

Splitting Honors

by Ed Rawlinson

Sometimes you may be fortunate enough to hold one or more potential winners (touching honors) in the opponent's trump suit* (e.g., QJx, QJxx, J10xx, KQx). As the hand is played, you may have to decide whether to split your honors. About 10% of the time it is absolutely right to split honors. There is no risk to doing so, and doing so is necessary to ensure that you get the tricks to which you are entitled. About 90% of the time it is absolutely wrong to split honors. In these cases, splitting honors gains nothing, but risks losing tricks you might otherwise win.

To split or not to split, that is the question. While there's no simple rule of thumb that is available, there are some general principles which will help aspiring bridge players.

Plan ahead. Sometimes it's not good enough to make the right play. You must do so without hesitation. If you hesitate and then play a low card, declarer may conclude that you were considering splitting honors and play accordingly. When you have a trump holding with touching honors, begin thinking at trick 1 what you will do when you are faced with the decision to split or not to split. Frequently you can visualize declarer's (and partner's) holding in the trump suit and anticipate his "normal" line of play.

Count and "value" your potential winners. If you hold QJ2 in the opponent's trump suit and you expect them to hold the AK, then you have one potential winner. However, if you hold QJ32, now you have two potential winners. What you are hoping is that the declarer will cash his AK, establishing your two winners. In each case, suppose declarer leads low to K94 in dummy. If you hold QJ2, you should split your honors to ensure your one winner. However, if you hold QJ32, you should play low without hesitation. If declarer holds A10xxx, it's highly likely he will play the K, increasing the odds you will win two tricks. Splitting your honors is a "no-win" play, since declarer will win and later give you only one trick. Playing low doesn't guarantee two winners (declarer may insert the 9), but it gives you the **chance** for a favorable outcome. Note that if declarer plays the 9, you have lost nothing. You still have the one winner you would have had if you had split honors. Another common example occurs when you hold KQx with xx on your right in dummy (with 2 entries) and declarer with a 6-card suit on your left. When declarer leads low from dummy, play low. If declarer has AJ10xxx, you will get only one winner whether you split or not. However, when declarer has AJ9xxx, the correct play for him is low to the 9. By playing low, you give him a chance to make this play. If you start by splitting, he will win, return to dummy and lead toward the J. In summary, count your potential winners. Ask yourself if splitting guarantees the maximum result. Also ask yourself if splitting risks losing a potential trick.

Entries matter; spot cards matter. LHO opens 3♠, followed by 3 passes. Partner leads the ♥K.

- A. Dummy tables xx/Axx/KJ9xx/xxx. You hold QJ2/J109x/AQ10x/xx. Declarer wins the ♥A and leads a spade. What do you play? What if your spades were QJ9?

*Can be a side suit; can be a key suit in NT.

B. Dummy tables xx/Axx/AJxxx/xxx. You hold QJ2/J109x/KQ109/xx. Declarer wins the ♥A and leads a spade. What do you play? What if your spades were QJ9?

You assume declarer has 7 spades. Thus partner has 1. If declarer has AK, he will play for a 2-2 break. So it's unnecessary to split your honors. However, if partner has the stiff K, you give up a trick by splitting honors. Also if partner has the stiff A, declarer may play the K (the correct play). If you played low initially, you will now have two winners. If you split your honors, you win one less trick. However, if you started with QJ9, you should split the honors. Dummy has no entries, so even when partner has the stiff A or K, you will get the maximum number of winners. In case B, you should play low with either QJ2 or QJ9. This will maximize your winners when partner has the stiff A or K. Don't worry about declarer finessing with AK10. You should expect declarer to play AK when he has them. Splitting honors in case B has the potential to lose a trick because declarer can re-enter dummy and lead toward the ♠10.