff anything because you have a natural trump trick on power. Better to lead ♦J, and try to build up a trick.

In a four-session seminar, I could do a little better, but I hope this helps. ■