

## DEFENSE - SECOND HAND PLAY

*To Cover or Not to Cover, that is the question*

The principles discussed in this lesson apply to the defense only. It is assumed that declarer can look at her hand and dummy, and make an informed decision as to which card to play. Since the defenders cannot see each other's hands, they need to make certain assumptions, and often follow general guidelines as to which card to play. Except where otherwise noted, the guidelines in this lesson apply to either suit or Notrump contracts.

The two basic principles that generally apply to second hand play are "Second Hand Low", and "Cover an Honor with an Honor". While today's lesson focuses on the latter, both principles are illustrated by the following suit layout:

	♣J32	
♣KT94	-----	♣A76
	♣Q85	

Whenever declarer plays this suit, the defense will get three tricks by following those basic guidelines. If they violate either "second hand low" or "cover an honor with an honor" they will get only two tricks.

**Recommendation:** *Use a deck of cards to play through the above, and other suit combinations presented in this lesson.*

When an honor is led from declarer's hand or dummy, and second hand has a higher honor, it is often, but not always, beneficial to cover.

**Note:** *Consider the TEN an honor for the purpose of this discussion.*

	<u>Dummy</u>
	♣AQ3
<u>You</u>	
♣KT9	
	♣J

To the left is an example of a position in which it is CLEAR TO COVER

The purpose of covering is usually to promote a later trick(s) for either yourself or partner.

When the ♣J is led in the above diagram, cover with the ♣K. Holding the T9, you can see that this will promote a trick in your own hand.

There are many exceptions to the "rule" of Cover an Honor with an Honor, some which give the experts headaches. Other exceptions should be relatively easy to spot. This lesson focuses on those covering dilemmas that the experts would routinely get right.

It should be **CLEAR NOT TO COVER** if there is nothing to promote in your own hand, and can't be anything to promote in partner's hand. An extreme example is to the right.

<u>EXTREME EXAMPLE OF WHEN NOT TO COVER</u>		
	<u>Dummy</u> ♣AJT98	
<u>You</u> ♣K54	-----	<u>Partner</u> ??
	♣Q	

When declarer leads the Q in the above diagram, it makes no sense to cover, as every card in dummy will be high.

How about this less clear example?

In this case, above, you should usually cover, as partner may have 9xxx (assuming the bidding hasn't made this impossible), and declarer will now take only three tricks, rather than four.

	<u>Dummy</u> ♣AJT8	
<u>You</u> ♣K54	-----	<u>Partner</u> ??
	♣Q	

Note that the position would be the same if declarer were leading the J and the AQT8 were in dummy. Or imagine declarer's leading the T with AQJ8 in dummy. Switching equal honors shouldn't change one's thinking.

Try one more similar example:

Should West cover in the position to the right?

	<u>Dummy</u> ♣AQT87	
<u>You</u> ♣K543	-----	<u>Partner</u> ??
	♣J	

Answer: It would be unwise to cover. Partner may have the ♣9, but can't have enough lower clubs to ever make a trick with it, therefore you are making all the clubs good for declarer by covering. If you play low, declarer may not have enough cards to finesse you out of your K.

**THINK AHEAD:** *Anticipate situations where you will need to make a decision as to whether or not to cover, and prepare yourself.*

**Whether or not it is prudent to cover often depends on partner's expected length in the suit.**

By routinely analyzing the bidding before defending a hand, you can often ascertain how many cards declarer has in a given suit. Now figure out what partner has, and you can make informed decisions.

When dummy leads an honor, if it isn't backed up by a touching honor, second hand often does well to cover. However, don't cover when enough is known about declarer's hand to make it unlikely or impossible that anything can be promoted. This information is most commonly available in the trump suit.

For example, declarer has opened the bidding with a Weak Two Bid of 2♠, and leads the ♠J from dummy in the following layout:

Dummy

♠J65

You

♠K32

It would be **ludicrous** to cover, given the bidding. Partner is marked with a singleton! Wouldn't you feel silly if that singleton were the ♠A or ♠Q? As you'd prefer not to hesitate when declarer plays the ♠J, you ideally should ready yourself for this play in advance, by making it a habit to analyze the hand when the dummy comes down.

Try the following problem. Declarer has opened 1♥ (Five-card majors), and leads the ♥J from her hand. Should you cover?

You  
♥Q87

Dummy  
♥A432

-----

♥J

Partner  
??

Make a decision before looking at the next page.

Surely you said no, but how much thought did you give it? If you gave it some thought at the table, you would tell declarer you have the ♥Q. Very likely, declarer holds ♥KJT9x, and has no intention of finessing, but is trying to get you to cover (or to give something away). Good declarers will do this to you often, so **be sure to prepare in advance, especially in the trump suit.**

It *can* sometimes be right to cover in the trump suit. Here's an example. Suppose declarer is believed from the bidding to have five spades (possibly six), and the ♠Q is led from dummy in the following layout:

<u>Dummy</u>	<u>You</u>
♠Q4	♠K53

You should cover, as you may be able to promote the ♠Txx in partner's hand. But if dummy had ♠Qxxx, covering would be pointless, and potentially costly, as partner would be marked with at most a singleton. If dummy had ♠Qxx, covering would probably, though not definitely, be best (one of those situations where the pros wouldn't be sure what to do).

Although it certainly can be best to cover in the trump suit, thinking about it at the wrong time is costly. Therefore, I offer the following practical advice:

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### **If you are caught off guard (who me?), don't cover in the trump suit.**

*Duck smoothly. This won't always be best, but will spare you the embarrassment of falling victim to the declarer who leads an honor with no intention of finessing, trying to draw you in.*

*Of course ideally, you will have analyzed the bidding, counted, and prepared yourself. Be a tough opponent!*

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### **Let's conclude with a few additional general guidelines regarding when to cover:**

1) It is often wrong to cover an honor led from declarer's hand when you have more cards than dummy and your honor will eventually be high (e.g., the Q is led, you have Kxx and dummy has Ax).

2) *If there are two or more touching honors in dummy, and you can cover only one of them, wait to cover the last one.* For example:

Declarer leads the ♦Q from dummy. Do you cover or not?

If you cover, declarer can finesse against partner's ♦T and make all four tricks. If you don't cover the first time, but cover if the ♦J is led next, partner's Ten wins a trick.

	<u>Dummy</u> ♦QJ92	
<u>Partner</u> ♦T76	-----	<u>You</u> ♦K43
	<u>Declarer</u> ♦A85	

3) Notwithstanding general rule #2, if you have a doubleton honor, it may be best to cover the first time, even if there is a touching honor in dummy. If you don't, your honor may be forced out by a low card next time.

But don't cover with a doubleton honor if you suspect your partner may have a singleton!

4) *If the Jack is led from dummy, and you have AQx(x), it is generally best to cover with the Ace.* See Practice Deal #3 for an illustration.

This subject is worthy of far more study than can be accomplished in a single lesson. Most books on defense include a *long* chapter on this subject.

For more fundamental reading, I recommend The ACBL "Heart Series", which has an excellent section on Second Hand Play. For more advanced applications, Edwin Kantar's book Kantar Teaches Modern Defense has examples. It is based on the now out of print big red book, Defensive Bridge Play Complete, which happens to be the book my grandfather taught me defense from.

A Google search for "cover an honor with an honor" turns up many sources with examples.

**Most importantly, to improve your understanding of cardplay, you need to work on analyzing positions both during the hand, and after the game.** Try to make a note of covering dilemmas you are confronted with, and review them after the session. Whenever I hear a pair of avid students discussing "How should we have bid this hand" I think they'd be better off discussing something along the lines of "What would have happened if I had/hadn't covered an honor with an honor?"

**Board 1**

North Deals  
None Vul

♠ A 7 2  
♥ A K 4  
♦ K 8 2  
♣ Q J 7 6

♠ Q 9 6  
♥ Q J 10 7 6  
♦ 7 5 4  
♣ 9 8

N	E
W	S

♠ K 8 3  
♥ 9 3  
♦ A Q 9 6 3  
♣ 10 5 4

♠ J 10 5 4  
♥ 8 5 2  
♦ J 10  
♣ A K 3 2

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 N	Pass	2 ♣
Pass	2 ♦	Pass	2 N
Pass	3 N	All pass	

Contract - 3 NT by North

Lead - ♦ 6

Declarer wins the diamond in dummy, and at some point (possibly after cashing some clubs) will presumably play the ♠ J from dummy in an effort to establish a ninth trick.

Should West (second hand) cover the ♠ J?

Let's see what happens. If second hand covers the first spade, declarer can win the ♠ A, and lead up to the ♠ T for the ninth trick.

If instead W correctly plays low, the contract can't be made (assuming East knows better than to continue diamonds, setting up declarer's ♦ K).

A guiding principle for second hand is as follows:  
**When the first of two (or more) touching honors is led, and you can cover only one, do not cover the first.**

There are exceptions, the most common being two honors doubleton (e.g., QJ), where it is often best to either cover the first, or not cover at all.

*These four deals were played at Debbie Rosenberg's Unit 503 Lecture on Tuesday morning, March 11, 2014*

**Board 2**

East Deals  
N-S Vul

♠ 10 7 6  
♥ —  
♦ A 9 8 4 3  
♣ Q J 10 6 5

♠ 9 4 3 2  
♥ A 5 4 2  
♦ K 10  
♣ A K 3

N	E
W	S

♠ A 5  
♥ Q J 10 9 8 7 6  
♦ J 7  
♣ 9 7

♠ K Q J 8  
♥ K 3  
♦ Q 6 5 2  
♣ 8 4 2

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		3 ♥	Pass
4 ♥	All pass		

Contract - 4 ♥ by East

Lead - ♠ K

With an 11-card fit missing only the King, the *percentage play* is to try and drop the King rather than to finesse.

However, even if declarer plans to play the ♥ A, it costs nothing to lead the Queen!! Maybe second hand will cover with Kx. Should they?

Certainly not! South knows from the bidding that covering can't possibly gain. If declarer has seven hearts, partner is void. Even if declarer opened 3 ♥ with only six, which some players might do at this vulnerability, partner has only a singleton.

Note that South must be ready for this play before it happens. If South hesitates on the ♥ Q lead, that will give the show away.

**DO NOT COVER IF YOU HAVE NOTHING TO PROMOTE IN YOUR OWN HAND, AND PARTNER HAS AT MOST A SINGLETON**

Assuming South doesn't err by covering or hesitating, declarer will presumably "misguess" the heart, and must eventually guess the diamond to make the contract. Once again, declarer may as well lead an honor, therefore leading the ♦ J, even if her plan is to go up with the King. Again we see a situation where covering is illogical, looking at KT doubleton in dummy.

Maybe declarer will guess right anyway, and there are some clues, but don't make life easy for them!

**Board 3**

South Deals  
E-W Vul

♠ A 5 2  
♥ K 8 7  
♦ J 10 6  
♣ 10 7 6 3

♠ 6  
♥ Q J 10 3 2  
♦ 7 5 2  
♣ Q 9 8 5



♠ 10 9 8  
♥ A 5 4  
♦ A Q 8 4  
♣ J 4 2

♠ K Q J 7 4 3  
♥ 9 6  
♦ K 9 3  
♣ A K

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 ♠
Pass	2 ♠	Pass	4 ♠
All pass			

Contract - 4 ♠ by South

Lead - ♥ Q

Declarer will ruff the third round of hearts, and needs to avoid two diamond losers. A good plan is to draw two rounds of trump ending in dummy, saving the ♠ 4 or ♠ 3 in the hopes that the trumps will split 2-2. If that happened declarer would have a second entry to dummy to finesse twice against the ♦ Q.

When declarer wins the ♠ A and leads the ♦ J, what should East do? Cover or not, and if so, with what?

**As a general rule, when dummy leads the Jack and second hand has the AQ (+ any length) it is usually best to "cover" by winning the Ace.**

This forces declarer to use another entry to dummy to finesse against the Queen, and in this case declarer doesn't have one! Therefore, as long as the defense doesn't lead diamonds, or throw too many away, declarer must eventually lose to the ♦ Q, and the contract fails.

**Board 4**

West Deals  
Both Vul

♠ J 7 5  
♥ Q J 10 9 8  
♦ K Q 10  
♣ K 8

♠ A K 2  
♥ A K 5 2  
♦ A 7 6 3  
♣ 10 4



♠ 10 6  
♥ 6 4 3  
♦ 8 4 2  
♣ A Q J 3 2

♠ Q 9 8 4 3  
♥ 7  
♦ J 9 5  
♣ 9 7 6 5

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1 ♦	1 ♥	Pass	Pass
1 N	Pass	3 N	All pass

Contract 3 NT by West

Lead - ♥ Q

The 1 NT rebid by opener, with responder having passed, shows 18-19 HCP. This is "Standard", as you don't want to have to jump to 2 NT to show the 18 or 19, when partner may have nothing.

Whether declarer wins the first or second round of hearts, the next play should be to lead the ♣ T. Should second hand cover or not?

Answer: North had better cover this. This play can't lose, and may promote partner's 9xxx, as it does on this deal.

If North fails to cover the ♣ T, declarer has five easy club tricks, and will make an overtrick.

Assuming North, correctly, covers the club ♣ T with the ♣ K, should declarer take the Ace? If she does, she can make only three club tricks, and only eight total tricks. By ducking the club, declarer can cater to a 4-2 club split, and still make four club tricks, which is enough for the contract. As the 4-2 club split is more likely than 3-3, declarer should duck the club, and make nine tricks.

In reality, experience has shown that if second hand covers the club, declarer will often err and go down.

**Cover when it can't hurt and might help!!**