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MUD - that stupid acronym that stands for middle-up-down - has had an undeservedly bad reputation for decades. MUD is a lead style that, until recently, was laughed at by many experts, in part, because it wasn't understood. It was believed to be used only by less-experienced players.

Anyone who used MUD was deemed "inferior". But were perennial national champions Michael Rosenberg and Zia Mahmood stupid or inferior for using MUD in their 2-year partnership? Were Sabine Auken and Roy Welland stupid for using it in many situations in their thrilling 2013 comeback win in the Vanderbilt KO? How about American stars, the father-son duo of Bob and Shane Blanchard? What about Christopher (*Chris Jon*) Willenken who, playing with (Michael) Rosenberg, will represent the U.S. at the Bermuda Bowl in Bali this month? (Note: Longtime partners Matt Granovetter and Ron Rubin (a former world champion) aren't exactly Swiss cheese, either.

So I'm here to tell you that MUD isn't inferior. Then again, I'm not here to tell you it is superior, either. I'm here to tell you that it is something that *all* players should consider, especially less-experienced players.

Where it all Started

MUD is a shortened version of what is known as *Roman MUD* an opening-lead style invented in the Fifties by none other than the great Benito Garozzo, member of the world-famous Italian Blue Team, that won 13 world championships between 1961 and 1975. And for those of you who don't know Garozzo, that's maybe because he retired from serious competition long ago. When experts are asked who belongs on the short list of *Who is the best player in the history of the game*, Garozzo's name is always mentioned.

When I first started playing in the Sixties, I read about the Italian Blue Team and learned that they used Roman MUD for opening leads. I figured if it was good enough for them, it was good enough for a virtual rookie like me. I've used it ever since. Here's how it works:

Versus suit and notrump contacts, leading low promises the Jack or a higher honor. Lead low from honor-third (e.g., the 4 from Q-8-4) or fourth best if the suit is longer (4 from (Q-8-6-4). From all three-card or longer holdings with no high cards (10 or lower), lead second highest (7 from (9-7-3 or the 6 from 9-6-5-2).

One exception: from 10-0-x or longer, I recommend leading the 10. This is worth discussing with your partners.

Examples of MUD Leads

- K-8-3 3 (low from three to an honor, then 8).
- K-8-3-2 2 (fourth best from a Jack or higher), then 3.
- 7-2 7 then 2 (the obvious exception).
- 8-6-2 6 then 8 then 2 (middle, up, down: MUD).
- 8-6-4-2 6 then 4, concealing the 2 (That makes it easier for partner to understand you haven't led from a doubleton. But if you want to, you can play 6, then 8 if you're afraid partner won't get the message).
- 8-7-6-4-2 7 then 2 (If, from the auction and his hand, partner can't distinguish this 7-2 from the above 7-2, then maybe you should get a new partner).

So just like third- and fifth-best leads, MUD-style tells partner how many cards you have in the suit, but maybe not until the suit is played a second time. On the bright side, it tells partner if you have an honor card right away, something that third- and fifth-best leads don't do. That is the tradeoff.

R-e-s-p-e-c-t

I live on Long Island in Merrick, a suburb of New York City; about 20 miles east of Manhattan. And since the days when Long Island was populated by a cadre of the nation's best players (including Bobby Levin, Alan Sontag, David Berkowitz, Harry Stappenbeck, Drew Case, and Billy Eisenberg), Long Island was the area of the country most associated with MUD leads, (not that all those players used MUD, but some did). Since those days - and even now- I have been teased for my support of MUD leads by the sophisticates of Manhattan. They have been unmerciful in their condemnation of MUD and its major local proponent, yours truly. National champions and bridge analyst Barry Rigal and his wife, word champion Sue Picus, tease me all the time about MUD, but it's all in fun - I think.

Then about 10 years ago, something strange happened. The European champions from Denmark, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia, and Germany started populating our tournaments and winning our national events (and the world championships) with increasing frequency. Besides their great talent, they introduced something strange to the American shores - a new way of leading.

Unlike many American experts who lead *third and fifth* (or, more exactly, *third and low*), these European players lead *second and fourth*, a style that, with one or two exceptions, is exactly like MUD.

So now when expert opponents ask me about my leads, I confidently say *second and fourth*, and receive knowing and approving glances instead of the derisive *you've got to be kidding look* I used to get when I said *I play MUD*. I may not win any more than I used to, but at least my respect factor has increased.

And because of the second-and-fourth ascension, MUD actually gets a once-in-a-while mention in lead discussions in serious bridge publications. There was actually a 30-year period where I didn't see a mention of MUD in *The Bridge World* - not even once. An article I submitted entitled *Here's MUD in Your Eye* was summarily rejected by *The Bridge World* editors. Times do change.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Third and fifth leads immediately give the count, at least when a low card is led. When partner leads a 2, you know he's got either three or five, but you don't know if he's got an honor card. Roman MUD leaders know right away whether the opening leader has an honor card, but is a little unsure as to how many cards he has in the suit. Here's a comparison of the three lead styles:

Card Led vs. Suit Contracts

Holding	3/5	2/4	Roman MUD
K-8-4-3-2	2	3	3
K-8-4-2	4	2	2
K-8-2	2	8	2
8-6-2	2	6	6
9-8-4-2	4	8	8
9-7-6-4-2	2	7	7
9-2	9	2	9

Of the seven examples above, MUD leaders lead the same card as the second- and fourth-best champions five times, and like the third- and fifth-best champions two times.

And if we throw out the weird *leading low from a doubleton* of the *second and fourths*, MUD and 2/4 leaders lead the same card in five out of six cases.

What does this all mean? It means that MUD is virtually the same as second and fourth, the favored choice of many of the European (and world) champions.

Which Lead Style Benefits You The Most

One of the most important things I want readers to come away with is that the supposed benefits of 3/5 leads are overstated for 99% of players. First, the argument in favor of 3/5 leads is that because partner knows immediately how many cards you have in the suit you've led, he can determine immediately how many cards declarer has in the suit and that can help him count the whole hand right away. But let me ask you one question: How many partners do you play with, who can count out the whole hand and then analyze and conclude the winning overall defense based on that information? I suspect maybe not too many, if at all. So instead of that *benefit* wouldn't you want the benefit of knowing right away if partner has an honor in the suit?

Look at this situation:

	<i>Dummy</i>	
	K853	
<i>Partner leads</i>		<i>You</i>
2		AJ1064

Playing 3/5 leads, the 2 could be from 9-7-2, Q-9-2. (Let's assume that a singleton is impossible because of the bidding.) Playing 2/4 leads, the 2 could only be from 7-2 or 9-2m but it increases the chances that the 2 is a singleton.

Should you play the 10 or the Ace? If partner has 9-7-2, you'd better play the Ace because declarer has the singleton Queen. But if partner has the Q-9-2, finessing the 10 is better. Playing MUD leads, the 2 promises an honor so you know partner has the Queen and it is safe for third hand to play the 10.

To be fair, there are situations where 3/5 leads work better. If, for example, the opening lead in the above situation had been the 7, partners of 3/5 leaders would know that the lead has been from a doubleton, exactly 7-2. The partners of the 2/4 leads would have to contend with the possibility of Q-7-2 or 9-7-2. And partners of MUD leaders would face the possibility of 7-2 or 9-7-2. Each lead style has benefits and flaws.

In my experience playing both styles with and against the best players in the world, and in 26 years of teaching beginning and intermediate players, I *know* that MUD players are better for 99% of players. That is, if you'll be a more effective defender if you use them. And, for the other 1% of players who are national and world champions, it's a toss-up as to which style is more effective. So no matter what your income level, MUD is probably better for you.

Another hidden cost of 3/5 leads is that too often, partner can't *read* the opening lead when it comes from a four-card holding. For example, suppose partner leads the 6 of Hearts against a Spade contract. Playing 3/5, the 6 could be from K-8-6-2, K-8-6, 10-8-6 or 6-2. If a Roman MUD player led the 6, the possibilities are K-8-6, 8-6-2, 8-6-3-2 or 6-2. Either lead style is open to an ambiguous assessment as to your partner's length and strength. But using MUD leads, it is much more likely that the 6 is *not* from an honor, whereas using 3/5 leads it's 50-50.

Is an opening lead of the 8 of Hearts against 4 Spades from K-8-2? Players using 3/5 leads wouldn't know because (at least in this case) their *count* message wouldn't be clarified until the second round - just like MUD - and 2/4 players who have to try and figure out whether a 4 has been led from 9-4-2 or Q-9-4.

Some final observations. First, a hidden benefit of MUD is that the opening leader always has the option of deception on the second round. For example, if you have led the 6 from 8-6-2, you can always play the 2 on the second round to try to give the declarer a losing option of ruffing unnecessarily high on the third round of the suit to prevent an overruff that doesn't exist. Once in a while this creates a trump trick out of nowhere for you or your partner. Rosenberg in particular is fond of this benefit and tactic. Second there is another negative aspect to 3/5 leads: when 3/5 players lead low, they give count to their partners, but they also give count to declarer who also can use that information.

An Odd Criticism From A Great Source

One of the best books around is the 1996 masterpiece from multiple national and world champion Mike Lawrence titled *Opening Leads*. In this book Lawrence has a discussion concerning MUD leads. But to me, his discussion is odd, in the sense that at the top of one page he tells readers not to lead second highest (middle) from three low cards, but then on the bottom of that same page, urges them to lead second highest from four or five low cards.

So the great (really>) Mike Lawrence urges you to lead either the 8 or the 3 from 8-6-3, but to lead the 6 from 8-6-3-2 or 8-6-4-3-2. The not-so-great Mel Colchamiro is just urging you to consider leading the 6 from all three holdings; lead second highest from three or more low cards.

To his credit, Lawrence summarizes his beliefs about leading from three low by writing *Really, the science of leading from three small is no science at all. You won't meet an expert who tells you that he knows which card to lead from 9-3-2. He will give you his rules or his tendencies, but he won't be at all sure what is right.*"

Mel Goes Out On A Limb

In concluding to attempt at persuasion, I'm going to make a bold statement about a new idea, one I do not believe any expert has ever voided before now (I could be wrong about that, but I don't think so). Here goes: *I know the best-lead style.*

The best lead-style against suit contracts is to play Roman MUD or 2/4 leads at lower-level contracts, where the number of high cards that the defenders have is relatively high. To play count lead (3/5) at higher-level contracts, where the number of high cards in the defenders' hands is more limited. In those contracts, it is often crucial to *cash out* tricks the correct amounts in a particular suit.

Where that cut-off point is, I'm not so sure. Each partnership can set their own inflection point, but my instincts are that at contracts up to and including 4 Spades, Roman MUD attitude leads may well be best, but at contracts 5 Clubs or higher, then 3/5 count leads probably make the most sense.

Leads versus No Trump

Against notrump contracts, almost no expert leads low from four low cards. Most already adopt the Roman MUD style of leading the second highest. Some experts, however, advocate leading low from five or six small cards against no trump. I disagree. I think that second highest still makes the most sense. Many U.S. experts and 90% of the participants in the 2011 and 2012 world championships agree with me. As they say: *You could look that up*> But don't bother. I already did.

The key is to let partner know if you really intend to continue his first led suit or to switch. I am well aware that many experts use that is called *Smith Echo* to try to sort all these things out, but for 90% of players, telling partner that yes, you've led a suit, but it's an honor-less one (at trick one) is really what 90% of third-hand players need to know.

What's a good idea for world-class experts may not necessarily be good for less experienced players. Would you rather hit a driver 230 yards off into the woods behind a tree or would you rather have hit a nice easy 3- or 4-wood 185 yards straight down the middle with a clear shot at the green. Think about it.