

Defensive Techniques: Covering Honors, Second Hand Low, Splitting Honors

Covering Honors. “Cover an honor with an honor” is a common bridge aphorism. It’s generally good advice, although there are a few exceptions. It’s also useful for inexperienced players to understand the rationale for the rule.

1065	
K987	Q32
AJ4	

Suppose the 10 is led from dummy. If East does not cover, South plays low and West wins with the King. Later declarer goes to dummy and leads toward the AJ to take two tricks in the suit. However, had East covered the 10 with the Queen, South would win with the Ace. Now, when South returns to dummy to lead toward the J4, West will win the last two tricks.

93	
Q875	K64
AJ102	

Sometimes it’s right even to cover a 9. The 9 is led from dummy. If East covers with the King, this will hold South to 2 winners in the suit. If East does not cover, West wins with the Queen. A second finesse will drop the King, enabling declarer to win 3 tricks.

Q2	
987	K543
AJ106	

An exception occurs when the defender has enough length in the suit that he cannot be finessed enough times to capture his honor. In this example, the Queen is led. If East covers, declarer will win 4 tricks in the suit. If East does not cover, declarer will win only 3 tricks.

QJ107	
98	K652
A43	

When the Queen is led, East should not cover. If declarer has Axxx, he has 4 winners. However, if he has Axx or Ax, he only has 3 winners as long as East does not cover.

AQ10987	
K43	?
J?	

Another exception occurs when declarer or dummy has such a strong suit that covering would set up the whole suit. In this case, West has to hope that South has only a singleton Jack.

A72	
Q65	?
J?	

Another exception occurs when the opponent leads the Jack of trumps and you hold the Queen. You should smoothly play low. Suppose declarer has KJ1098. He could finesse either way. But as an extra chance, he leads the Jack, hoping you will feel compelled to cover an honor with an honor. If you don’t cover, his plan is to play the Ace and finesse the other direction. Watch out! Remember this! It’s a common con job.

QJ93
1052 K84
A76

A special case occurs when the honor led is one of two touching honors. Declarer leads the Q from dummy. The standard play is to play low with the intention of covering the second honor if it is led. If East covers the first honor, South wins and then finesses the 9 against West to win all the tricks. If East plays low on the first honor, now if the second honor is led and covered, West's 10 becomes a winner.

Second Hand Low. "Second Hand Low" is another common bridge aphorism. Although this rule is not absolute, it is the right play most of the time. If the player to your right leads to the trick, you are "second hand" (second to play). The main reasons why second hand low is usually the right play are:

- It maximizes your chance of winning the most tricks possible.
- It may make the declarer unsure about the right play (make 'em guess).

K85
A92 J1043
Q76

South leads the 6. If you play the Ace, it sets up 2 tricks for declarer. If you play low, the King will win, but that is the only trick for NS. The Queen is "surrounded".

Q84
K73 A1092
J75

South leads the 5. If West plays the King, now declarer is guaranteed 1 trick (Jack knocks out the Ace, establishing the Queen). If West plays low initially and the Queen is played, East wins the A and leads the 10. The Jack is "surrounded" and NS will win no tricks in the suit.

KJ
A1087 Q943
652

South leads the 2. Play low smoothly. Make 'em guess. Note: West should scan the dummy when it is first laid down. When West sees the KJ, she should make a mental note to smoothly play low.

KQ10
J87 A965
432

South leads the 2 to the 7 and King. East should play low (smoothly). South regains the lead and leads the 3, West playing the 8. What does declarer play from dummy? Note that if East had initially taken his Ace, the only (realistic) chance declarer has for 2 tricks is to finesse the 10.

KQ10
A987 J65
432

South leads the 2 to the 7 and King. East plays low. South regains the lead and leads the 3, West playing the 8. What does declarer play from dummy? This card combination comes up frequently. It's worthwhile remembering how to make 'em guess.

♠KQJ102	
♥Q92	
♦K72	
♣K5	
♠A86	♠7543
♥82	♥65
♦J1095	♦AQ83
♣A1042	♣963
♠9	
♥AKJ1074	
♦64	
♣QJ87	

One exception to “second hand low” is when you have the opportunity to set the contract. Against 4♥, West leads the ♦J. The King is played from dummy. Partner wins the Ace, cashes the Queen, and lead a third diamond. Declarer ruffs, pulls trumps, and lead the ♠9. Now is not the time to play low. Win the ace and cash the ♣A to set the contract.

There are other exceptions, from the obvious...

A109	
KQJ2	873
654	

South leads the 4. You can play lip service to “second hand low” by playing your lowest honor.

to the less obvious.

A1085	
QJ6	74
K932	

South leads the 2 (in his trump suit after a Stayman auction). West should play the Jack to ensure that he wins a trump trick. If he plays low, declarer might play the 10, and West would have lost a “sure” trick. This play is called “splitting honors”.

Splitting Honors. This term refers to a situation in which a defender has two touching honors (KQxx, QJxx, J10xx) in a key suit for declarer (the number of low cards may vary). There are times when the defender should split the honors and other times when the honors should not be split. It all depends on the circumstances.

In the above example, it is likely that NS have a 4-4 fit due to the Stayman auction. If so, then West can conclude that East holds a doubleton in the suit. It is possible that East might hold the King. If so, the play of the Jack by West does not cost a trick (East would simply play low initially and then win the King on the second round of the suit). But...suppose South opened the bidding in the major (showing at least 5). Now West should not split the honors ...for two reasons. First, East might hold the singleton King, and a trick would be lost when the Jack and King both fall under the Ace. Second, when NS has a 9-card fit including the Ace and King, there is no risk that declarer will finesse the 10. Declarer would intend to play the Ace and King (separately) and hope that the suit splits 2-2.

AK10
QJ3 42
98765

South leads the 5. West should not split honors here, because declarer may win the trick, return to South and finesse the 10. West simply has to play low and hope that declarer will play the AK.

AK1098
QJ32 4
765

South leads the 5. West should play low, hoping that declarer will play the AK. Splitting honors eliminates the chances of 2 tricks and may result in winning none.

65
? KQ3
?

South has bid and rebid his suit (showing 6+). East should play low. If South has AJ1098x, East will only get 1 trick regardless of what he plays. But...South could have AJ987x. If so the correct play by declarer is the 9. If that play is made, West will win the 10 and East will win a trick. If East initially plays an honor, South will return to dummy and lead the 6 toward the Jack.