

Defending against no trump contracts: 3. Second hand play

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

Second hand play

When sitting over dummy (dummy to your right)

When sitting over dummy principles which should be applied are:

- **When declarer leads a low card from dummy play low** (unless you have the ace and there are compelling reasons to attack another suit).
- **When declarer leads an honour from dummy cover the honour** with a higher honour.
- **When dummy has two or more equal honours cover the last equal honour that is led** – this doesn't guarantee anything but it reduces the likelihood of declarer being able to place your cards and effect a finesse and sometimes means they have to play their ace leaving your honour as a winner.
- **When holding three touching honours e.g. KQJ8 if a low card is led from dummy play the lowest of the touching honours.**

Consider the following examples – declarer is south and you are seated east.

♥ Q92 (dummy)
♥ J873 ♥ KT6
♥ A54 (declarer)

If declarer leads the 2H from dummy east must play low. If east plays either the TH or the KH declarer will make one more trick in hearts than they should – by playing the 6H defence restricts declarer to one heart trick instead of two.

The 6H is also the best play if west holds the AH. In this case declarer shouldn't take any tricks at all!

♥ Q92 (dummy)
♥ A873 ♥ KT6
♥ J54 (declarer)

The following example shows why covering an honour with an honour is usually the best play.

♥ Q3 (dummy)
♥ 98752 ♥ KT6
♥ AJ4 (declarer)

If declarer leads the QH from dummy east should cover with the KH, losing the trick to declarer's AH. Although south will also take a trick with the JH, east's TH or west's 9H will eventually take a trick.

However, if east ducks the initial QH lead then declarer makes three heart tricks. So, it's important to cover the QH to promote a T or 9, either in your hand or, hopefully, if held by partner.

In the following example, with two or more equal honours in dummy, east should cover the last equal honour that is led.

♥ QJ9 (dummy)
♥ T876 ♥ K32
♥ A54 (declarer)

If east covers the first honour that is led declarer can later finesse the 9H and take three tricks in the suit. However if east covers the second equal honour that is led then declarer is restricted to two tricks.

When sitting under dummy (dummy to your left)

When sitting under dummy principles which should be applied are:

- **When declarer leads a low card from their hand towards dummy play low** (unless you have an immediate winner **and** there are compelling reasons to attack another suit).
- An exception to this principle occurs **when second hand has two honours with dummy holding one higher honour and a finessable card – in this situation play the lower honour** (splitting your honours) to set up a later trick.
- **When declarer leads an honour from their hand towards dummy cover the honour** with a higher honour if there is a chance of promoting a lower honour in your hand or potentially in partner's hand.
- **When declarer leads an honour from their hand towards dummy and there is no chance of promoting a lower honour** in your hand or potentially in partner's hand **then do not cover.**

Consider the following examples – declarer is south and you are seated west.

When declarer leads low towards dummy it's usual to play low, even when holding the ace or a safe king. Going up early can give declarer an extra trick – remember that aces and kings should ideally be used to 'kill' inferior honours.

In the following hand if declarer leads the 2H towards dummy, west should duck and keep the ace for killing declarer's unseen honour, the QH, later in the play. If west goes up with the AH then declarer will win two tricks rather than one.

♥ K54 (dummy)
♥ A76 ♥ JT98
♥ Q32 (declarer)

Playing low in second hand is especially important when dummy has broken honours e.g. KJT or QT2 when declarer may finesse and give partner a trick. In the following hand, if declarer leads the 5H towards dummy, west should duck and retain the KH for later – there is every chance declarer will finesse the TH, losing to partner's JH.

♥ QT2 (dummy)
♥ K43 ♥ J987
♥ A65 (declarer)

In general, then, when declarer plays a low card towards dummy, second hand should usually play low.

There are situations, however, where second player should play high – splitting their honours to set up a later trick or to cover an honour led by declarer.

In the following hand, if declarer leads the 5H west should play the JH (splitting their honours) in order to set up their QH for a later trick (and stop declarer finessing the TH).

♥ AT2 (dummy)
♥ QJ3 ♥ 874
♥ K965 (declarer)

When declarer plays an honour towards dummy the usual play is to cover the honour with an honour in the hope of promoting a lower honour for themself or for partner. In the following hand, if declarer leads the JH then west should cover with the KH in the hope of promoting the TH possibly held by east.

♥ AQ9 (dummy)
♥ K43 ♥ ????

♥ J?? (declarer)

In the next hand, if declarer leads the JH then west should cover with the QH in order to set up their partner's 9H later in the hand.

♥ AKT2 (dummy)
♥ Q54 ♥ 9863
♥ J7 (declarer)

There are, of course, occasions when it is best not to cover – often dummy’s holding provides a clue e.g. for obvious reasons don’t cover with the KXXX sitting under the AQT9 when the J is led or with the KXX under the AX when the Q is led.

A couple of situations which are a bit tricky in deciding whether to cover are:

- Declarer leads the J, west has the QXX and dummy holds the AXX – where is the T?

♥ A43 (dummy)
♥ Q65 ♥ KXXX
♥ JXX (declarer)

- Declarer leads the Q, west has the KXX and dummy holds the AXX – where is the J?

♥ A63 (dummy)
♥ K54 ♥ XXXX
♥ QXX (declarer)

Good declarers will only try to finesse in this way if they hold at least the JTX in the first example and the QJX in the second example. Then you should cover the second honour from declarer’s hand, rather than the first.

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