

Second-Hand Play

This important topic is generally not discussed enough. It contains some relatively simple rules that quite a few players are unaware of or have forgotten. The general rule for second hand play “The first time a suit is led, give your partner a chance to win the trick” otherwise known as “second-hand low” most everyone knows and adheres to. There are certain times, however, when you should violate that rule. These situations can be easily categorized, the first being 'you have a good strategic reason for doing so'. As an example, at the moment that you are faced with the choice of playing second-hand low or winning the trick you have sufficient sure tricks in your hand to set the contract and partner seems to have no clue as to what to return to set you up. Otherwise, how you play in the second seat depends primary on your honor holding.

In general we consider “honors” to be the 4 face-cards A,K, Q, J and also the T; Five honors in total, but for the case of second-hand play we will also include the 9.

You hold a single honor...

And there is a single honor of lower value visible in the Dummy. This is where the standard second hand low applies. Example: The 3 is led is from the dummy's J643 and you hold QT2. You should play the 2, there is a chance that declarer is holding AK9x and may attempt to finesse the 9 but (with 3 honors) that is unlikely. By playing low you have assured yourself 1 trick in that suit. Another example, this time the declarer leads low from hand. The dummy holds Q83 and you K95. You may be tempted to play the 9 – forcing the Q – but that is wrong! It is true that you effectively hold 2 honors (K and 9) but now is not the time to split your honors (that's for a little later), just remember “low on low” in second seat!

Honor led from Dummy

When an honor is led from the Dummy it is often correct to cover that honor, but it is also just as often wrong to do it. Knowing when to cover is a what makes you a better player. You might have heard the rules “cover an honor with an honor” and “cover the second honor” if the lead is from a two honor holding, We'll dissect those for a better understanding. There are two other rules that are dependent on how many honors you have that are higher than the honor that is led.

1. You have 2 honors higher than the honor led – play the higher of your two honors. Example: The lead is the J from the Dummy's JT65 and you hold AQ3. You should play your A. If declarer later plays the T you should cover with the Q. It may lose to the K, but if Partner originally held 3 to the 9, the 9 is now a winner. You have held declarer to one trick in the suit. You can check out this logic by laying a suit out as shown above and then divide the remaining 6 cards evenly between the other two hands. You will see that no matter how those 6 cards are divided, the explained strategy maximizes the tricks for the defense.

Another example. The lead is the T from dummy's T94 and you hold KJ7. The T and the 9 are equal honors so it matters little which is led, our rule says you should cover with the K. (Note: if partner has the A, he now knows that you have either the Q or the J.) If later the 9 is led you should cover with the J. If Partner indeed has the A, this approach will guarantee you 3 defensive tricks in the suit. One last example.

You hold QT3 and (sneakily) declarer leads the 8 from dummy's 982. Thinking of the 8 as an honor is quite a stretch, but here it is accompanied by the 9, so it is effectively equal to the 9 and you should cover with the Q (the higher honor). This isn't the best of defensive positions but no matter how the remainder of the cards are distributed playing the Q in this situation causes the declarer more problems than would playing the T. In both examples the Dummy showed 2 honors, the rule applies even if there had been only one.

NOTE: If the bidding indicates that Partner has a singleton or void in the suit (which is often

the case when the suit is trump) then these rules do not apply. You should cover or split your honors in a way that benefits your own hand. Note that in all the last examples, we have split our honors so what we have learned is the proper way to split our honors when we have two.

2. You have only 1 honor higher than the honor led. Cover the honor if it is unsupported. This is where we find the rule about covering the last honor. If there are 2 honors in the dummy then you have supported honors and you should-not cover when the first honor is led. Once that honor is led, the other becomes unsupported and should be covered. Example: The T is led from dummy's T54 and you hold K82. You should play the K since the T is unsupported. Again lay out the cards as above and distribute the other 7 cards (4-3) in various ways between the other hands and note the disaster that can occur if the K isn't played. Another example.

Dummy leads J from JT8 and you hold Q94. The J is supported by the T and so you should not cover, play the 4. Let's analyze this particular situation. The missing cards are the AK76532. If declarer holds anything other than AK7, your side has 2 tricks if you play low, if you don't play low you will only get 1 trick.

Dummy leads Q from QJ85 and you hold K73. The Q is supported by the J and so you should not cover, play the 3, low. Once again divide the remaining 6 cards between the other two hands and witness the different results when you play the K and when you play low.

Playing in Tempo – in any of these circumstances if you hesitate, even for the slightest moment you give your holding away. So before the card from the Dummy is played you should already know what you are going to play, so there is no hesitation. This means that while declarers are studying their options you should be looking at the dummy and your hand and deciding which card you will play when the offensive lead from the dummy is made.

So we have found the general formula for 2nd hand play. (a) If you have 2 higher than the honor led play the your highest and (b) with 1 higher cover unsupported, duck supported honors. This we will see also applies if dealer is on lead,

Honor led by Declarer

When an honor is led from Declarer's hand, all the same principles apply. The only difference is that you don't know if the honor is supported. But the situations are symmetrical so let's look at some conditions.

1. You have 2 higher than the honor led. The only difference here is that you don't necessarily need to play the highest. Play your highest unless your second highest will promote a sure trick for your highest. Example: Declarer leads the 9 toward the Dummy's AK82, you hold QJ73 you must play the J. In this particular situation you need to cover any card led by Declarer, because you have the 4th trick in the suit, holding the 3 over the 2. It may get ruffed but that doesn't change the proper way to play it.

You hold KJ7 and dummy has AQ3. You know that you are Double finesse-able. If the declarer leads the T or the 9 you should play the K. It is the best way to conceal who holds the J; besides that, if you play the J and the Q wins the tricks the declarer is going to know you have the K. One more example.

You hold KJ7 and dummy has AT53. You know that you are Double finesse-able. If the declarer leads the 9 you should play the J. This forces the A (or wins the trick) and if the A is played you have promoted your K.

2. You have only 1 honor higher than the honor led. Cover if there is a card in the dummy that touches the card led. If there is no touching card in the dummy, don't cover. The logic behind this approach is that if there is no touching card visible, there is a high likelihood that there is a remaining honor in declarer's hand. A couple examples. Dummy holds AJT4 and declarer leads the 9. You

hold K52. The T is a touching honor(to the 9 that was led) you should therefore play the K. Once again you can see the effects of this strategy by laying out the cards as defined and then distribute the remaining 6 in the other 2 hands and look at the different results from playing low and playing the K.

Another example you hold either A73 or K73 and the dummy has Q974. The declarer leads the J. The Q is a touching honor, cover.

Finally, you hold Q82 and the dummy has K43 and declarer leads the J. There is no touching honor in the dummy – play low, don't cover.

COVER THE 2nd time – This is equivalent to the notion that you cover the last honor led from dummy, and that is usually from a dummy that holds 2 honors. And if partner could win the first honor led she certainly shouldn't be able to win the 2nd round.

SPLITTING HONORS

We have already encountered the term “splitting honors”. The true notion of honor splitting is when you have a strong holding in a suit, i.e. you have 3 honors and a low card is led. The general rule is to split when at least two of your honors are touching. With the exceptions that we have already noted it is usually a mistake to split touching honors when there is only two. When holding three where two are touching it is right to split¹ and the card you play will be the same card you'd play if you were leading that suit, i.e. the top of the 2 or 3 touching honors. So Q from AQJ, K from KQT or Q from QJT.

1 Note that the only 3 honor holding where there's no touching honors are AQT or AQ9 or KJ9