

The Exciting World of Bridge – Lesson 13

It's All About Defense

Introduction

Defense is considered by most to be the toughest part of the game. On top of that, you're going to be a Defender about half of the time so getting good at it is a pretty good idea. Tonight we're going to talk briefly about the choice of cards to lead on opening lead and then we're going to explore a couple of well known "rules" and see how best to turn these into guidelines.

The Opening Lead

Whether we're defending a trump contract or a notrump contract, the safest of leads is generally from a sequence. We've talked about this before so tonight will be a quick review. There are three types of sequences that we look for, I will list them in order of safest to least safe.

- 1) Solid Sequence – this is holdings like AKQx, KQJx, QJTx, JT9x. It's 3 or more cards in a row headed by an honour. From these holdings you lead the top card.
- 2) Broken Sequence – examples of this are AKJx, KQTx, QJ9x etc. It's when you have two cards in a row headed by an honour and then a one card gap to the next card.
- 3) Interior Sequence - This is where the gap is above the two (or more) card sequence. Examples would be KJTx (lead the jack), QT9x (lead the ten) etc.

If you're not leading from a sequence then from the suit you've chosen to lead you should lead the top of a doubleton, your lowest from three cards (generally you'll only do this if it's a suit partner bid) or your fourth highest from your longest and strongest suit.

Third Hand High

A very popular "rule" in bridge is "third hand high". This implies that third hand should play as high a card to the trick as the player can afford. It helps to consider the circumstances in which this guideline is best applied. A typical situation is when partner leads a low card on opening lead and a low card is played from dummy. Let's see why third hand high works so well. Take the spade suit and distribute it as follows:

N- ♠864

W - ♠KJ75

E - ♠AT2

S - ♠Q93

You are East and your partner leads the ♠5 against a notrump contract. Declarer plays the ♠4 from Dummy. If you play your lowest card, the ♠2, Declarer wins the first trick with the ♠9. If you make a halfhearted attempt to win the trick and play the ♠10, Declarer wins with the ♠Q. Instead, you must play the highest card you can afford, the ♠A. If you play the ♠A and lead back the ♠10, Declarer's ♠Q is trapped. If Declarer covers your ♠10, partner's ♠K takes the trick. If Declarer doesn't cover, your ♠10 wins and Declarer loses the ♠Q on the next round. By playing third hand high, you prevent Declarer from taking a single trick in the suit.

Playing third hand high can be the best idea, even if you don't win the trick. Let's change the example slightly by exchanging your ♠A and ♠10 for Declarer's ♠Q and ♠9:

N- ♠864

W - ♠KJ75

E - ♠Q92

S - ♠AT3

Again the lead is the ♠5 and a low card is played from Dummy. It doesn't hurt to play the highest card you have, the ♠Q. Declarer can take the ♠A, but you have promoted three winners for your side. If you played the ♠2, or even the ♠9, Declarer would win the first trick with the ♠10 and still have the ♠A left.

Only As High as Necessary

As with all guidelines, we have to be careful as to when we apply them. You don't always play your highest card as third hand. The objective is to try to win the trick or to promote winners in partner's hand, so you need to play a card only as high as necessary. To see this, lay out the following cards in the spade suit:

N- ♠864

W - ♠KT75

E - ♠QJ2

S - ♠A93

Suppose partner leads the ♠5 and a low card is played from dummy. You need to play third hand high. Your ♠Q and ♠J are equals, however. Since each one would be equally effective, it does not look as though it makes much difference which you choose. However, you must remember that you are playing with a partner. The card you choose may make some difference to partner who can't see into your hand and has no way of knowing that you hold both the ♠Q and the ♠J.

You have seen this sort of situation before, where you give partner information through the card you play. When making an opening lead, you always lead the top of a sequence to show that you have the next lower card but not the next higher card. It would be nice if we used the same rule in this situation, but the guideline here is to play only as high a card as necessary. That means you play the lower of your touching cards, the ♠J. It may seem

irritating that you lead the top of touching high cards but play the lower of touching high cards in third hand, but let's see why this works out best.

When you play the ♠J, Declarer has to play the ♠A to win the trick. This passes the information to partner that you must also have the ♠Q. Why? If Declarer had both the ♠A and ♠Q, Declarer would play the ♠Q on East's ♠J, not the ♠A. Why does it make a difference whether you play the ♠Q or the ♠J? Suppose you played the ♠Q and Declarer won with the ♠A. Partner would not know who had the ♠J. Partner would be entitled to think that Declarer held that card. Let's exchange your ♠J for Declarer's ♠9:

N- ♠864

W - ♠KT75

E - ♠Q92

S - ♠AJ3

If this were the layout, you would have to play the ♠Q, third hand high. Now it would not be safe for partner to lead the suit again — Declarer would take a trick with the ♠J. By always playing the lower of your touching cards when you have a choice, you are telling partner that you do not have the next lower card, although you may have the next higher card(s).

Trapping High Cards

When deciding how high a card you need to play as third hand, it often helps if you try to visualize the entire layout of the suit. You can't see partner's cards, other than the card led, and you can't see declarer's cards, but sometimes the bidding and the logic of the situation will help you out. Let's lay out some of the cards in the diamond suit as follows:

N- ♦K8

W - ♦4

E - ♦AQ73

Partner leads the ♦4 and Declarer plays the ♦8 from Dummy. Which card do you play? This looks too easy — because it is. Let's make it more challenging and replace your ♦Q with the ♦J:

N- ♦K8

W - ♦4

E - ♦AJ73

What do you do now? The ♦A will win the trick for sure, but the ♦J may win the trick if partner has the ♦Q. This is where it helps to visualize the possible layout of the suit. First, let's give partner the ♦Q:

N- ♦K8

W - ♦QT64

E - ♦AJ73

S - ♦952

Seeing all of the cards, it is easy to see that you can insert the ♦J and win the trick, keeping your ♦A to catch Dummy's ♦K. If you play the ♦A rather than the ♦J, you will give Declarer an extra trick. But what if Declarer holds the ♦Q, rather than partner? Now it looks as though it would be a mistake to play the ♦J, since Declarer will be able to win the trick. Before deciding that it would cost a trick to play the ♦J, however, let's see what the situation looks like when we exchange partner's ♦Q for Declarer's ♦5:

N- ♦K8

W - ♦T654

E - ♦AJ73

S - ♦Q92

When you play your ♦J Declarer gets to win a trick in that suit but it's the last diamond trick they will win. If you had played the ♦A instead, Declarer would have two diamond winners.

Don't finesse against Dummy when there is nothing to finesse! If Dummy has only low cards, there is no high card to trap. You should play third hand high with the highest card you can afford.

Unblocking

There are times when you have to play a high card from third hand even though it doesn't seem necessary. Put out the following cards in the spade suit:

N- ♠942

W - ♠KQJ75

E - ♠A3

S - ♠T86

Before considering how the defenders should play this suit, let's consider how Declarer would play this suit. It is straightforward for Declarer. To avoid stranding winners, Declarer starts by playing the high card from the short side. After winning the first trick with the ace, Declarer can lead the ♠3 to the rest of the winners. The defenders have a more difficult time. Partner can't see your cards and starts off by leading the ♠K, top of a sequence. Since partner's ♠K will win the trick, it does not look as though you need to play your ♠A. But look what happens if you don't. Partner's ♠K will win the trick. When partner leads the suit again, you can win the trick with the ♠A, but you have no low cards left to lead to partner's winners. The suit is blocked.

How can you avoid blocking the suit? (Overtake partner's ♠K with the ♠A.) You want to start by playing the high card from the short side, in the same way that Declarer does. By playing the ♠A on partner's ♠K, you unblock the suit and take the first five tricks.

An easy way to recognize this type of situation is to remind yourself that when partner is trying to take tricks in a long suit, you don't want your last card in the suit to be a high card. You want to keep a low card so that you can give the lead to your partner.

Second Hand Low

So Declarer is leading a card, either from their hand or the Dummy, and you have to decide what card to play. When you are the second person to play to a trick, your side is in a favourable position. Your partner is in the enviable position of being the last player to play to the trick. Most of the time, the second player (hand) wants to play low, leaving it up to partner to try to win the trick. A popular maxim is second hand low, the opposite of third hand high. Like most guidelines, this maxim is most useful when we understand how it came about and when to apply it.

The general idea is that, if your partner gets to play last, there is no need to waste your high card on one of Declarer's low cards. Wait until Declarer plays a high card which you can capture. Second-hand play is a bit like 'when in Rome.' If Declarer plays a low card, it is usually a good idea to play low. On the other hand, if Declarer plays an honour, another maxim, cover an honour with an honour, is more likely to apply.

When Declarer Leads a Low Card

Your high cards are at their most powerful when they not only win a trick but capture one of the opponents' high cards at the same time. An old bridge saying goes aces are made to take kings— and kings are made to take queens and so on. If Declarer plays a low card and you are the second hand to play, most of the time it works out best if you also play a low card. Let's see why this works so well. Take the heart suit and put the following layout on the table:

	N- ♥K73	
W - ♥AT4		E - ♥J865
	S - ♥Q92	

You are West. Suppose Declarer (South) leads the ♥2 toward Dummy and it is your turn to play. You are second hand, looking at the ♥K in Dummy, and might feel that you have to play your ♥A to prevent Declarer from winning a trick with Dummy's ♥K. Look what happens if you do this. You win the first trick with the ♥A and Declarer plays the ♥3 from Dummy. Declarer can win the next two tricks in the suit with the ♥K and the ♥Q. If you play low instead with the ♥4, Declarer can win the first trick with Dummy's ♥K, but then the ♥Q is trapped. Declarer takes only one trick.

So second hand low appears to be good advice in this situation. You save your ♥A to capture one of Declarer's high cards, the ♥Q in this case. How low is low? Would it do any harm to play the ♥10, rather than the ♥4? Yes. If you play the ♥10, Declarer wins the trick with the ♥K and these are the remaining cards:

	N- ♥73	
W - ♥A4		E - ♥J86
	S - ♥Q9	

Can you see what Declarer can do now? They can lead a heart from Dummy and play the ♥9 to force out the ♥A, establishing the ♥Q as a second trick. There is no point in unnecessarily sacrificing your ♥10 — it may cost you a trick. Play second hand low, the ♥4.

Now let's give partner the ♠K, exchanging Dummy's ♥K for partner's ♥J:

N- ♥J73

W - ♥AT4

E - ♥K865

S - ♥Q92

Again, Declarer plays the ♥2 toward Dummy. With partner holding the ♥K, does it do any harm if you win the first trick with the ♥A? Yes. If you play the ♥A, these will be the remaining cards:

N- ♥J7

W - ♥T4

E - ♥K86

S - ♥Q9

Declarer now can use the ♥J or the ♥Q to drive out partner's ♥K and take a trick in the suit. If instead you play second hand low, When Declarer plays Dummy's ♥J, partner wins the trick with the ♥K, and Declarer's ♥Q is trapped. Declarer takes no tricks in the suit.

Splitting Honours

So we've seen that when Declarer leads a low card, playing second hand low is generally good advice. There are other considerations, however. If you can see that by taking your trick you will be able to defeat the contract, you should not play low. You don't want to duck with the setting trick and then see it disappear. You also don't want to let Declarer win a trick too cheaply if you can prevent it. Lay out the following cards in the club suit:

N- ♣AT2

W – ♣KQJ3

E - ♣965

S - ♣874

If Declarer leads a low card toward Dummy, there is some danger if you play second hand low, the ♣3. Declarer just might play Dummy's ♣10, winning the trick, since partner has no higher card. To prevent this, you need to insert the ♣J (lowest from touching cards), making sure that Declarer has to play Dummy's ♣A to win the trick and to promote your remaining clubs into winners. This sort of play by second hand is referred to as splitting honours. You split your honours to ensure that you get the tricks to which you are entitled. Now give Declarer your ♣K and look at the layout:

N- ♣AT2

W – ♣QJ3

E - ♣965

S - ♣K874

What should you do if Declarer leads a low card toward Dummy? Split your honours. To ensure that you get the trick to which you are entitled, you have to play the ♣J. Otherwise Declarer may insert Dummy's ♣10 and take all of the club tricks. The purpose of splitting your honours is to make sure you promote the tricks that belong to your side. If there is nothing to promote, you should not split your honours, falling back on second hand low.

Covering Honours

So far you have been second hand to play after Declarer leads a low card from either Declarer's hand or the Dummy, and generally it works out best if you play second hand low. The situation is different if Declarer leads a high card. Now, the guideline cover an honour with an honour comes into play. The idea behind playing a higher card on top of Declarer's high card is to promote your side's lower cards into tricks. After all, your high cards are put to best use when capturing the opponents' high cards. Let's see how this works by laying out the spade suit as follows:

N- ♠Q65

W - ♠7432

E - ♠KJT

S - ♠A98

Suppose Declarer leads the ♠Q from Dummy and you play second hand low. What happens? If Declarer plays a low card, the ♠Q will win the trick since partner does not have a higher spade. Declarer gets two tricks. Instead of playing low, you must cover Declarer's honour, the ♠Q, with a higher honour, the ♠K. Look at the difference this makes. Declarer has to play the ♠A to win the trick, and you have got two of Declarer's high cards for the price of one of yours. The net effect is to promote your ♠J and ♠10 into winners.

It is easy to see that covering the ♠Q with the ♠K promotes winners for your side when you are looking at the ♠J and the ♠10, but most situations will not be so clear-cut. Give your partner the ♠J and the ♠10 in exchange for two low spades:

N- ♠Q65

W - ♠JT74

E - ♠K32

S - ♠A98

Even though you can't see the ♠J and the ♠10, the idea is the same. Declarer takes two tricks in the suit if you play low. If you cover the ♠Q with the ♠K, Declarer takes only one trick. Of course, you can't see partner's hand and partner may not hold the ♠J and the ♠10.

Even if partner holds only one of these cards, however, covering the ♠Q will work out best. For example, exchange partner's ♠J for Declarer's ♠8:

N- ♠Q65

W - ♠T874

E - ♠K32

S - ♠AJ9

If you don't cover the ♠Q when it is led, Declarer takes three tricks in the suit. The ♠Q wins the first trick and now your ♠K is trapped by Declarer's ♠A and ♠J when a low spade is led from Dummy. If you cover the ♠Q, Declarer's ♠A wins the first trick. Declarer takes a second trick with the ♠J, but partner's ♠10 wins the third round of the suit. Of course, partner may not even have the ♠10, but then it is unlikely to matter whether or not you cover. Without knowing what partner has, you have to cover and hope there is something to promote.

There is no point in covering an honour with an honour if you can see that there is nothing to promote for your side. For example, put Declarer's ♠J and partner's ♠10 in the Dummy:

N- ♠QJT65

W - ♠874

E - ♠K32

S - ♠A9

Looking at the ♠J and the ♠10 in Dummy, you can see that there is nothing to promote if you cover Dummy's ♠Q when it is led. Instead, play second hand low and hope to take a trick with your ♠K later.