

THIRD HAND PLAY by Maritha Pottenger

One bridge maxim is: “Third hand high.” Although this is a useful guideline, it should **not** be followed blindly!!

It is usually correct to **play third-hand high when partner leads a low card** (promising an honor) **and dummy has no honor cards**. Given a choice between **two non-touching honors, play the higher honor** (e.g., from KJxx, play the King). This is especially important at no trump where playing the lower honor may give Declarer a trick s/he does not deserve. If you have **two touching honors, play the lower one**. On defense, if your partner leads low and you have the queen and the jack, play the jack (which denies holding the 10—the card just below it). When Declarer plays the Ace, partner will know that you have the queen. If you played the queen and Declarer took the Ace, partner will think that Declarer has the jack.

If the spot cards in dummy allow it, you may be able to play a non-honor card (because it is equivalent to an honor card due to dummy’s holding in that suit). For example, partner leads low and dummy has 942. If you hold J108 and dummy play low, you can play the 8. With the 9 in dummy, your Jack, ten, and 8 are “equals.” If Declarer plays the Ace, King or Queen on your 8, you have just given partner **lots** of information!

When partner leads a card that is obviously top of a doubleton or “top of nothing,” it is often wrong to play third-hand high. If, for example, your partner leads the 8 of clubs and dummy has 732 while you have K1096. Declarer clearly has the AQJ(x). Do NOT play your King. Force Declarer to use up a dummy entry to finesse you a 2nd time and yet another dummy entry (if s/he has it!) to finesse you a third time.

When you are playing 4th-best leads, **use the “Rule of 11” to help you decide what cards to play**. If, for example, partner leads the 6 in a suit and dummy has 79 and you have K103, you know (from Rule of 11) that Declarer has only ONE card higher than the 6 (because you can see 4 of the 5 cards—Rule of 11—that are in your hand, Dummy, and Declarer’s hand above the 6-spot). If Declarer has denied 4 cards in the suit from the auction, you can safely throw your 10 on some later trick to let partner know s/he can run that suit in NT as soon as s/he gets in.

When playing 3rd hand, remember the importance of maintaining open lines of communication with your partner. Suppose, for example, that you open a Weak Two in hearts and your LHO ends up declaring at 3NT. Your partner leads the 9 of hearts and dummy has a singleton heart. You hold AKJ10xx in hearts. Obviously, Declarer has Qxxx of hearts. If you have no outside entry, you should play the 10 (forcing the queen). Now, if partner has an entry, partner still has a heart to lead to you. If you have an outside entry, it is OK to play AK and then jack of hearts, but it still might be advisable to play the 10 first. Once in awhile, Declarer will only need to knock out ONE entry to make 9 tricks. If that happens to be your partner’s entry, you cannot set the contract if you play AK and then jack. [If you do play AK, play in suit preference order.]

When dummy has an honor card and you have a higher honor card, you usually save that honor card to play on dummy’s honor—provided that you have the 9 or 10 to play if dummy plays low. Example: dummy has J75 and you hold K102. If dummy plays low, put in the 10. If you hold K92 and dummy plays low, put in the 9 (at NT). If you have K82 and dummy plays low, put in the King. (Sometimes even the 8 will work.)

Do not give up a high trump when trumps are led if there is a chance you could use it later to over-ruff dummy.

Third hand must be ready to overtake (e.g., you bid hearts; opponents bid 3NT and partner leads the Jack of hearts when you hold KQ1098x—overtake!!) when appropriate and **unblock** when appropriate. Partner bids spades; opponents bid NT and partner leads the Queen of spades. You have Ax. Overtake the queen and lead back your low one. When partner leads a long suit and you hold Jx or Qx or 10x and dummy wins the trick with a doubleton honor (Kx or Ax or Qx), unblock your honor under dummy's honor. (This allows you to lead low and finesse Declarer's remaining honor later. If you kept your honor, partner could not get the rest of the tricks in the suit. [Envision A1098xx in partner's hand; Qx in dummy; Jx in your hand & Kxx in Declarer's hand.] Watch the spot cards in dummy. Sometimes you cannot afford to overtake.

Pay attention to the auction and partner's signals. Often your play will be based on what you know of partner's (and Declarer's) length in a particular suit. If, for example, you bid hearts and partner leads the Queen, partner should have Queen doubleton or singleton. If dummy has 3 small and you have AJ82, then Declarer has K109x. If you overtake partner's Queen, Declarer can finesse your jack later and you take only 1 trick. If you play low on partner's Queen, you'll get two tricks.

When partner leads a low spot card against a suit contract, assume that partner is NOT underleading an Ace and is not underleading a KQ combination. If you bid a suit and partner lead something else, it is probably (1) a strong sequence; (2) a singleton; or (3) partner has your Ace and is afraid of setting up the King in Declarer's hand.

When NOT to Play Third Hand High

- 1) When Declarer has all the missing honors (e.g., QJ109 in dummy and you have K6432—do NOT cover any honor with your King!).
- 2) When it is clear that neither you nor your partner has anything worthwhile in the suit, play low to discourage any continuation. For example, partner leads the 8 of hearts against a no trump contract (obviously trying to “find” your suit) and dummy has KJ9 and you have 10642. When Declarer plays the 9, do NOT play the 10. (It could encourage partner if Declarer then takes the Ace. Partner may think you now have Queen behind KJ. Play a low heart to tell partner to forget this suit.)
- 3) When partner leads a low card and you have 3 worthless cards, play low to give count.
- 4) When partner leads a trump and you have a high trump that might be able to over-trump dummy later, do NOT play your high trump. Save it!
- 5) When partner leads what you are reasonably sure is a doubleton against a suit contract and you have no outside entry, signal encouragement with a high card, but do NOT take your Ace first round. Partner should have a trump entry and will (with your encouragement) lead the suit again, and you will give partner a ruff. (If you have an outside entry, take Ace & return card that is suit-preference for your entry.)
- 6) Sometimes it is right to NOT play a high honor if it would give an extra entry to dummy which has a long suit to run. The classic example is when dummy has J109 in a suit and your partner leads low in no trump and you hold the King in that suit but also the Axx in a good 5-card suit in dummy and dummy has no other outside entries. Do NOT cover the 9. (Declarer has either Ace or Queen. If you cover the 9, Declarer may take Ace and can drive out your Ace in Dummy's long suit and is guaranteed an entry to dummy with the Jack or 10 in partner's suit.) If you duck the 9, Declarer will get 2 tricks in the suit (to which s/he is entitled anyway), but is forced to use up the 2nd dummy entry early and cannot get back to that long suit!

- 7) Against no trump, if you hold AQx in a suit that partner leads, it is usually best to play the Queen rather than the Ace. This forces Declarer to take King right away and prevents a hold-up that could cut the lines of communication between you and your partner.
- 8) Against no trump, keep the lines of communication open with your partner. When partner leads a known doubleton, try to force Declarer to take his/her stopper right away (e.g., queen from Qxx or King from Kxx) while your partner still has one card to get back to you.
- 9) When partner leads a doubleton in your suit and you know Declarer has two stoppers, try to make sure Declarer uses one stopper right away (while partner still has one card in your suit).