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This Week in Bridge

(502) Splitting Honors on Defense

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

When we lead a suit on defense, either on opening lead or in the middle of the hand, we usually lead the top of touching honors (with a few exceptions for NT leads and surround plays). This allows partner to know our holding and helps our side place the honors around the table. We also need to have agreements about how we play our honor cards when we are on defense and playing to a trick after the opening lead. Here we look at what card we should play from a variety of different holdings and in a variety of different seats on defense.

Touching Honors on Defense

The *general defensive rule* when we play to but do not lead a suit:

On defense, we play the lower of touching honors when playing to a trick as 2nd, 3rd, or 4th hand.

This is true if we have two, three, or even more touching honors.

Example 1

Axx

KQx

If partner (West) leads this suit and declarer plays low from the dummy, then we (East) win the Queen from our KQx holding. When our Queen wins the trick, partner knows that we have the King, because declarer would win the King if they had it. This play of the Queen would be made if partner led the suit (we played 3rd hand), declarer led the suit from their hand (we played 4th hand), or if declarer played from the dummy (we played 2nd hand).

Example 2

Axx

KJx

If partner (West) leads this suit and declarer plays low from the dummy, then we (East) win the King. In doing so, we deny holding the Queen, allowing partner to place that card with declarer if it's not in their own hand. We would make a similar play if winning the trick 2nd hand or 4th hand.



Example 3

Jxxx
AKx

If declarer leads this suit, either from the dummy or from their hand, we win the trick with our King, not our Ace. Playing the Ace would deny the King, and winning the King allows partner to work out that we likely have the Ace – since declarer would have won the Ace if they held it and played after us.

Example 4

xxx
Kxx QJxx
ATx

When we have the touching honors of the Queen-Jack, we play the Jack when partner (or dummy) leads the suit. By playing the Jack, we deny the Ten and leave open the possibility of holding the Queen. Partner will be able to infer the position on the hand if our Jack forces the Ace from declarer.

Three Touching Honors

When we have holdings with three touching honors then we play the lowest of our touching honors from these holdings:

- AKQx
- KQJx
- QJT_x
- JT9_x

When playing from these holdings as 2nd, 3rd, or 4th seat, we play the cheapest of our equal honors.

Example 5

Axx
QJT

If partner (West) leads this suit and declarer plays low from dummy, we play the Ten. Playing the Ten in this position denies holding the 9 but could be played from the JT or QJT holdings. Partner will have to work out our holding based on what declarer does and other information they have available to them.

Note: The play of the lower/lowest of touching honors from both 2-card and 3-card sequences (when playing 2nd, 3rd, or 4th hand) is also made from spot card holdings like 987.



An Expert Alternative Treatment

When splitting honors in 2nd or 3rd hand it can sometimes be difficult to read the position when we play the lowest of three touching honors.

Example 6

xx
Axxx QJTx vs.
Kxx

Example 7

xx
Axxx JTxx
KQx

Here if partner (West) leads this suit and we (East) play the Ten, forcing declarer to play the King, it can be difficult to tell if we played the Ten from QJT_x, and our suit is ready to run, or if we played the Ten from JT_{xx} and declarer still holds the Queen. In this case partner may be left to guess or use some information from another carding agreement (like Smith Echo) to help determine what we hold.

Some expert players agree to play high from the holding in Example 6. Thus, when they play the Ten they cannot hold the QJT and this leaves partner in a better position to know their possible holdings. Additionally, this may make it more difficult for declarer to play honors, especially when they cannot rule out as many possible holdings from the fact that partner led low and not from an interior sequence.

Conclusion

Having good agreements about what card to lead from different holdings and in different situations is important not just on opening lead but also when following suit after the opening leads. You should make sure that you and partner are clear about your agreements in these situations and then you should learn to make use of all the inferences available from what card partner denied and what card partner could still hold.