

THE CRITICAL LEAD

You are sitting in the North with this hand:

North
♠ AQ1084
♥ 6432
♦ 5
♣ AJ3

Your RHO opens 1♦ and you overcall 1♠. East passes and your partner advances your overcall to 2♠. West rebids 3♦. You pass and East cue bids 3♠. This is called the “western cue.” It asks his partner if he has a stopper in spades, the opponent’s suit. It also says, if you do have a spade stopper, bid 3NT. Otherwise, bid something else. Sure enough, West bids 3NT, which becomes the final contract.

It is your lead. What do you think?

This is the bidding:

West	North	East	South
1♦	1♠	Pass	2♠
3♦	Pass	3♠	Pass
3NT	All Pass		

The declarer most likely holds the ♠K. But spades are your only hope for setting the contract. You might as well start with them. But which spade?

Of the choices, ♠A, ♠Q or ♠8, leading the ♠A makes the most sense. Leading the ♠Q comes a close second. Leading 4th best, the ♠8 is a bad lead. If the dummy holds the ♠J, declarer will insert it and he will suddenly have two spade stopper unless your partner leads a spade through declarer’s ♠K. But you hold the ♣A, so you will be the defender who gets in again.

By leading the ♠A, you will either see the ♠J in the dummy or partner will give you a signal that he holds it. If it’s in the dummy doubleton, you can simultaneously squash it and draw out declarer’s ♠K with your ♠Q.

This is the entire deal:

D 8	N North	W	N	E	S
	♠ AQ1084 ♥ 6543 ♦ 5 ♣ AJ3	1♦	1♠	P	2♠
W West		3♦	P	3♠	P
♠ K93 ♥ K ♦ AKJ943 ♣ K75		3NT	P	P	P
	S South				
	♠ 752 ♥ J1097 ♦ Q1082 ♣ 106				
		E East			
		♠ J6 ♥ AQ82 ♦ 76 ♣ Q9842			
		3NT W NS: 0 EW: 0			

As you can see, the ♠J is indeed in the dummy and you can neutralize it. Had you led the ♠8, declarer would have had time to set up his clubs for two overtricks. With the ♠A lead you have to get back in when declarer starts to develop his clubs, and take your remaining three spade, setting the contract by one trick.

You can see how this hand should be played by clicking on this link: <http://tinyurl.com/p4rbybz> . Or, copy and paste it into your browser. Click on the "Next" button on the bottom to advance through each trick. Alternatively, by clicking on "Play" you can play all four hands and see if you can make the hand on your own.