

# Second Hand Play



When you are defending, you will spend more time following to suits led by declarer than on any other type of play. This makes knowing what to do a crucial part of defensive strategy. Indeed the topic extends so wide that in this article I shall confine the discussion to what to do when your opponent leads a low card and mainly concentrate on the benefits of playing second hand low.

**Layout 1:**

♥ A 10 6	<div style="display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">E</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</div> </div>	♥ J 8 4 3

**Layout 2:**

♥ A 10 6 2	<div style="display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">E</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</div> </div>	♥ 9 8 3

**Layout 3:**

♥ A 10 6 2	<div style="display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">E</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</div> </div>	♥ J 9 5 3

The instinct to grab an ace grips many players but it is something you often need to resist. A good rule of thumb is that unless you can see how to defeat the contract by taking the ace you should duck. Aces are meant to take kings (or queens or even jacks), not small cards.

For each of the first three examples I have assumed that you are West and you can see your hand and North's, although the same principles would apply if North were declarer and you could see the West and South cards.

In layout (1), declarer can always take a trick with dummy's king but playing the ace on the seven will allow the queen to score as well. It is a different story if you duck. Later you intend to capture the queen with the ace and either your ten or partner's jack will score.

Layout (2) is similar. Declarer always has two tricks – with the king and queen in dummy. Playing your ace on a low card would make South's jack a winner as well. If, instead, you wait to take the jack with the ace, your ten will control the fourth round of the suit.

People who have no problem with the first two layouts tend to go wrong with the third. If dummy has plenty of trumps, they will say to themselves: "We can only make one trick in the suit anyway, so I want to make sure of my ace." The snag is that going in with the ace turns South's queen into a winner and may allow declarer to discard a loser from dummy on it and subsequently take a ruff. Suppose the full deal looks as follows:

♠ 9 8	<div style="display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">E</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</div> </div>	♠ 7 3
♥ A 10 6 2		♥ J 9 5 3
♦ 10 3 2		♦ Q 9 8 4
♣ 10 9 8 7		♣ Q 5 2

South opens 1♠ and plays in 6♠ having shown two key cards (the ace of diamonds and the king of spades) and the spade queen in response to a Roman Key-Card Blackwood inquiry from North.

You lead a neutral ten of clubs to dummy's ace. Declarer draws two rounds of trumps and then leads a low heart from hand. If you play low, your opponent has two chances for the contract – that your ace is doubleton or that the diamond finesse works – but both fail and the slam goes down. If, however, you fly in with the ace of hearts, the heart queen will take care of dummy's losing diamond and twelve tricks roll in.

*Please Take the East Seat*

**Layout 4:**

♦ 9 5 4	<div style="display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">E</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</div> </div>	♦ A 10 7 3 2

**Layout 5:**

♦ K 9 5 4	<div style="display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">W</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">E</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">S</div> </div>	♦ A 7 3 2

This time I have moved you across to the East seat. In layouts (4) and (5), with the singleton visible in dummy, the temptation to take the ace can prove overwhelming.

In (4), unless dummy contains a lot of trumps, you will probably still make your ace if you duck the first round, as declarer would have three losers to dispose of after winning the first round. The effect of taking the ace would be to set up three winners in declarer's hand, obviating the need to take any ruffs in dummy and, as we saw with the 52-card example earlier, those winners might enable declarer to discard vital losers from dummy.

In (5) if you go up with your ace, you expose partner's king to a ruffing finesse. Instead of needing to ruff three times in dummy to avoid any more losers in the suit, declarer needs only a single ruff – quite a difference.

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Layout 6:



Layout 7:



In (6) and (7), where the shortage lies in the closed hand, the result is the same. If you play the ace on the first round in layout (6), you establish the king for an immediate discard after declarer ruffs. In (7), playing the ace would set up the entire suit. Declarer would no longer have to ruff the fourth round, which would otherwise take a possible valuable trump and a possibly vital entry. Only if you had reason to believe that South might hold the singleton queen, and could see a realistic way for the contract to go down if that were the case, should you normally play the ace.

### West Gets Busy

In the layouts so far, playing an ace early has cost a trick because you lost the option of using it to capture an opposing high card. It can prove equally costly to play a high card that would crash with one of partner's:

Layout 8:



If you are West and declarer leads a low spade (trumps) from hand, you should smell a rat. Unless dummy is devoid of entries, you would expect your opponent to tackle the suit by running the queen for a finesse. Perhaps the reason this has not happened is that partner holds the

ace – and it could be singleton as in this case. As we all know, crashing the ace and king of trumps together can be one of the worst mistakes a defender can make.

Layout 9:



Of course, you face a harder problem with only a doubleton king, since now you might lose the king altogether if you do not play it on the first round. Again, unless you can see good reason why declarer, if holding the ace, would not finesse, then you should place partner with it and duck.

Layout 10:



In layout (10), in which we are back to dealing with side suits, you can see the effect of playing your ace on the three. Declarer will have little choice on the next round but to cash the king and partner's queen will bite the dust.

To date playing high in second seat has produced a definite loss. Sometimes hanging on to a high card merely makes life more difficult for your opponent.

Layout 11:



If you need two defensive tricks in this side suit, you must play low when a low card is led from the closed hand. Moreover, you need to do so smoothly, since you would hardly contemplate rising with the queen. If you do duck in

tempo then, depending upon how much declarer knows about the hand (and your abilities), there may well be a good chance that dummy's jack will be played.

### Back to East

West has been working rather hard lately, so I am going to ask you to move back to the East seat for the remainder of my single-suit examples.

Layout 12:



If East plays low on the two, declarer will normally go with the odds and finesse the nine, playing East for K-10 or Q-10 rather than K-Q.

The need for East to follow low would be even more apparent if West's singleton were the ace or the jack, as playing high 'splitting honours' would blow a trick no matter how good or bad South is on suit combinations and percentages.

Layout 13:



If East follows low on the two, most declarers would put up the ace, playing either for a 2-2 split or a bare honour in the West hand.

If, however, East contributes the queen or jack, and declarer does not mind looking silly occasionally if East has cleverly played high from Q-x or J-x, then he may finesse on the next round and avoid a loser in the suit. Again, if West's singleton were the ten or especially the king, the risk of splitting honours would be evident.

### Two Last Problems

To conclude, I would like you to consider two defensive problems for West. Here is the first:

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♠ J 2	
♥ A 8 7 4	
♦ A 10 8 4	
♣ A K 8	
♠ K Q 9 5	
♥ 6 5	
♦ 7 3	
♣ 10 6 5 4 3	
	N W S E

West	North	East	South
	1♦	Pass	1♥
Pass	3♥	Pass	4♥
End			

Some players would open the North hand 1♥ and some, having opened 1♦, would only raise to 2♥, but that is not your concern.

You lead the king of spades and, when this holds, switch to a trump – a sensible move with the doubleton spade visible in dummy and its longest suit posing little threat. Partner wins the first round of trumps with the king and returns a trump, South’s ten winning. What do you do when a low spade is led towards the jack?

There are two material points to consider here and both give you the same answer. Declarer would hardly lead away from the ace of spades at this juncture, so you can place partner with this card. If you played the queen of spades and South held four spades:

- (a) a single ruff will bring down partner’s ace, and
- (b) partner would be unable to get in safely to play a third trump.

This is the full deal:

♠ J 2		
♥ A 8 7 4		
♦ A 10 8 4		
♣ A K 8		
♠ K Q 9 5		♠ A 7 3
♥ 6 5		♥ K 9 3
♦ 7 3		♦ J 9 6 5
♣ 10 6 5 4 3		♣ Q 9 2
	N W S E	
		♠ 10 8 6 4
		♥ Q J 10 2
		♦ K Q 2
		♣ J 7

After you duck and partner wins and plays a trump, the contract goes down. Now consider our last problem:

♠ J 8 7 5	
♥ Q 4	
♦ K 6 3	
♣ K Q 7 4	
♠ 10 6	
♥ K 10 6	
♦ Q 10 5 4	
♣ J 10 9 6	
	N W S E

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

You lead the jack of clubs and dummy’s king covers. Partner produces the ace and switches to the nine of diamonds, which runs round to the king. Declarer cashes the ace and king of trumps, to which partner follows with the three and then the queen. What do you do when a small heart is led towards dummy?

It seems tempting to go in with the king, since if South has the ace then you may lose the king if you do not play it at once. Unfortunately, playing the king would be rather short sighted. To defeat the contract you need four tricks in all. How can you manage that unless partner has the ace of hearts? The trump position

is obvious, and from the play to the first round of diamonds it looks like South has A-J-x(x) in that suit, so you would somehow need to make both a second club and a diamond if only one heart trick is available. This is unlikely in any event, and impossible if declarer is a competent player, since it would be far more natural to play on clubs than hearts if holding ace-small doubleton in hearts and three small clubs.

Do you see the danger of going in with the king? If your partner has the ace of hearts but not the jack, you could well be setting up the jack as a third-round winner, which declarer could then use to dispose of one of dummy’s losing diamonds. The full deal is:

♠ J 8 7 5		
♥ Q 4		
♦ K 6 3		
♣ K Q 7 4		
♠ 10 6		♠ Q 3
♥ K 10 6		♥ A 9 7 5 3
♦ Q 10 5 4		♦ 9 8
♣ J 10 9 6		♣ A 8 5 3
	N W S E	
		♠ A K 9 4 2
		♥ J 8 2
		♦ A J 7 2
		♣ 2

With the full hand like this, your side will score two hearts and a diamond if you play low on the heart and down goes the contract. Play the king and bang goes your third-round diamond winner. ■

YOU KNOW IT MAKES SENSE

Common sense prevailed at the Harold Wood Neighbourhood Centre Bridge Club, Essex, thanks to the stand taken by Ann Gosling (in the picture).

Following an accident that occurred at the Club, it was discovered that neither the venue nor the Club were adequately insured. While at first it looked as though no lesson would be learned from this, thanks to Ann’s tireless campaigning the Bridge Club has now put in place proper procedures (introducing an accident report form and an accident report book) as well as taking out adequate insurance cover.

Ann Gosling’s message is: “Make sure your club is aware of the adequacy of its insurance cover and it appreciates that some accidents, for example the ‘Member to Member Liability’, may not be covered in basic insurance but can be obtained for a very reasonable amount.”

