

Basic Defensive Carding

This lesson discusses the best way to play your cards when you are a defender.

Proper defensive carding is very important, because it often gives partner vital information. When you are declarer, you can play your cards anyway you wish, because partner is dummy and is not participating in the hand. However, when you are defending, if you card correctly, you will help partner defend, because he or she will have a better picture of your hand. If you card incorrectly, then you will mislead partner, and may cause a misdefense.

This lesson includes two sub-topics:

- Third Hand Defensive Play
- Second Hand Defensive Play

Third Hand Defensive Play

The person who plays the third card to a trick is often in the most disadvantageous position. Why is that?

Well, first let's look at 4th hand, and see why that is the most advantageous position. If you are 4th hand, you can see all the other cards on the trick and play the card that provides the best advantage to you. If you choose to win the trick, you can win it as cheaply as possible, preserving higher cards in that suit when you have them. And if you cannot or choose not to win the trick, you can play the lowest card you have in that suit, preserving all your other higher cards.

As an aside, the whole idea behind executing an end play is to set up the hand so that

- a) You are 4th hand on the next trick.
- b) The defense has to lead a suit that gives you an advantage over having to lead the suit yourself.

As an example, assume you are 4th hand and hold AQ in the suit led. You are then guaranteed 2 tricks in that suit. If third hand plays a card lower than the Q, you will win the Q and the A. If third hand plays the K, you will win the A and your Q is good. On the other hand, if you are forced to lead the suit yourself (you are 3rd hand the first time the suit is led), you will only win 2 tricks if the person to your right has the K and you choose to play the Q.

Here is an illustration of the above example.

	<u>♠</u> 3 2	
<u>♠</u> K J 10 9		<u>♠</u> 8 7 6 5 4
	<u>♠</u> A Q	

If West leads a spade, no matter what spade West leads, South, as 4th hand, will take two tricks.

However, if declarer leads a spade from the North hand, then South, as 3rd hand, will only get 1 spade trick.

So what does that mean if you are unfortunate enough to be the third hand to play to a trick, and both partner and the opponent has followed low to the trick? It simply means you should play your high cards to give the most advantage to your side.

You may have heard the advice that "3rd hand should play high". Although that is certainly true in many cases, it is very oversimplified. In this section, I will explain the principles of 3rd hand play, and when it is and is not right to play high. I will also explain how to play your cards in a way as to give your partner the most amount of information.

Should you always win the trick as 3rd hand if you can? Not necessarily. In fact, there are many situations where it is not to your best advantage to win the trick when you can. The best use of your high cards is to use them to capture an opponent's honor. For example, it is much better when you play your ace on the same trick as an opponent's honor than to play your ace and there are no opposing honors on the trick.

Let's look at an example (in all examples, you are East):

♠ Q 2

♠ J 10 9 4

♠ A 8 7 6

♠ K 5 3

If partner leads the J and declarer plays the 2, you should definitely not play the A. If you play the A, declarer will win 2 tricks in the suit, the K and Q. However, if you do not play the A, declarer will only win one trick with the K. Your A will capture the Q on the next trick.

If you cannot use an honor to capture one of the opponent's honors, the next best use of your honor is to force out an opponent's honor. That way you can set up lesser honors for your side. Here is an example:

♠ 4 3 2

♠ K J 6 5

♠ Q 8 7

♠ A 10 9

If your partner leads the 5, you play the Q, and South plays the A, you have set up two spade tricks for partner, his K and J. This example illustrates the advantage of 3rd hand high.

Ok, so much of the time you play 3rd hand high. However, when you have a sequence of high cards, you have a choice as to which card to play. For example,

♠ 4 3 2

♠ K 8 6 5

♠ Q J 7

♠ A 10 9

If partner leads the 5, should you play the Q or the J? Your first reaction probably is that it does not matter. And, in fact, that is true as far as it goes. However, there is one play that gives partner more information than the other play.

Let us assume you decide to play the Q and South wins the A. Partner now knows that the K is good. But partner does not know that you also have the good spade J.

Now let us assume you decide to play the J. South still wins his A. However, partner now knows that you have the Q. Why is that? Because if South held the Q, he would have captured your J with the Q, not the A. So by playing the J, partner has much more information than by playing the Q.

In fact, the correct 3rd hand play when you have an honor sequence is to play the lowest card in that sequence. In the above example, the J is the lowest card of your QJ sequence. If you held the Q J 10, your correct play would be the 10.

It is imperative that you play the lowest card in your sequence to make sure partner knows what you have. If you incorrectly played the Q in the example above, partner will now be entitled to place the J in the South hand. And partner is not at fault for assuming that – you are, because you did not play the correct card.

Now let us look at a slightly more complicated example, taking the cards dummy has into account.

♠ J 3 2

♠ K 8 6 5

♠ Q 10 7

♠ A 9 4

Let us assume the 5 is led and dummy plays the 2. If you mechanically play the Q, 3rd hand high, then once partner takes the K, declarer will take a 2nd spade trick with the J. However, if you think about it for a minute, you can see that, in terms of forcing out one of declarer's honors, playing the 10 is equivalent to playing the Q. Since you can see the J in dummy, you know that by playing the 10, you will not be giving declarer a cheap trick with the J. In fact, by playing the 10, you are setting up two tricks for your side, whereas by playing the Q you are only setting up 1 trick.

Let us look at a more extreme example of this principle:

♠ Q 10 8
♠ 5 4 3 2
♠ K J 9
♠ A 7 6

If the 2 is led and dummy follows with the 8, it should now be clear to you that you should play the 9. If dummy plays the 10, you play the J. If dummy plays the Q you play the K.

There is one more slightly ambiguous case to consider:

♠ Q 7 6
♠ J 9 8 2
♠ K 10 4
♠ A 5 3

If the 2 is led and dummy follows with 6, you should play the 10. That forces out the A and sets up your K. You might be thinking, "Wait a minute. You were lucky partner had the J. If declarer had the J, you would be giving declarer a cheap trick with the J." Fair enough. Let's change the example slightly.

♠ Q 7 6
♠ 9 8 3 2
♠ K 10 4
♠ A J 3

Partner leads the 2 and dummy follows with the 6. You decide to play the K. Now look at what happens. You set up 3 tricks for declarer -- the A, Q, and J.

Let's see what happens if you play the 10. Granted, declarer wins with the J instead of the A. But now declarer only gets one more trick, with the A, rather than the two more tricks he would have gotten if you had played the K.

The basic principle these examples illustrate is as follows. If dummy has an honor, and you have a higher honor, try and keep your honor to capture dummy's honor. In the example above, try and keep your K to capture dummy's Q. That means if you have a higher honor plus the 10 or 9, play the 10 or 9 rather than your honor.

Second Hand Defensive Play

Before I get into details, let me give you an important cardinal principle of defense:

"When declarer leads a suit and you are 2nd hand, play low quickly and smoothly."

Most players, especially inexperienced ones, find this a very hard principle to follow. But, I can promise you, if you can train yourself to play 2nd hand low smoothly, you will gain many more tricks than you will lose.

I cannot emphasize the importance of following this principle enough. If you learn nothing else from this lesson but 2nd hand low, you will still improve your defense immensely.

Why should you play 2nd hand low? You already learned the most important reason from the last section. Remember, the most important use of an honor is to capture an opponent's honor. Well, if declarer leads a low card and you play 2nd hand high, then he will play a low card from the 3rd hand, and your high card will not capture anything useful. On the other hand, if you play low, then declarer will be forced to play a high card from the 3rd hand and hopefully partner can capture that high card with one of her own high cards.

Let's look at an example. You are West and South leads the 2 towards dummy:

♠ Q 10 4

♠ K 5 3

What do you play?

You might be thinking, "If I don't play the K and declarer has doubleton Ace, then I may never get my King."

That is possible but not likely. And even if it is true, if you play the K, it is likely that declarer can use the Q to throw off another loser.

Let me ask you to consider another question. Who has the J, declarer or your partner? Do you know for sure?

For now, for the sake of argument, let us assume you know that declarer has the A and partner has the J. In that case, do you see the advantage of playing low? If you play low smoothly, declarer, who may not realize what a good defender you are, is likely to guess that you don't have the King, because you were so smooth in your play, He likely will play the 10 in the hope that you have the J, and he can force out the K to set up his Q.

If, on the other hand, you played the King, or even just hesitated, declarer will play the Q and get 2 tricks in the suit.

Now, let's get back to the question of do you know who has the J. You may be surprised to learn that it is almost certain that partner has the J. Why is that? Because if declarer had the J, he would finesse partner for the K, in the hopes of winning 3 spade tricks.

Remember, just as you do not know many of the cards that declarer has, declarer does not know many of the cards that you have. If you hesitate as 2nd hand, you are giving declarer information that he is not entitled to.

One of the more important aspects of defender play is to maintain steady tempo. This is known as always playing "in tempo". If you play more slowly, maintain the same speed throughout the game. If you play more quickly, again, remain "in tempo." By doing so, you alleviate any inference declarer might make about what cards you hold. By the way, it is considered unethical to hesitate when you have nothing to think about, in an attempt to mislead declarer.

Let us look at another example:

♠ Q 10 5

♠ A 9 3

If South leads low, it is clear for West to play low. There is no position of the cards where it is right to play the A. Even in the case where declarer has a singleton, partner then has the K and J. And there are plenty of cases where playing the A will cost a trick. For example:

♠ Q 10 5

♠ A 9 3

♠ J 6 4 2

♠ K 8 7

If you play low, declarer can only take 1 spade trick no matter how he plays the suit. But, if you play high, then declarer will take 2 spade tricks, with the K and Q. This is just another example of using your ace to capture an opponent's honor.

This position comes up frequently:

♠ K J 5

♠ A 10 3

When the declarer South leads a low card, you should play low smoothly. If declarer has the Q, it does not matter whether or not you play the A. But if partner has the Q, then declarer has to guess whether to play the J or K. If you hesitate, or play the A, then declarer has no guess.

There are a few common situations where it is right to play 2nd hand high. One is when by playing 2nd hand high, you are taking the setting trick or at least know you can defeat the contract. It is never wrong to take the setting trick.

The other common situation is illustrated as follows:

♠ A 10 5

♠ Q J 3

If South leads low towards dummy, you should play a spade honor. Why is this? If declarer has the K, you are entitled to one spade trick. But if you play low and declarer plays the 10, you will not win any spade tricks.

The standard play is to play your highest honor, in this case the Q. That tells your partner your honor sequence is headed by the Q. This is known as splitting your honors. If you had KQ in spades and decided to split your honors, then you would play the K. When you decide to split, playing your highest honor gives partner the most information about what honors you have.