

Common bridge guidelines and when to disregard them: Bridge is a game for thinkers, not rule robots.

By Cris Barrere

Bridge has many useful maxims that advise us about the correct play in common positions. We all know many of them, like: “Cover an honor with an honor.” These maxims masquerade as rules but are more accurately characterized as guidelines, what we should do in general when we don’t have additional pertinent information. They are the distillates of examining many outcomes to learn what the winning play is most of the time and are especially helpful as we are just learning the game or simply trying to play in tempo. Guidelines are a sort of power-assist as we climb the steep learning curve of bridge. What are some of the ones that come to mind for you?

We’ll examine a few of these maxims by looking at examples of the basic decision position in isolation to understand why the guideline is helpful, and then go deeper to consider where it may be right to break the rule. Our proximate aim is to become aware of the proper play in various recurrent positions. But while very useful, they shouldn’t be followed blindly. They are simply starting points and always require contextual specifics and the strategic creativity of your own careful thinking. Our ultimate goal is to become better bridge players by increasing our comprehensive holistic thinking at the table. We must recognize that while we learn the correct play for a general scenario, there is always the rest of the hand to consider and that this may suggest an alternate play.

Thus the **context** of the hand must always be taken into account. This starts with background information such as: Form of scoring, vulnerability, information from the bidding and lead, signaling agreements, and additional corroborating information from the interrelation of the rest of the hand. This includes: Winners or losers, sources of additional tricks, timing, sequencing, and entries. Together these make up some of the many overlaying factors that comprise the context of the hand. Whew – a daunting amount of information to unpack. You can see why we need guidelines in the first place, and we’ll stick mostly to core positions and basic contextual factors.

The logic of card combinations and percent tables for distribution govern common cases and the key context factors are **suit length** and **nearby honors** (or spots). One final element in the decision making process is a statement of the obvious: It’s reasonable to credit that your opponents will act in their best interests. They won’t intentionally make a play they know is wrong or inferior from a logic or percentage standpoint.

General guidelines help a lot and can be relied on absent further compelling information, but they don’t dictate what is necessarily right in the unique case at hand. The Meta rule – the rule for our collection of guidelines is something like this: If you know what the percentage or generally correct play is for the abstract case in isolation, go ahead and follow that unless there is a countervailing context that suggests otherwise. Make the normal play unless you can see an alternate play that gives you a better chance. Always be on the look-out for those contrary or exceptional cases.

Template Key:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <u>Underlined</u> card: | Lead. |
| ? : | Decision maker. |
| Bold : | Cards visible to decision maker. |
| x : | Irrelevant spots, as if they are deuces. |
| (x) : | Additional spots you might or might not have on a layout. |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| | Dummy | |
| Left Hand Opponent (LHO) | | Right Hand Opponent (RHO) |
| | Declarer | |

“Cover an honor with an honor”

We employ this guideline for a range of important reasons: We cover an honor to prevent declarer from winning a cheap trick or from building a trick, or to build a trick for our side, or in order to block or create an entry. All very useful things to do with an honor that might otherwise wither on the vine.

| | | | |
|---------------|------------|----------------|-------------|
| 1a. | AJx | 1b. | Axx |
| Kxxx ? | 109xx | K10xx ? | xxx |
| | <u>Q</u> x | | <u>Q</u> Jx |

The first case is classic. If you bury your head in the sand and duck the lead of the queen, declarer will blithely take the finesse twice and enjoy three tricks, one of them a pitch. If you follow the guideline and cover an honor with an honor, they have only two. You must assume declarer is actually going to take the finesse and do the best you can to prevent or preserve a potential trick. If declarer also has the 10 there was nothing you could do so you must assume partner has it. In the next case we know where the ten is, so covering is virtually 100%. The decision making context is adjoining honors and you can see the jack.

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1c. | A10xx | 1d. | Axxx |
| Kxx ? | J9x | Kxx ? | 10xx |
| | <u>Q</u> xx | | <u>Q</u> J9 |

Declarer might lead the queen in the first case if the bidding places the king with LHO or due to a dearth of entries. An errant duck would swing two or three tricks to declarer. This dramatic example would embarrass any defender but is very unlikely since declarer has a better way to play that combination. If declarer has the jack nothing matters, but if partner has it the cover is critical. The apparently similar position in the second case might be the actual deal. If you cover the queen declarer can finesse for the ten on the way back to pick up the suit with no losers. Here the context is basic probability and logic coupled with visible adjacent honors: If declarer had only the queen they have a better chance for an extra trick by leading to the queen and if they have QJ10 it doesn't matter what you do. A not as snappy but perhaps more accurate articulation of the guideline might be: “Consider covering the *second* honor with an honor.”

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1e. | Axxx | 2. | AK92 |
| K10 ? | xxx | J4 ? | Q875 |
| | <u>Q</u> J9x | | <u>10</u> 63 |

The cover of this queen is automatic since if you ‘wait’ by playing the ten, your hand is revealed and your trick opportunity disappears. In this position, declarer might start with the jack so if you play the king, which you should, they may get a clue about whether you have a singleton honor. The second position calls for a cover in order to prevent declarer from winning three tricks in the suit and swings the trick-building balance to your side. You could look at the cover as “building” a trick for your side even if you never get to cash that trick. The decision maker can see the effect of ducking or covering which makes following the guideline easy. Other cases may not be so clear.

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|
| 3a. | AK54 | 3b. | AKxx |
| QJ6 ? | xxx | QJx ? | x |
| | <u>10</u> xx | | <u>10</u> xxxx |

Here we don't know whether cover is correct because we can't see all the relevant spots. Distributional information can help with the decision. If declarer has four or fewer, finessing twice tends to be right so covering is correct. But if declarer has five or more, playing for the split is better so you should duck.

Tip: As declarer, lead the top of touching honors if you want a cover and the lower if you prefer a duck. Defenders are more likely to cover a card when they see it will win if they duck.

Under what circumstances should you consider breaking the cover guideline and duck instead?

- They have showed length (e.g. in a trump suit) or where their percentage play is to go up.
- The opponent's higher honor in the dummy is short and you have greater length.
- Ducking creates a guess when two or more honors are missing.
- Your play blocks or removes an entry that would otherwise benefit the opponents. This can occur when declarer needs to return to take a second finesse or when a trick-source has limited entries.

Many guidelines have associated conditions, caveats and exceptions. For brevity and simplicity we don't always articulate them but they're still there if you reason them out. What are the clues and process for knowing when it's right to go against the advice of the guideline? Use distribution, highcard count and signals from partner to visualize the hand. Ask yourself: Why did declarer make that play? Better still, consider the toughest card declarer could present to you and *decide ahead of time* how you will handle it. Pre-thinking a decision permits smooth, in-tempo play. The goal is to cover an honor intentionally with reason to think it is the right play in this particular case.

Here are some situations where you should duck instead of a cover:

Trump suit positions where the opponents have bid and raised the suit:

| | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-----------|------------|--------------|---------------|
| 4a. | A9xx | | 4b. | Jxxxx | |
| Qxx ? | | xx | | void | Q10x ? |
| | KJ10x | | | AK9xx | |

The first case is a cheap ploy that may work against beginners. If declarer has bid the suit they must have at least four, so their correct play is to cash one high honor and then finesse on the second round. Knowing their proper play provides the context for your smooth duck. They're just tempting you to cover the first round. Don't fall for it. In the second example East must apply some simple counting rather than make a silly reflexive cover. Missing only Qxx declarer is not going to float the jack and is simply trying to induce a blunder. The decision context is the count in trump – declarer opened the major thus must have five so there is no way they will play for all three remaining cards to be onside in one hand, but it costs nothing to throw out some bait.

Fishing is fun as long you're not the trout.

Trump suit:

| | | |
|---------------|--------------|----------|
| 4c. | Kxxx | |
| Q10x ? | | A |
| | J987x | |

Side suit:

| | | |
|----------------|-------------|-----------|
| 5. | KJxx | |
| Q98xx ? | | Ax |
| | 10x | |

While it's correct to think of a high spot card as potentially something that might require a cover, this is the wrong time to do so because declarer has length in the suit. Declarer is just fishing again. Your side gets two tricks if you cover, but will get three if declarer goes up with the king. Incidentally, the correct play of this suit a priori depends on how many tricks you need. Playing to the king (with the additional advantage of encouraging a cover along the way) is best for maximum tricks, but running the 9 is best to ensure three tricks. Positions like this second one are resolved on the basis of distribution counts and sometimes by a trick assessment or entry issue. For that reason it is often right for declarer to present you with the choice early before you can be more certain about that information. That early presentation can be your clue to duck. The defensive situation is similar if the honors are swapped. As declarer, however, it can sometimes be right to delay your guess if you will be able to count highcards to make a better honor guess later.

Notrump positions where you have to think past the trick at hand to consider later potential tricks:

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----|---------------|-----------------------|----|
| 6a. | Ax | | 6b. | Ax | |
| Kxx ? | | xxx | KJxx ? | | xx |
| | <u>Q</u> J109x | | | <u>Q</u> 10987 | |

The first case should be relatively easy to solve by mentally playing the alternatives. If you cover, declarer may have all the missing equal honors or a finessing position against a missing spot in partner's hand. On the other hand, if you choose to ignore the guideline based on the context of the short ace in dummy, you will certainly have a trick with your king and create an entry problem for declarer in establishing remaining tricks in the suit. In the second case, however, many players err and cover the queen because they see that this makes their jack good. They failed to think further to additional tricks and an entry. If you duck the queen you earn a double blessing: Two tricks in the suit instead of just one, and a significant delay for declarer in establishing more tricks in the suit.

| | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|----|---------------|--------------|----|
| 7a. | J109x | | 7b. | J109x | |
| Axxx ? | | xx | Axxx ? | | Qx |
| | <u>K</u> Qx | | | Kxx | |

Here declarer is building tricks. We've all heard the adage that "aces are meant for kings" but can you imagine a circumstance where deferring your trick could be correct? Any trick you have isn't going away, unless declarer's king is singleton in a suit contract or we duck the first and foolishly rise on the second to crash partner's honor. There can be significant contextual "ifs" to think about in what might appear to be a clear case. The relevant context issue here is a dummy entry. Suppose declarer lacks an entry, or taking the entry creates some other problem. A key to knowing what to do is to wait on the first round to get a count signal from partner. Then you will know to wait a second time and hold declarer to two tricks. But what if that rascally declarer is trying to hoodwink you? In the second example that appears to be the case. But notice that if the king is won by the ace, the queen will win the second trick perforce and declarer will have a suit entry. Delayed gratification, a sign of maturity we've all been told, pays off here if we duck twice since it holds declarer to one trick instead of two.

Be wary of potential sucker-cover positions where you can't personally see the relevant clarifying spots:

| | | | | | |
|--------------|----------------------|-----|--------------|----------------------|-----|
| 8a. | Axx | | 8b. | Axx | |
| Jxx ? | | Qxx | Kxx ? | | Jxx |
| | <u>K</u> 109x | | | <u>Q</u> 1098 | |

If you cover the ten you will soon feel like a dope. With multiple missing honors partner can win if you duck and it won't matter if they can't. Why is covering in the second case even more heinous? Because declarer was initiating a double finesse or, perhaps worse for you, an up-and-back suit guess that could net you two tricks. A cover flunks the test. Leading the 10 in the second case, intending on double finessing in the suit, is the correct start because of the luck jackpot if LHO has a singleton king. Covering an honor usually means "gently" covering. That is, you are covering with the next higher honor. Highcard context information from the bidding could change declarer's play, for instance if RHO had opened 1NT marking highcard location.

Defensive decisions: When presented with a defensive decision you have two general approaches. You may think through the entire position and consider all the combinations and contextual issues to arrive at the best choice. That may take time you don't have, be too complicated or convey costly information to the opponents. On the other hand, you may follow the guideline for this position and play smoothly in tempo but be wrong. Each has its plusses and minuses. The bigger your mental data base of thoroughly understood positions the more frequently you will be able to confidently follow the second path and be right. It's always your choice.

“Second hand low”

This is another common ‘rule’ you probably learned early that has excellent merit, and some significant exceptions. The reason for this guideline is two-fold. First and quite simply, partner has yet to play. Why waste a spot or honor if partner may be able to win the trick? Second, declarer might have been intending to go up anyway and ducking conceals your holding a little bit longer. You certainly don’t want to sacrifice your card when you could be getting it later anyway. Going up prematurely can mean playing your honor “on air” and not getting full value. You could be squandering an honor you will need later for a trick or entry, reveal a position, or eliminate a guess – lots to lose and usually less to gain.

Here’s a very common case:

1a. **Qxxx**
K9x ? A10x
 Jxx

This is the position you might be conjuring:

1b. **Qxxx**
K9x ? J10xx
 Ax

Declarer leads a small spot toward dummy. Should you play second hand high to take your trick? No! You must play low to keep declarer from establishing a trick on power. In the second case you hate to be swindled, but this is more a baseless fear than a likely scenario. If you go up, declarer still has two tricks.

A big swing potential:

2a. **K108x**
QJx ? A9x
 xxx

A common variation:

2b. **xxxx**
(9)x **QJx ?**
 AK108(x)

We must consider the hand from declarer’s point of view. In the first case, the percentage play for two tricks is to finesse the 8 because there are two different H9 combinations and only one HH combination. Following the guideline may win three tricks for your side! Further contextual factors can include your judgment as to a) who has the ace and b) where the 9 is. An honor count of the hand may have told you where the ace is likely to be and if declarer had the nine they might have led it. In the second case splitting honors is wrong if it only serves to tip off declarer to the winning line when the percentage play would have been to play for the suit to split or finesse the 8.

It’s tempting to take a trick as soon as you can, but sometimes it’s better to wait:

3. **Q10xx**
Kxx ? Jxx
 Axx

4. **KQxx**
Axxx ? xxxx
 x

If we go up, declarer no longer has a problem where playing low leaves a guess. In the second example, even if the lead is a singleton it can still be right to duck since going up establishes two tricks while ducking yields declarer only one. Even when dummy leads a stiff and you hold the ace it is right to duck more often than you might think. The decision turns on a combination of the distributional count and whether you need this trick to defeat the hand, or whether declarer can use the discards or has enough trumps to ruff.

5. **K9xx**
Qxx Jx
 A10xx

6. **KQ10**
Axx ? Jxx
 xxx

It doesn’t matter where declarer starts this suit. As long as second hand plays low, the defenders will always get a trick. But if one defender plays high second hand the suit can be picked up with no losers. The second case is a double application of the guideline. You follow low on the first trick and then, receiving a count card from partner, know to play second hand low in tempo on the subsequent lead to give declarer a losing option.

Tip: Once you have analyzed a particular case, look for comparable variants as you compile a reference repertoire. This will allow you to see the right play in a new situation more readily.

You don’t have to work out every position, just recognize those which are sufficiently similar.

| | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|------|---------------|-------------|-----|
| 7. | K10xx | | 8. | AJxx | |
| QJx ? | | Axxx | 10xx ? | | Qxx |
| | <u>xx</u> | | | <u>K98</u> | |

It can be right to split when declarer has either a singleton or the ace, but splitting still allows declarer to set up a trick. Declarer's percentage play is to go up in the first case and finesse the jack in the second. Absent further information follow the guideline by playing second hand low. Playing high squanders a trick and perhaps the entire suit. Count early to help with this decision and permit you to play in tempo.

As you can see, there are lots of cases where it's right to play second hand low. But there are also plenty where going up instead is the right play in the particular case. The context for contravening the guideline is often based on count, distribution or high cards, and is influenced by timing – can your a trick go away?

Consider breaking the rule and playing second hand high to:

- Avoid splitting honors when you can't protect the second one.
- Take a needed trick you would otherwise lose. This is usually a counting decision, often indirect. Those can be tough. You will inevitably go wrong sometimes. Do not fret or regret a thinking decision.
- Create a guess where you can see that the normal percent play will be successful for your opponent.
- Kill an entry or source of tricks. This might entail sacrificing an honor in order to nullify a suit.
- Capture a trick promptly to lead through declarer or to prevent partner from becoming endplayed, but be careful to avoid solving a guess for declarer. Count early to be prepared when the decision arises.
- *Never detach a card early.* It signals you've made up your mind and means they don't have to use theirs.

Let's consider some second hand low rule-breaking positions:

Sometimes you should sacrifice or take an honor prematurely in order to deny declarer an entry:

| | | | | |
|-------------|----------------------------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|
| 9. | AJ109x (entry-poor dummy) | 10. | ♦AKQJx | |
| Qx ? | | | ♣Qxxx | |
| | Kx(xx) | ♣Axxx ? | | ♣xxx |
| | <u>(xx)x</u> | | ♦void | |
| | | | ♣Kx | |

This important and often missed position occurs when playing low allows the suit to be routinely picked up on the second lead. If you play a rule-following low and partner wins the king, declarer can subsequently lead to an otherwise entryless dummy and run the suit. Going up to sacrifice your honor prevents the suit from running or at the very least buys you a second trick in the suit. It's a special thrill when you pull it off. In the second case going up prevents declarer from winning the queen to gain entry to an otherwise inaccessible trick source. You must be alert to spot these counterintuitive and uncommon plays.

Other times you might alter your normal play to create a guess or losing option:

| | | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|-----|--------------|--------------|------|
| 11. | AJ9x | | 12. | AKQ98 | |
| K10x ? | | Qxx | Jxx ? | | 10xx |
| | <u>xxx</u> | | | <u>xx</u> | |

If you can read that partner may have the queen you might play the king to give declarer a guess when the percentage play would have declarer taking the winning finesse of the nine. (The reason to finesse the 9 is that there is only one 10 but two higher honors.) If this happens when you are declaring ask yourself why your opponent put up their honor so obligingly. In the second case you can see – but declarer cannot – that the suit runs. Putting up the jack never costs and gives declarer a losing option if they foolishly think you hold J10xx.

“Third hand high”

Partner has led a low card, RHO has played and now it's your turn. It's generally right to make an effort on the trick by playing high. The reason for this guideline is fundamental and obvious since it's your side's last chance to win before the opponents complete the trick. We play third hand high to win the trick or at least force an opponent to expend a higher card to capture the trick, possibly promoting an honor or later spot in partner's hand for our side. This general position is why we lead attitude - low from an honor or interest in having the suit continued and high without. This helps partner know whether to invest in the suit or not.

| | | | | | |
|-------|-----|-------|-----|-----|--------|
| 1. | xxx | | 2. | xxx | |
| Q10xx | | Kxx ? | Kxx | | QJxx ? |
| | AJx | | | Axx | |

Partner's low lead suggests an honor so we protect our equity in the suit by going up to promote a trick for partner. In the second case we play high with the lower of touching honors to make it obvious to partner that we also have the queen since if declarer had the queen, that's what they would win.

| | | | | | |
|-------|------|-------|------|-----|-------|
| @ NT: | | | | | |
| 3. | xxx | | 4. | xx | |
| Qxx | | KJx ? | Jxxx | | AQx ? |
| | Axxx | | | Kxx | |

In the first case we might choose to play the jack to reveal the king to partner and provide a clear defensive option. We can do this because partner won't have underled the ace and if declarer has both the A and Q the honor we play won't matter. The second case is an important position where playing our second honor will often be right. If we win the ace declarer can hold up on the second round to win the third and sever our communication in the suit. However, if we play the queen on the first trick, declarer won't know who holds the ace and may win for fear of losing the entire suit, thereby preserving our communication. In both cases our thoughtful trick one play makes life easier for partner. Partners really appreciate this.

When should we contravene the third hand high guideline? There are plenty of times it's right to duck third hand, breaking the rule:

- You would be playing high on air with an honor that you can still win later but with added benefits.
- To preserve an entry when you have an ace and need to hold up to preserve communication so partner can reach you to receive a ruff.
- To freeze a suit where neither side can profitably play it without establishing a trick for the other side.

A complex but more accurate guideline might be: **“Play high if it is likely to promote a secondary honor in partner's hand, but duck to control an entry or preserve an honor that will later be able to capture an enemy honor.”** Your play is the answer to the “How high?” question. These decisions turn on counts and honor positions. Build a mental library of cases to make correct future decisions smoothly and in tempo.

Notable exceptions to the guideline of third hand high:

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----|--------------|-------|-----|--------|
| Later in the hand: | | | | | |
| 5. | Qxx | | 6. | Qxx | |
| AJxx ? | | <u>109</u> x | AJx ? | | K109*7 |
| | Kxx | | | xxx | |

* Special agreement

In the first example you must wait to win declarer's honor with your honor, denying them a second trick in the suit. Partner has done the heavy lifting by leading an honor; you needn't contribute your honor just yet. The second case is similar but instead of ducking, you must rise and return the suit. These positions present an important question: Who has the missing honor? We lead the top of a sequence which may or may not include a higher honor. You're on a guess unless count-context provides an answer. You might ask yourself:

“Do I want to force out an honor to retain the potential to score two tricks later, or win that *particular* trick? This decision might also include an entry preventing component. As in life, delayed gratification can be a good idea, but how do we know when? There is a carding solution to this dilemma.

Carding agreement suggestion: *After* the opening lead consider playing that: Jack denies a higher honor and 10 or 9 show zero or two higher to help distinguish the two different positions illustrated above. Partner would have led the coded 10 from 1097 and the 9 from K1097 showing zero or two higher. This agreement gives you a better chance to solve difficult defensive decisions, but is not best practice on opening lead because it tends to give more information to declarer than partner.

| | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| 7. | KQ8xx | 8. | xx |
| <u>9(x)</u> | Axx ? | <u>9(x)</u> | Kxxx ? |
| | xxx(x) | | AQJ10 |

In both these cases partner has led a high spot signaling one of three situations: Negative attitude (no honor), shortness (either a singleton or doubleton), or a sequence topped by the nine. In the first case your challenge is to decide the timing for offering partner a ruff. Ducking now let’s partner reach you if they have a doubleton and can gain the lead later. Resist the fear of losing your ace by ducking the first time in order to maintain communication. In the second case you must recognize that rising with the king will not help build a trick for your side since partner has denied an honor with the lead. Couple that with the realization that declarer can only finesse twice in the suit so your king is length-protected. Ducking third hand limits declarer to two tricks, rising gifts declarer four tricks – quite a difference.

Here are some helpful questions to ask in duck-or-rise decision making:

- What is the high card count on the hand so I can pin down honor location?
- Is now the right time to take my trick, or will I get an extra trick or preserve an entry by delaying?
- Does declarer have pitch(es) coming – will my trick still be there if I duck?
- Do you (or partner) have a trump control so that a delayed ruff is possible?

The first step to making more winning decisions is to avoid blind reactive plays. Don’t give up an honor without due consideration. Establish as much context as possible by counting and visualizing the hand.

Note: UI is created by your completely reasonable BIT. Partner may not take notice but the opponents may.

Trump ducking positions:

| | | | |
|----|--------------|----------|---------------|
| 9. | QJxx | 10. | K10xx |
| x | Axx ? | <u>x</u> | Axxx ? |
| | Kxxxx | | QJxx |

It might be helpful in the first case to duck a round to see a useful signal from partner on the second round. In the second scenario it’s often right to duck two rounds in order to retain control or reduce entries. You might tap declarer and score a trump via a ruff or promotion because an entry shortage prevents extracting your last trump. The ace of trump is an especially powerful card; be reluctant to release it prematurely.

Common side-suit positions:

| | | | |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| 11. | Qxx | 12. | Qxx |
| <u>J109</u> | Kxxx ? | <u>J109</u> | Axx ? |
| | Axx | | Kxxx |

In the first case you duck because the jack and king are co-equals when the queen is sandwiched between. In the second, it’s generally right to duck. Imagine if partner holds the KJ10, and even in the unlikely layout where you lose to a stiff king the opponents still have a trick in the suit. Playing low only loses if you needed to cash out or make a crucial trick-two shift.

These next cases illustrate why playing third and fifth instead of fourth best leads may be a better agreement:

| | | | | | |
|-----|-------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|
| 13. | Jxx2 Qx4 | Ax3 ? | 14. | Jx2 Q543 | A109x ? |
| | Kxx | | | K7 | |

In the first case you know you can win and profitably return the suit to probably develop a second trick since partner has only three cards (if your ace doesn't fall a singleton honor signifying that partner led from five). Playing fourth best leads the position would be ambiguous. In the second case you suspect partner has the three when declarer doesn't play it on the first trick, and thus four cards in the suit. Therefore there is nothing more to do in this suit, making a shift worth considering.

Here are two common notrump positions where a guideline breaking third hand lower is often right:

| | | | | | |
|-------|-----------------|------------------|------|------|-------|
| 15. | ♦KQJ10x ♣K84 | ♦Axxx ♣A107 ? | 16. | Q108 | K54 ? |
| ♣9632 | ♦(xxxx) ♣QJ5 | | J962 | A7x | |

In the first case you should merely cover dummy's card to prevent a later dummy entry. Notice why playing the ten would fail to a thoughtful declarer. In the second case partner's low-lead suggests an honor but not necessarily the ace. Going up doesn't promote anything and in fact would blow the whole suit. Following low limits the trick loss by freezing the suit so that neither side can profitably play it. If instead you go up, declarer can win and finesse to pick up the rest of the suit. Playing third hand low gives declarer a trick they always had coming. The contextual reasoning you should follow is this: Declarer always has at least one trick coming anyway. If partner has the ace you can attack the suit later to win the tricks you have coming, but if declarer has the ace you must bide your time. Your goal here is to prevent, not promote.

A less emphatic but more thoughtful guideline may be: "Third hand high *enough*."

Conclusion:

Bridge maxims - guidelines - are sound advice but they are neither immutable nor sacrosanct and not in themselves sufficient and never to be adhered to robotically. It's impossible to list all the 'rules' with all their possible exceptions – there really are a lot. The point is to give you a default and head start as you methodically think further based on counting, picturing, processing, considering alternatives, and looking at the hand from both partner and declarer's points of view in order to work out the best play in the particular situation. You must be able to recognize an exception as much as you need to know the guideline in the first place. You have to think for yourself on every hand.

“Learning ‘Rules of N’ (in any regard) is a waste, as substituting rote techniques for thinking is a sure path to become clueless.” – Richard Pavlicek

Tips:

- Count every hand – suits and high cards.
- Take time at trick one to pre-think later choices.
- Keep a card up to freeze the play so you can consider developments and decide before the crunch case.

Thank you bridge players!

Cris Barrere is a retired educator and professional bridge player and teacher living in Berkeley, California. A Grand Life Master with two national wins and a perennial high Barry Crane Top 500 finisher, Cris really enjoys teaching and coaching improving players at all levels. You may contact him at:

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