

“SECOND HAND LOW” (& Covering Honors with Honors) by Maritha Pottenger

One of the maxims of bridge is “second hand low.” However, bridge is not a simple game, so there are lots of exceptions to this general “rule.”

Often, “second hand low” conflicts with “cover an honor with an honor.” **You should only cover an honor with an honor when there is a chance to promote a secondary card in your own hand, or in partner’s hand.** If your hand does not have a promotable card, you must judge whether or not your partner could have one. (Part of that judgement is based on partner’s length in that suit and Declarer’s length in that suit—based on the bidding.) For example, you hold Q32 and Dummy has AK109 and Declarer leads the Jack. Do **NOT** cover. You cannot possibly promote anything. However, if Dummy had AK108, **do cover**. Partner could hold the 9xxx and you’ll promote that 9. If you hold Q532 and Dummy has AK1087 and Declarer leads the Jack, **do NOT cover**. Even if partner has the 9 of clubs, s/he cannot have long enough clubs for you to promote that 9.

If you have length in a suit, it may be right NOT to cover an honor with an honor. For example, K752 in your hand and A34 in Dummy. Declarer has bid the suit and leads the queen. Duck. Even if Declarer has the QJ109, the Ace will fall in 3 rounds and your King will take the 4th round of the suit—IF you refuse to cover.

Another general guideline is that a defender should cover the second equal honor that comes out of Declarer’s hand or the last equal honor that is led from Dummy. As an example, Dummy holds QJ93 in a suit. You are behind Dummy with K45 and Declarer leads the queen. Do NOT cover the queen. (If you do, Declarer takes Ace and finesses partner’s 10 on the next round.) If you cover the jack (second equal honor), Declarer cannot take more than 2 tricks in the suit.

When Declarer leads an honor from his/her hand, assume that s/he has the next-lower honor and do NOT cover the first honor. For example, you hold Q54 and Dummy has A32 and Declarer leads the Jack. DUCK. If partner has K96, your ducking the first trick is essential for your side to get two tricks. If you cover the jack, your side gets only one trick.

Be extremely wary of covering with honors in the trump suit. Usually your partner does not have enough length for you to promote anything. Often, Declarer is on a “fishing expedition” and you’ll fall in the trap if you cover an honor. If, for example, Declarer has bid and rebid a minor suit (promising 6 cards) and leads the Jack toward A32 in Dummy and you hold Q54, do NOT cover. Partner might have singleton King. Declarer may be planning to play the Ace anyway (having KJ109xx in hand) and is just “fishing” by leading the Jack. If you cover, you cannot possibly get a trick. If you duck, you *might* get a trick. Play low as smoothly as possible.

Suppose **Declarer is setting up a long suit in Dummy.** When (sitting behind Dummy) should you cover? Cover when (1) Dummy has no side entry; (2) Declarer is about to discard a loser (e.g., Declarer ruffs and partner over-ruffs and can cash a trick). Do NOT cover when (1) Trumps are gone and Dummy has another entry; (2) Partner has worthless trumps; (3) The defense has no immediate tricks to cash. Example: A10987 in Dummy. You have Q543. Declarer leads King and then Jack, overtaking with Ace (partner following 2 rounds), then Declarer leads the 10. Do you cover? (See above suggestions.)

When **Declarer leads low toward a Dummy with two honors** (e.g., KJx) and you can win a trick, should you take it? Yes, if it is the setting trick. In most other cases, no. Duck smoothly & let Declarer guess. (This includes Axx in front of KJx; Kxxx in front of Q10x; Axxx in front of KQ10; KQxx in front of AJ9. [A good Declarer will try the 9 from Dummy first in that combination.])