

Tip of the month

This month's tips concern **competitive bidding** and **third hand play**.

Our favourite game is much easier when the opposition has nothing to say but much more difficult if they open the bidding when you also hold values to bid. The following guidelines should help you to hone your **competitive bidding**:

- Try not to make one level suit overcalls with a full opening hand. See if a take-out double is more suitable or make a jump bid if you have one strong suit.
- Try not to let your opponents play at the two level, ie 1H – 2H. Don't make life easy for them. Protect your partner if possible.
- Do not compete at the three level without agreed length and strength. This is the bidding area where you may concede a penalty whilst protecting a part score.
- Do not compete at the four level with a minor suit against a major unless you intend to double the opposition if they bid at game level.
- Competing at the five level is the most difficult area to assess and the experts are almost unanimous that you should tend to defend.

Although '**third hand high**' is a very basic bridge tenet which beginners are taught at an early stage, like all rules of thumb, it should be exercised with care and in the light of your analysis of the lead and the cards you can see in dummy.

For example, partner leads the two and you have K108 and dummy Q43. Dummy plays low so which card do you play? Do you immediately reach for the King (third hand high)? The lead is presumably from an honour (or a singleton – the bidding usually tells you which), and, if it is from an honour, that honour is unlikely to be the Ace, unless it is an NT contract (but see postscript below). Therefore, the declarer must have the Ace and there is no point in playing the King. The ten must be the correct card because the distribution may be as follows:

A76

K108

J952

Q43

If the ten is played, the defence will eventually make two tricks, but if the King is played, dummy's Queen is immediately promoted and the defence takes only one trick. Very often such decisions will determine whether a contract makes or fails (and whether your side gets a 'top' or a 'bottom!').

Changing the scenario a little – if partner leads the nine, you have K106 and dummy the same Q43, which card do you play now? Again, do you automatically reach for the King? This lead is presumably either the top of a sequence or the top of nothing (if MUD - middle, up, down - leads are not being played), so the declarer must have both the Ace and the Jack. Again there is no point in playing the King because if you do the declarer would make not only the Jack and Ace but also the Queen (and any long cards he might have). The distribution may be:

AJ52

K106

987

Q43

In these circumstances, if the six is played on the nine and loses to the Jack, when the opening leader gets in and leads the eight, it is now possible to promote a trick for the defence either by playing the ten on the eight or by covering the Queen with the King depending on declarer's play to this trick.

These examples underline the importance of analysing the lead and considering what information this gives you **before** you decide which card to play third in hand. It is quite acceptable to take as much time on this as you need to reach clear conclusions at trick 1 and such pauses for thought at that stage are in no way unethical.

Postscript

Declarer is in 4H and receives a low diamond lead after an NT bid has indicated diamond stopper(s) in dummy. Dummy holds KJx opposite xx. Which card does he play from dummy? On the basis that players 'never' under-lead an ace against a suit contract, the correct play would appear to be the Jack. But look at it from the defender's point of view. If the bidding has shown that such diamond strength as there may be at declarer's disposal is likely to be in dummy, an under-lead of the Ace might gain the defence two quick tricks which they don't deserve. Of course, if you were to do this frequently and thereby gain a reputation for such, declarers would soon learn to think about rising with the King. So it pays to mix things up. In defence, it is often profitable to be predictably unpredictable!

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