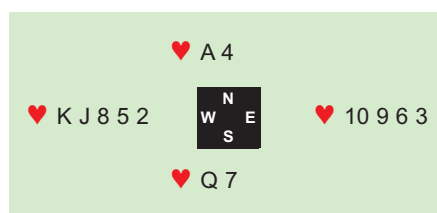


Covering Honour Leads

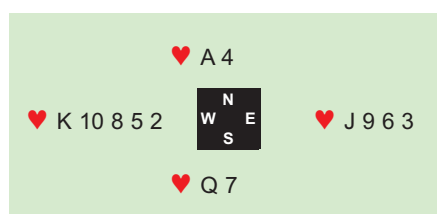


Deciding whether to cover a high card led by declarer or dummy is a decision that defenders face with regular frequency. Ever since the game was first played defenders learnt to cover honours – though they did not always put this into practice - and to this day some contracts still make because someone failed to cover.

Covering honours



If South leads the queen, West must cover with the king to restrict declarer to one trick.



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Make the holding slightly weaker and covering is still correct in normal circumstances. Declarer could always make two tricks if holding the queen and jack; on the actual layout, playing the queen on the king promotes East's jack to winning rank on the second round.



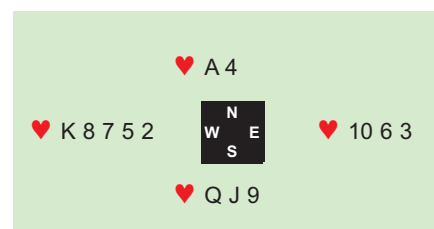
Make West's holding weaker still and covering remains correct on the layout as shown. Indeed if declarer has no more than two cards in the suit, covering cannot ever cost a trick in the suit.

Of course, with a holding of A-x facing Q-x, you do not, as declarer, normally attack the suit head on. Either you look to discard a loser on some other suit (in a suit contract), play on a longer suit (in a no-trump contract) or perhaps try to get one of the defenders (ideally the player holding the king) to lead it for you. If you lead the queen, you often have the jack behind it.

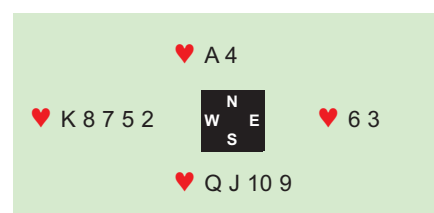
In the first two layouts above, West's intermediate cards are sufficiently good that it scarcely matters if declarer has concealed length in the suit. The third layout, however, could actually be this:



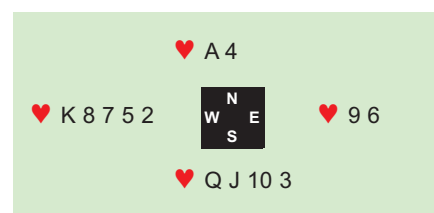
Now playing the king on the queen costs a trick straight away. Or consider this:



Covering on the first round allows declarer to finesse the nine on the way back and make three tricks instead of two. When declarer has three cards including the queen and jack, covering makes no difference if East has both the ten and nine but costs if declarer has either of those cards.

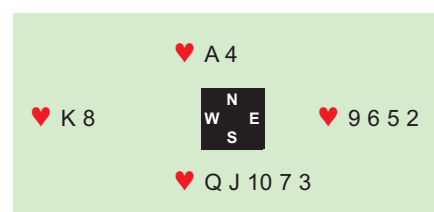


Covering has less to commend it if declarer has four cards in the suit. Covering on the first round would concede a trick with this layout.



On this layout declarer can probably always make three tricks but would generally be happier doing so without losing one first. Covering allows your opponent three fast tricks.

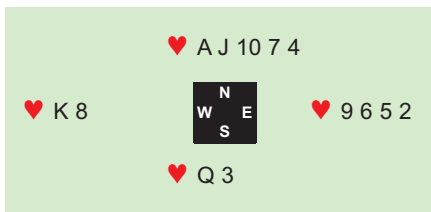
So, with the A-x visible in dummy and king to five in your hand it is usually right to cover if either (a) you think declarer has a singleton or doubleton, or (b) you have useful high cards other than the king (lower honours and/or intermediates).



In general, covering is more attractive when you are short in the suit led. Here, *Continued on page 36* ►

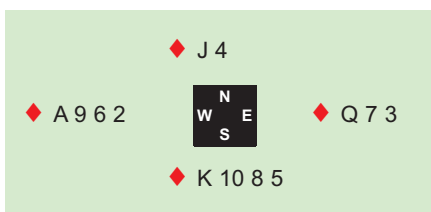
POTTAGE ON DEFENCE continued from page 35

if you fail to cover an honour on the first round, the king will fall lamely under the ace on the second round.

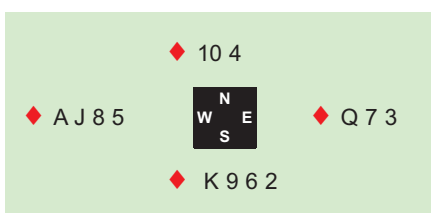


It is the same story with the length in dummy. You need to play the king on the queen to promote partner's nine into a fourth-round winner. If you wait for it to pick up a low card, you allow declarer five tricks.

Covering can also work well when a card other than the queen is led and it is East who is put to the test:



East needs to cover the jack with the queen to restrict declarer to one trick. The effect would be the same with the ten and jack interchanged. With the ten in dummy, the layout could instead be like this:

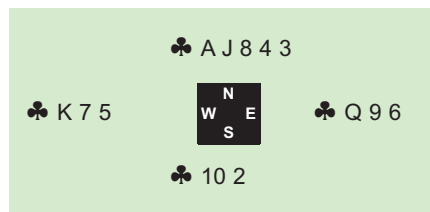


Covering the ten with the queen now stops declarer from making any tricks. Allowing the ten to run round to the jack would permit declarer to finesse the nine on the next round and later score the king.

Covering Lower Cards

So far we have covered either the card immediately below your own (e.g. the queen when you hold the king) or two below yours (e.g. the ten when you hold the queen). It may be correct to cover a card ranking well below yours. Take the

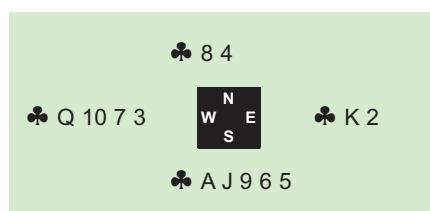
West seat for the next two layouts:



As West you need to cover the ten with the king to make partner's nine a potent force on the third round. If declarer has both the ten and the nine, then you are only entitled to one trick anyway.



You should play the ace on the jack to make sure that declarer cannot, by guessing right, develop a trick for the third round. When your holding and that of the player who leads the high card are both short suits, you may need to cover when there is an even bigger gap between your high card and the one led. Please move back to the East seat:



Would it occur to you to cover the eight with the king? Looking at the full layout, I hope you can see the benefit. If the eight runs to the ten, your king falls helplessly under the ace on the next round, leaving the jack and nine as equals against West's queen. Covering on the first round means that declarer has to worry about the seven as well.



When the nine is led, let us suppose East plays low. West wins with the jack and plays some other suit. Declarer gets back to dummy and leads the suit again. East plays low again and the ten forces the king. Now, by leading low on the third round to flush out your ace (perhaps ruffing in dummy at the same time), declarer sets up a fourth-round winner. This would not be possible if East played the ace on the nine.

When Not Covering is Best

As I mentioned earlier, unfortunately there are situations in which you should not cover.

The first is known as 'the honour that cannot be caught'.



If South has bid spades strongly, then East should not cover the jack here. True, if West held a singleton ten or nine, then covering might promote the eight to trick-taking rank on the fourth round, but there is no need to take that chance. With only two spades in dummy, East can be sure that, by saving the king, declarer will not be able to pick it up on a finesse.



Similarly, when the ten is led from dummy and declarer is likely to hold six or more spades, East should not cover the ten with the queen.

If West has A-9-x, or K-9-x, then covering would not cost – doing so would set up the nine – but is fatal as the cards lie, transforming two defensive spade tricks into one.

Clearly, playing the queen on the ten would be equally fatal if declarer had K-J-9-x-x-x, or indeed A-J, or K-J, to seven.

Continued on page 37 ►

POTTAGE ON DEFENCE continued from page 36

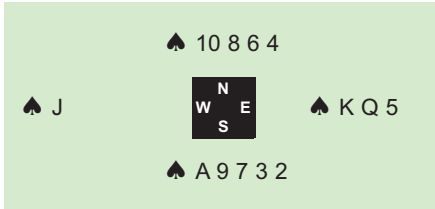


Covering would also cost a trick if the layout were this. Far from promoting a lesser honour (the usual aim of covering), putting the queen on the ten would nullify the usefulness of West's jack.

Fear of crashing honours provides another good reason not to cover. The key to recognising such positions is working out either from the bidding or the play whether partner is likely to be very short in the suit. Here are a few examples:



If the jack of spades (presumably the trump suit), comes off dummy, East should not cover if declarer is likely to have a six-card suit. Most of the time, what East plays makes no difference, but playing the king on the jack will produce a spectacular (and embarrassing) display of high cards if West has the singleton queen or ace. Only if East judged that there was a real possibility West might hold 10-x(-x) would it be right to cover.

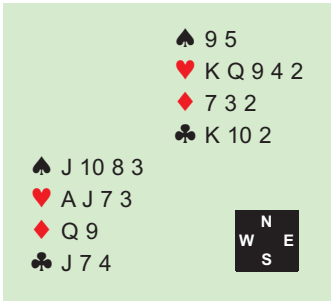


Many players would instinctively cover dummy's ten to ensure that declarer does not make a cheap trick with it, but it is very hard to construct a layout on which covering gains. It is easy enough, however, to see how doing so might cost. If West has a singleton jack or ace, then you would lose a trick.

There are a few more reasons why not to cover (saving declarer a guess, keeping

or disrupting entries for example) but we will need to wait until the next issue for those, as I would like to give you a few full deals to consider.

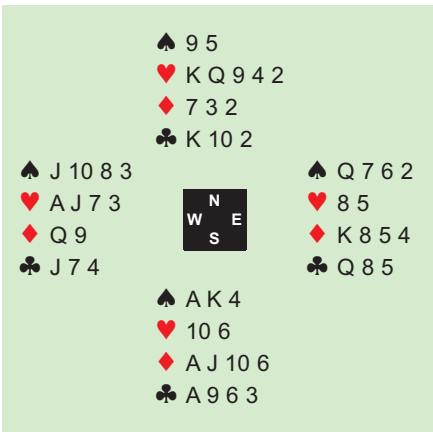
Test Your Judgment



West	North	East	South
Pass	2♦	Pass	1NT ¹
Pass	2NT	Pass	2♥ ²
End		Pass	3NT

¹ 15-17
² Completing the transfer

You lead the jack of spades, your partner encourages with the seven and the ace wins. At trick two, declarer leads the ten of hearts. Do you cover and, if so, with the jack or with the ace?



We have not covered this precise position before, so are you going to need to figure it out. The bidding suggests that both unseen hands hold two hearts (or South might have chosen to play in 4♥) and the lead of the ten seems to confirm this. If you duck and declarer lets the ten run – a live possibility – then clearly you will make only one heart trick. It comes to the same thing if you take the ten with the ace, as declarer can finesse dummy's nine on the second round. The winning play is

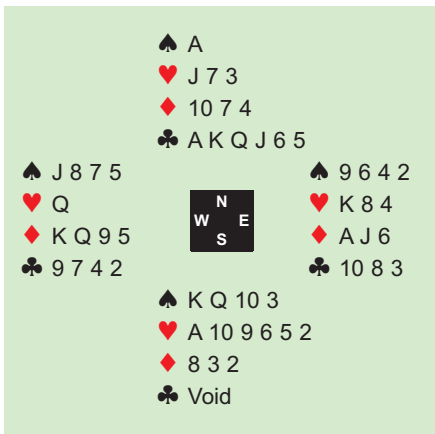
the jack on the ten. Declarer can win in dummy and come back to hand to play the suit again, but you duck on the second round to give yourself a second stopper. Covering would also be correct if South happened to hold 10-8 doubleton, as then you would duck the second round to leave the suit blocked.

For our final example, please move across to the East seat:



West	North	East	South
Pass	1♣	Pass	1♥
Pass	3♣	Pass	3♠
Pass	4♥	End	

Partner leads the king of diamonds and you are delighted to find that your side wins the first three tricks with this card, then your ace and jack as South follows. What do you lead at trick four?



Given dummy's strong club suit and bare ace of spades, the setting trick will almost certainly have to come from trumps. As we discussed earlier, you do not want to cover the jack if West has the singleton queen, but you do if partner has 10-x (as then declarer might finesse the nine on the second round). You cannot be sure of the layout on this bidding yet, but there is a sure way to find out. You know South has four spades and three diamonds, so has either six hearts and no clubs, or five hearts and one club. By playing a club, you will find out.