

Third Hand High... and Third Hand Not So High

There are many slogans in bridge. One is “third hand high”. It is only mildly useful as a reminder to absolute beginners that, when partner leads the 2 and dummy has the 876, third hand should play the Queen from Q43 without fretting about losing her Queen. Partner, with KJ92 will appreciate the play of the Queen.

The rule, however, is not absolute. There are several exceptions.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	Q75	You
2		KJ3

If the 5 is played from dummy, you clearly shouldn't play the King. The Jack will force the Ace, if declarer has it, or will win the trick if partner has it.

There are other cases which are similar, although not quite so obvious.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	Q75	You
2		K103

If the 5 is played from dummy, the correct play is the 10. There is no scenario in which this will cost you a trick, but there is the potential to gain a trick. Suppose declarer has the J64. He will win the Jack, but your side can win the remaining tricks in the suit. If declarer had the Jack, he is always entitled to one trick in the suit. Suppose, however, that declarer had the A64. Playing the 10 forces the Ace. If partner regains the lead, she can lead the Jack, ensuring that the Queen does not win a trick. If you had played the King initially, declarer would have won 2 tricks in the suit. The same rationale would have applied if you had held the K93 initially.

Here's another (more advanced) example.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	J93	You
2		Q865

If the 9 is played from dummy, you should play low. Partner has apparently led fourth-best, so that means declarer has two. If he has Ax or Kx and you play your Queen, he will win two tricks in the suit: the Ace (or King) and subsequently the Jack. If you had played low initially, he would win the 9 and subsequently the Ace (if he had it) for two tricks. But...if he started with Kx, now partner's Ace will

drop declarer's King and they will only win one trick in the suit. There's also the chance that declarer may started with the AK doubleton. Playing the Queen at trick 1 make the Jack good, for 3 tricks in the suit. Playing low holds them to two. There is one scenario in which the recommended play costs a trick. That is when partner held AKxx. That happens much less than the Axxx AND Kxxx possibilities.

All of these examples occur when dummy has an honor and third hand has a higher honor. The principle involved is keeping the honor in dummy "trapped". If dummy has only low cards (below the Jack), third hand should play high.

Here's an example which frequently occurs when defending suit contracts. Suppose the opponents are playing a suit contract after an auction in which you made an overcall. Partner never bid. Partner leads your suit.

	Dummy	
Partner's lead		You
4	Q82	AJ1096

The 2 is played from dummy. Inexperienced defenders often would play the Ace, fearing that declarer might have a singleton King. There may be some rare circumstances when it is correct to play the Ace (perhaps you see enough tricks to set the contract as long as you get one trick in your suit). Most of the time, playing the 9 is the correct play. Even if it loses to a singleton King, it may not cost you a trick, since, had you played the Ace, you would set up the Queen in dummy, on which declarer might pitch a loser. On any holding other than a singleton King, playing the 9 is a winner. Suppose declarer had Kx or Kxx. Playing the Ace initially gives declarer two tricks in the suit rather than one, had you played the nine.

Again, the principle involved is keeping the honor in dummy "trapped".

Here's a totally different example of "not so high".

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	762	You
4		QJ5

The correct play is the Jack, lowest of touching honors. This tells declarer nothing, but provides very useful information to partner. Suppose declarer wins the Ace and partner (who holds K1064) subsequently regains the lead in another suit. Now partner absolutely knows that you have the Queen (If you didn't have it, declarer would have won the first trick with the Queen). Partner can underlead her King,

win your return and cash the remaining tricks in the suit. Suppose you had played the Queen initially. Now partner would know that you are denying the Jack. If partner regains the lead in another suit, now she should shift to some other suit, hoping you can regain the lead and lead through declarer's Jx.

So if you are leading from an honor sequence, you lead the highest card in the sequence, but if you are following suit with a sequence, you play the lowest card in the sequence.

Unblocking. Sometimes it's necessary to play third hand high to avoid "blocking the suit" partner has led.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	854	You
Q		K2

You may think there's no reason to play the King, but suppose the cards are as shown below, and partner has one outside entry.

	Dummy	
Partner	854	You
QJ1063		K2
	Declarer	
	A97	

If you play low initially, declarer will duck. Partner leads the suit again to your King. Declarer ducks again. Now the suit is "blocked". You are unable to lead it again. Declarer still has his stopper. When partner regains the lead, she can knock out declarer's stop but can never regain the lead to cash the established winners.

The solution is for you to "unblock your King", (i.e., play it initially). Now when declarer ducks, you lead the 2 to partner's 10. Partner continues with a third round, which forces declarer's Ace. Partner retains her entry to cash her winners. Note that the unblock is also necessary when the cards for dummy and declarer are reversed.

The same circumstances exist if you had started with A2 instead of K2. If you play low initially, declarer can win the King and knock out partner's entry while your suit is blocked.

Sometimes declarer may not have a stop, and it's still necessary to unblock.

	Dummy	
Partner	854	You
KQJ97		A3
	Declarer	
	1062	

Here's an interesting variation:

	Dummy	
Partner	K54	You
QJ1063		A2
	Declarer	
	987	

Partner leads the Queen, and declarer plays the 4 from dummy. If you play low, you have blocked the suit. Perhaps you had hopes of winning the King. More likely is that declarer will duck again on the second round. Now the King is an established winner, and the suit is blocked. If you had played the Ace initially and returned the suit, partner can knock out the King and wait to cash her winners.

Suppose you have 3 cards in the suit initially.

	Dummy	
Partner	K54	You
QJ106		A73
	Declarer	
	982	

It is not necessary to unblock and would be a mistake to do so. Let partner continue to lead the suit until the King is played. Now if partner regains the lead, the last winner can be cashed.

Here's one more variation:

	Dummy	
Partner	87	You
QJ1065		AK2
	Declarer	
	943	

Partner leads the Queen. You must unblock both the Ace and King.

