

Defending against no trump contracts: 2. Third hand play

This is the second of a series of four articles on how to defend against no trump contracts. This article focuses on third hand play.

Third hand play

There are some useful guidelines for how the third player should play to the first trick:

When partner leads a low card and there are two or three low cards in dummy

- where partner has led a low card play your highest card unless you have two or more equal high cards e.g. with the KJ5 play the K
- where partner has led a low card if you have two or more equal high cards play the lowest of the equals e.g. with the QJT5 play the T. The card played can give partner important information about where some key cards are held. For example, if the initial lead is the 2S from the QT52 and partner plays the ace, they clearly don't have the king.
- If third player wins the first trick or gets the lead later in the auction the card they return is also important. If they **originally held three cards in the led suit they should return their highest remaining card** in that suit. For example, with the KQ4, if the first trick is won with the Q, the K should be led back. With **four or more cards they should usually return the original fourth highest card** (unless there are compelling reasons not to). For example, with the AT54, if the first trick is won with the A, the 4 should be led back.

Where there is an honour card in dummy

- where partner has led a low card and **there is an honour card in dummy and third hand has no honour higher than dummy's** – if dummy ducks third player should play their highest card unless holding two or more equal high cards in which case they play the lowest of the equals.
- where partner has led a low card and **there is an honour card in dummy and third hand has an honour higher than dummy's** - then if the honour in dummy is played third hand should cover dummy's honour; but if the honour in dummy is not played then third hand should keep their honour and play their next highest card as long as it is a nine or better.
- where partner has led an honour card, dummy has an honour and third hand an honour higher than dummy's honour, then third hand should only play their honour if dummy plays its honour.
- where partner has led an honour card and **third hand has a doubleton ace they must unblock** immediately by playing the ace.

Hand 4

South is in 3NT and west leads the 3H (fourth highest).

	♠ A73	
	♥ JT4	
	♦ KQ3	
	♣ 8732	
♠ 865		♠ T94
♥ K9732		♥ AQ5
♦ 985		♦ 764
♣ K9		♣ QJT4
	♠ KQJ2	
	♥ 86	
	♦ AJT2	
	♣ A65	

Regardless of what card north plays east should play the AH. With an initial holding of three cards in hearts it is critical that east now returns the QH followed by the 5H. E-W then takes five heart tricks and defeats the contract. However, if east returns the 5H after taking the ace, east will win with the king and return a third heart to east's QH. However east has no more hearts to lead and west's extra two heart tricks will not be made, allowing N-S to make their contract.

Hand 5

South is in 3NT and west leads the 6H (fourth highest).

	♠ JT6	
	♥ 3	
	♦ KT8	
	♣ AQJT64	
♠ 872		♠ 943
♥ AQ86		♥ K9752
♦ Q94		♦ 753
♣ K85		♣ 93
	♠ AKQ5	
	♥ JT4	
	♦ AJ62	
	♣ 72	

After west leads the 6H, east wins the trick with the KH. With an initial holding of five cards in hearts east should now play the 5H - their initial fourth highest card (that is true for both four-card and five-card holdings). West takes the trick with the AH, then plays the QH and the 8H. The 8H is overtaken by east's 9H and the 2H is the fifth heart trick which defeats the contract.

Note that if after taking the KH south makes the mistake of returning the 9H there are two problems – firstly north will think south has only three hearts and secondly south can no longer regain the lead and the fifth trick is never made.

Hand 6

South is in 3NT, west leads the JH (top of sequence) and declarer plays the 4H from dummy.

	♠ JT6	
	♥ K54	
	♦ 975	
♠ AQ8	♣ KQJ4	♠ 742
♥ JT96		♥ A873
♦ J63		♦ QT42
♣ 963	♠ K953	♣ T8
	♥ Q2	
	♦ AK8	
	♣ A752	

Following the lead of the JH it's clear that declarer has the QH. Nevertheless east should duck, playing an encouraging card (e.g. the 3H if 'low' means encourage) and keep the AH to kill dummy's KH later in the play. When west regains the lead they play the TH and the contract is doomed.

Hand 7

South is in 3NT and west leads the 5S (fourth highest).

	♠ J62	
	♥ AQ4	
	♦ QT76	
♠ Q8754	♣ 742	♠ KT3
♥ 8753		♥ J92
♦ 9		♦ 8432
♣ J93	♠ A9	♣ AT5
	♥ KT6	
	♦ AKJ5	
	♣ KQ86	

In this hand east holds two honours – one below and one above dummy's JS. If dummy plays low East should play the TS and keep the KS to kill dummy's JS later in the play. If declarer ducks and plays the 9S east should now play the KS to force the AS and ensure that they don't block the suit. Once east gets back the lead they lead the 3S so west can take another three spade tricks.

Hand 8

South is in 3NT and west leads the QH (top of a broken sequence).

	♠ KT93	
	♥ 642	
	♦ 65	
	♣ A843	
♠ A84		♠ 652
♥ QJ975		♥ A8
♦ 943		♦ JT87
♣ J5		♣ QT76
	♠ QJ7	
	♥ KT3	
	♦ AKQ2	
	♣ K92	

The important play here is that east, with a heart doubleton, must play the AH on the first lead and return the 8H. Although declarer will make their king it is critical that east plays the AH to ensure that the heart suit is not blocked later in the play.

Hand 9

South is in 3NT and west leads the QD (top of sequence).

	♠ KT6	
	♥ J94	
	♦ 975	
	♣ AQ54	
♠ A85		♠ 972
♥ 863		♥ KQ752
♦ QJT62		♦ K3
♣ 93		♣ T86
	♠ QJ43	
	♥ AT	
	♦ A84	
	♣ KJ72	

Similar to the previous hand the important play here is that east, with a diamond doubleton, must play the KD on the first lead to ensure that the diamond suit is not blocked later in the play. If declarer ducks, east then plays the 3D. Either way eventually the contract will go down.

PG series: 5 (2)