

BRIDGE – INTERMEDIATE LESSONS II – 11

Third-Hand Play

Third-Hand Play: An old bridge adage exists; namely, “*third hand plays high*”. One cannot generalize, however, in that Partner’s lead, Dummy’s hand, layout of the suit in question, the contract, etc., can all affect this decision-making process. Ultimately, third hand play is extremely important for, in simplistic terms, it is the last card your side will play to each trick in question, and can, therefore, have profound significance.

1. **Third hand high:** In each of the following layouts, your Partner has led the 5, and the 3 is played from the Dummy. Which card must be played by the third hand in order to ensure the maximum number of tricks to which the Defenders are entitled?

| | | | | | |
|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | 7 <u>3</u> | | 98 <u>3</u> | | A8 <u>3</u> |
| KJ6 <u>5</u> 2 | A <u>8</u> 4 | Q <u>T</u> 6 <u>5</u> | K <u>7</u> 2 | Q97 <u>5</u> | K <u>T</u> 6 |
| | Q <u>T</u> 9 | | A <u>J</u> 4 | | J42 |

Conclusion: Usually speaking, *under most circumstances, the third hand Defender is most effective when contributing the highest card available when trying to maximize the number of tricks taken by the Defenders.* The general strategy of third hand is to try to win the trick or to force fourth hand (Declarer or Dummy) to spend a higher card.

2. **Only as High as is Necessary:** Playing the highest card available in third hand play is not always the best play. Keep in mind, the objective which must remain to promote cards in Partner’s hand by playing only the highest card necessary to do the job. In the following card layouts, Partner again leads the 5 followed by the 3 from Dummy. What card would you play and what inferences might Partner deduce from your play?

| | | | | | |
|----------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|
| | A9 <u>3</u> | | J8 <u>3</u> | | A6 <u>3</u> |
| <u>8</u> | Q <u>J</u> <u>T</u> | <u>8</u> | K <u>Q</u> <u>T</u> | <u>8</u> | K <u>J</u> <u>T</u> |

Conclusion: Under all conditions, however, *third hand should play only as high as is necessary, playing the lower of touching cards when there is a choice to do so.* Before deciding how high a card is necessary, however, the Defender must look at both Partner’s lead, as well as the cards of the Dummy. *Do not waste your highest card if you cannot beat the cards played so far; or if Partner’s lead is equivalent to your highest card (do not fight Partner).*

3. **Trapping High Cards:** When deciding how high a card to play, third hand must try to visualize the entire layout of the suit. Not being able to see either Partner’s hand or Declarer’s, it is often helpful to consider the bidding and the logic of the situation. Remember, the general idea is to try to keep Dummy’s high cards trapped whenever possible. In each of the following layouts, which card must you play in third seat in order to enable your side to eventually take the maximum number of tricks in the suit shown?

| | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------|--------------|
| | Q7 <u>3</u> | | J8 <u>3</u> | | K <u>3</u> |
| K96 <u>5</u> | A <u>J</u> 4 | Q76 <u>5</u> | K <u>T</u> 2 | J9754 | A <u>T</u> 6 |
| | <u>T</u> 82 | | A94 | | Q82 |

Conclusion: *When Partner leads a low card, he/she is probably leading from an honor. Try to visualize Partner's holding and, whenever possible, keep Dummy's high cards trapped.*

4. **When Partner Leads a High Card:** So far we have addressed the situation where Partner has led a low card which usually necessitates third hand playing high. When Partner leads a high card, however, third hand may not need to play high, especially when there is an honor needing to be trapped in Dummy. In each of the following examples, Partner has led the **Jack** and Dummy has put in the **4**. How should the Defenders play the suit such that all the tricks to which they are entitled are secured?

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| K7 <u>4</u> | | Q8 <u>4</u> | | 75 <u>4</u> |
| <u>J</u> T85 | A <u>Q</u> 6 | <u>J</u> T95 | A <u>6</u> 3 | K <u>J</u> T9 |
| 932 | | K72 | | Q82 |

Conclusion: *When Partner leads a high card, you may be capable of trapping a high card in the Dummy by playing a low card rather than third hand high. On the other hand, if there are only small cards in the Dummy, you may have to overtake Partner's high card if there be an opportunity of potentially trapping a high card in Declarer's hand.*

5. **Unblocking:** There are times when it is appropriate for third hand to play high even though it might, at first glance, seem unnecessary. One of these conditions is when the suit would otherwise block; i.e., one would not be able to lead the suit back for Partner to take his/her winners. In the following examples Partner has led the underlined card with Dummy following as indicated. Assuming Partner to have no other outside entries except for the suit shown, which card must third hand play in order for the Defenders to maximize their tricks?

| | | | | | | |
|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| 9 <u>4</u> 2 | | A <u>9</u> 2 | | A <u>8</u> 3 | | A <u>9</u> 4 |
| <u>K</u> QJ75 | A <u>3</u> | <u>Q</u> JT63 | K <u>4</u> | <u>J</u> T965 | K <u>Q</u> 2 | <u>Q</u> T752 |
| T86 | | 875 | | 74 | | J86 |

Conclusion: *In order to avoid stranding Partner's winners, third hand must sometimes play a high card, even though it is not needed to win the trick. The goal, under these circumstances is to unblock the suit by maintaining a small card with which to lead the same suit back to Partner. It is usually right to overtake a King with A-x; often right to overtake a Queen with K-x; and sometimes right to overtake a Jack with Q-x.*

Exception: *Do NOT unblock if Dummy has a card that is likely to be promoted into a trick for Declarer.*

| | | |
|--------------|--------------|------------|
| | A <u>9</u> 3 | |
| <u>J</u> T87 | | Q <u>6</u> |
| | K542 | |

CONCLUSIONS:

The general guideline dictates that third hand usually plays high.

Before automatically contributing your highest card, however, take a look at both the specific card which Partner has led as well as the cards visible in the Dummy.

One must play a card that is no higher than is necessary while, at the same time, attempting to entrap any high card in the Dummy's hand.

At the same time, one must guard against blocking the suit by being left with the highest card in the suit when Partner is waiting to take his/her remaining winners.