

Second Hand High

You've all heard the old saying, "Second hand low, third hand high." Like all bridge adages, this one has some validity, but if you follow it blindly, many a declarer will be very pleased. Sadly, you may not even realize that your defense cost your side the setting trick(s). When "second hand low" didn't set the contract, ask yourself, "What would have happened if I had played high?" Tracking the answer to that question over time will enable you to see the situations in which "Second Hand High" is the winning play.

KEEP THESE CONCEPTS IN MIND WHILE VISUALIZING YOUR SECOND HAND PLAY.

If you're the second hand to play to a trick, you are the first hand of your partnership to play. Frequently, the correct play as second hand is the same card you would have played if you were leading the suit.

The best card to play as second hand is a lot easier to determine if dummy plays *after* you. With a similar hand in a similar situation, that is also the correct play to make if declarer's hand, the *hidden* hand, plays after you.

Think about your play as second hand *before* you're called upon to make it. Playing smoothly to a trick, whether you choose to play high or low, does not give unauthorized information to your partner – or authorized information to declarer – as to your holding. Give declarer a chance to go wrong.

SECOND HAND SHOULD PLAY HIGH IN THESE SITUATIONS:

♠ When taking the setting trick or when you know that the setting tricks have been established.

Example 1a.

	♠Q973	
	♥K95	
	♦AQ6	
	♣653	
♠A54		♠
♥83		♥6
♦843		♦
♣QJT98		♣K4
	♠T	
	♥	
	♦	
	♣A72	

Auction (South dealer):	
1NT – Pass – 3NT – Pass	
Pass – Pass – –	
The play:	
• ♣Q (West). ♣3. ♣K. ♣2	
• ♣4 (East). ♣7. ♣8. ♣5	
• ♣J (West). ♣6. ♥6. ♣A	
• ♠T (South). ♠??? (West)	

When partner played the ♣K at trick one, you knew the contract was set. Once the ♣A is forced out, you will take a total of four clubs and the ♠A. Is declarer *really* planning to finesse for the ♠J? Do you *really* need to wait until declarer plays the ♠K to play your ♠A – or does partner have that ♠K?

The bidding tells you that partner has 5-7 high card points (HCPs). He could have the ♠K, but if so, you can always lead a spade to him *after* setting the contract.

Example 1b.

<p>♠JT9 ♥Q95 ♦AK65 ♣653</p> <p>♠ ♥ ♦3 ♣Q8</p> <p>♠ ♥ ♦Q ♣A7</p>	<p>♠A75 ♥JT762 ♦97 ♣K42</p>
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<p>Auction (South dealer):</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1NT – Pass – 3NT– Pass Pass – Pass – –</p> <p>The play:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ♣Q (West). ♣3. ♣4. ♣7 • ♣8 (West). ♣5. ♣K. ♣A • ♦Q (South). ♦3. ♦K. ♦9 • ♠J (North). ♠??? (East)

It looks like declarer might be missing the ♠Q and is planning to finesse you for that card. Partner has 5-7 HCPs, and given the minor suit information you have, it's very likely that partner does have the ♠Q. However, partner's club suit, which will yield a total of four tricks for your side, is set up, and your ♠A makes a total of five tricks to the good guys. Declarer knows that no matter who has the ♠A, they're going down once that card is taken. The only hope for making the contract is your ducking this trick. Take you ♠A and lead your last club to partner's good tricks.

- ♠ When you need to establish your suit or partner's suit before an entry is removed from your hand or partner's.

Example 2.

<p>♠653 ♥AKQ2 ♦Q52 ♣953</p> <p>♠4 ♥3 ♦ ♣</p> <p>♠T ♥5 ♦ ♣</p>	<p>♠87 ♥J987 ♦K987 ♣A64</p>
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<p>Auction (South dealer):</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1C – Pass – 1H – Pass 1NT – Pass – 2NT– Pass 3NT – Pass – Pass– Pass</p> <p>The play:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ♠4 (West). ♠3. ♠7. ♠T • ♥5 (South). ♥3. ♥A. ♥7 • ♣9 (North). ♣??? (East)

It's not difficult to play second hand high when you hold the setting trick or tricks. It's a little more difficult when partner holds those tricks, but only a little. When those setting tricks have not yet been established, whether or not to play second hand high is not as obvious. There are two ingredients necessary to successfully set a contract by establishing a defensive side suit: (1) the suit must be established, and (2) there must be an entry in the hand holding that side suit. If your partner holds the side suit, grab your entry – while you still have a card in partner's suit – and lead that suit *before* partner's entry is removed. If you hold the side suit, avoid taking your entry until the suit is established.

What do you know about partner's hand? (1) Partner probably has five spades. Declarer didn't bid spades at his second turn, so it's unlikely that he holds four. It's *possible* that declarer holds only two spades, ♠KT or ♠QT, but *impossible* that he would hold ♠AT or ♠KT. Your partner is a better player than that! (2) Partner probably holds exactly 7 HCPs. If those points are all in spades, his suit is effectively established *and* he has no outside entry. If he holds an outside entry, his suit is not established and you need to lead your last spade before his outside entry is removed. (3) What if partner's only outside entry is the singleton ♣K? Think about it.

♠ When declarer is trying to steal a trick

Example 3.

	♠K965 ♥K962 ♦AJ3 ♣AK	
♠ ♥A ♦9 ♣		♠A8 ♥QJT875 ♦Q85 ♣T8
	♠ ♥4 ♦4 ♣	

Auction (North dealer):	
1D	– 2H – Pass – Pass
Dbl	– Pass – 2S – Pass
3S	– Pass – 4S – Pass
Pass	– Pass
The play:	
•	♥A (West). ♥2. ♥8. ♥4
•	♦9 (West). ♦A. ♦5. ♦4
•	♠5 (North). ♠??? (East)

Declarers frequently need to steal a trick to make their contract. That stolen trick may be the only trick they need or it may be a trick that disrupts the defenders' transportation or timing. This hand is an instance of the latter. As much as you might want to save that ♠A to capture dummy's ♠K, take it now and give your partner a heart ruff. A diamond trick is the setting trick.

♠ When you have an honor sequence, play the top card of the sequence. Not only will this help establish a trick for your side, but it will tell partner your exact strength in that suit.

Example 4.

	♠A64 ♥KQ75 ♦K72 ♣J85	
♠ ♥94 ♦ ♣AKQ		♠9832 ♥83 ♦JT94 ♣T32
	♠ ♥AT2 ♦ ♣96	

Auction (South dealer):	
1H	– 2C – 3C – Pass
3H	– Pass – 4H – Pass
Pass	– Pass
The play:	
•	♣A (West). ♣5. ♣2. ♣6
•	West plays two more rounds of clubs, declarer ruffing the third round.
•	Declarer pulls two rounds of hearts ending in dummy with the ♥K
•	♦2 (North). ♦??? (East)

Remember that second hand is the first hand of the partnership to play. Sometimes, it's helpful to think of second hand play as if that hand is on lead. If you were on lead, you would play the $\spadesuit J$, and that's the card you should play now. Yes, the $\spadesuit 9$ forces out an honor, too, but it doesn't tell partner what your diamond holding looks like. Knowing you hold $\spadesuit JT9$, partner can confidently play the $\spadesuit Q$ and avoid the end play.

♠ When you can "split your honors" to guarantee a trick in the suit.

Example 5a.

	♠AT5	
	♥AQ42	
	♦T832	
	♣75	
♠QJ76		♠
♥JT98		♥763
♦Q7		♦KJ9
♣KT6		♣
	♠3	
	♥K5	
	♦A54	
	♣2	

Auction (South dealer):	
1NT	– Pass – 2C – Pass
2D	– Pass – 3NT – Pass
Pass	– Pass – –
The play:	
•	♥J (West). ♥2. ♥3. ♥K
•	♦4 (South). ♦Q. ♦2. ♦9
•	♥8 (West). ♥Q. ♥6. ♥5
•	♦3 (North). ♦J. ♦5. ♦7
•	♥7 (East). ♣2. ♥9. ♥A
•	♦8 (North). ♦K. ♦A. ♣6
•	♠3 (South). ♠??? (West)

If you were listening to the bidding and counting tricks carefully, you know that declarer has three heart tricks, two diamonds, the $\spadesuit A$ and $\spadesuit K$, and the $\clubsuit A$, eight tricks. He's looking for his ninth trick, so make sure he doesn't get that trick with the $\spadesuit T$. Play the $\spadesuit J$ and "split" your honors. You guarantee yourself at least one spade trick, and more importantly, you take away a trick from declarer. Note that when you split honors, you play the lower of the two. It helps partner differentiate between a two-card holding and an honor sequence.

Example 5b.

	♠853	
	♥AQ42	
	♦T832	
	♣K5	
♠		♠QJ76
♥		♥JT98
♦AK94		♦Q7
♣		♣864
	♠	
	♥	
	♦J65	
	♣2	

Auction (South dealer):	
1NT	– Pass – 2C – Pass
2D	– Pass – 3NT – Pass
Pass	– Pass – –
The play:	
•	♦4 (West). ♦2. ♦Q. ♦5
•	♦7 (East). ♦6. ♦K. ♦3
•	West plays two more rounds of diamonds, dummy winning the second; East pitching the $\clubsuit 4$ and $\spadesuit 6$; declarer pitching the $\clubsuit 2$.
•	♠3 (North). ♠??? (East)

Splitting honors is not always best. Should East split honors here? Declarer's hand is hidden, but it's very likely that he holds both the $\spadesuit A$ and $\spadesuit K$. If he holds the $\spadesuit T$, as well, splitting those honors allows him to return to dummy and finesse you out of the remaining spade honor. Yes, he could finesse on his own, but not every declarer will do that. When you can do nothing more, at least give declarer a chance to go wrong.

♠ When you need to unblock to prevent an *end play*.

Example 6.

	♠QJ76	
	♥AQ4	
	♦AQ5	
	♣862	
♠53		♠92
♥KJ5		♥
♦JT93		♦842
♣KT74		♣
	♠A4	
	♥3	
	♦K76	
	♣	

Auction (South dealer):	
1S	– Pass – 2NT! – Pass
3NT!	– Pass – 4NT – Pass
5D*	– Pass – 6S – Pass
Pass	– Pass
The play:	
•	♦J (West). ♦A. ♦2. ♦6
•	Declarer pulls two rounds of spades
•	Declarer plays two rounds of diamonds ending in hand with the ♦K
•	♥3 (South). ♣??? (West)

When you hold all the defensive tricks, you need to beware of falling victim to an end play. If you play low on this heart trick, you will win the third heart, but then what? If you can transfer a heart trick to your partner, your ♣K will be the setting trick. Since you can't pass the ♥K under the table, the best you can do is not win a heart trick and hope your partner holds the ♥T. Play second hand high and start getting rid of those high hearts. What happens if partner does *not* hold the ♥T? Have you lost anything?

♠ When you need to disrupt declarer's transportation

Example 7.

	♠432	
	♥43	
	♦AJT86	
	♣Q72	
♠K9865		♠T
♥T9		♥
♦K92		♦
♣J96		♣
	♠Q	
	♥	
	♦4	
	♣	

Auction (South dealer):	
1C	– Pass – 1D – Pass
2NT	– Pass – 3NT – Pass
Pass	– Pass – –
The play:	
•	♠6 (West). ♠2. ♠T. ♠Q! (hide the ♠J)
•	♦4 (South). ♣??? (West)

Declarer holds 18-19 HCPs, leaving 7-8 HCPs for your partner. Declarer also has plenty of transportation to hand, so your ♦K is worthless. Declarer will be able to repeat a finesse and set up five diamond tricks in dummy. If partner holds the ♦Q, however, partner might be able to win that trick when declarer can no longer enjoy all those diamonds. *Play the ♦K!* Second hand doesn't always play high to win or develop tricks for her side. Sometimes, the goal is to keep declarer from taking his tricks. In this example hand type, note that many declarers will assume you held both the ♦K and ♦Q, return to hand, repeat the finesse, and win *no* diamond tricks. If partner doesn't hold the ♦Q, does this "second hand high" play cost your side a trick?

♠ When covering an honor with an honor will establish a trick for you or your partner.

To cover, or not to cover, that is the question – but it’s a whole topic in itself, and you’ve worked hard enough for one day.

SUMMARY

Second hand high is frequently the best play when you need to establish and/or take the setting tricks.

Second hand high is frequently the best play when you need to keep declarer from taking extra tricks, either by disrupting his transportation or avoiding an end play.

Second hand high is the play to make when you hold an honor card sequence – and remember to play the *top* card in the sequence. If you’re the second hand to play to a trick, you are the first hand of your partnership to play, and you would always lead the top card in the honor card sequence.

Second hand high to split your honors *may* be the correct play to make, but be careful. If the hand following yours has two honors higher than your holding, you may be giving away the show. When splitting honors, play the *lower* of the two cards. This helps partner differentiate your honor card holdings.

If second hand high is the play to make when dummy plays *after* you, it’s also the correct play to make if declarer’s hand, the *hidden* hand, plays after you. Unfortunately, this play may not be obvious. “That’s why they paint the backs of the cards.”¹

Think about your play as second hand *before* you’re called upon to make it. Playing smoothly to a trick, whether you choose to play high or low, does not give unauthorized information to your partner – or authorized information to declarer – as to your holding. When you can do no other damage, give declarer a chance to go wrong.

The declarer should also keep second hand play tendencies in mind, too. If you need to steal a trick, it’s usually best to do it early, before the defenders have a clear picture of the hand. Camouflage your intent as much as possible.

For an excellent analysis of second hand play, read that section in Edwin Kantar's *Defensive Bridge Play Complete* (No. Hollywood, Calif.: Wilshire Book Co., 1974). Example hands 2 and 7, and play hands 2 and 4, were taken from this book.

¹ One of Mike Andrews’s favorite sayings.

Test Hand.

	♠J65	
	♥T54	
	♦KQ962	
	♣K5	
♠87		♠QT94
♥762		♥A98
♦AT7		♦J85
♣QJ762		♣T93
	♠AK32	
	♥KQJ3	
	♦43	
	♣A84	

Auction (South dealer):

1NT – Pass – 3NT – Pass
Pass – Pass

The play:

- ♣6 (West). ♣5. ♣9. ♣4
- ♣T (East). ♣8. ♣2. ♣K
- ♠5 (North). ♠9. ♠K. ♠8
- ♦3. ♦??? (West)

This hand has so many critical second hand play decisions, that it can serve as an example of many of the illustrated hand types.

1. Should West win the ♦A on this trick? Why or why not? There are two excellent reasons for West to play low on this trick: (1) Her suit is not established, and this is the only entry to her hand; and (2) declarer is not simply trying to steal one diamond trick. Playing the ♦A at this point gives declarer *two* diamond tricks. Remember, he opened the bidding 1NT, so he has at least two diamonds.
2. Declarer wins the ♦K, East following with the ♦5. Declarer now leads the ♥4 from dummy. Should East win the ♥A at this time? Why or why not? Your partner needs clubs led one more time for the suit to be established *before* her entry is removed. Grab this trick and lead your last club!
3. Instead of leading a heart from dummy at trick five, declarer leads the ♠6, wins with the ♠A in hand, and leads the ♦4 towards dummy. Should West win the ♦A on this trick? Why or why not? (Note that the spade spots are such on this hand that declarer really cannot afford to lead a second spade, but that will not always be the case.) (1) If West doesn't win this trick, declarer will now win two diamond tricks, and West's suit is still not established. Those two diamond tricks may be all declarer needs to make his contract. (2) East's ♦5 is low and suggests he holds an odd number of diamonds, i.e., three. Therefore, declarer started with only two diamonds, and winning this trick will cut his transportation to dummy. (3) If West wins the ♦A, her club suit is dead. How can the defense set the contract now?

Second Hand High

1

♠ K42
♥ KQ3
♦ Q1096
♣ AK8

♠ Q105
♥ A76
♦ 43
♣ J10932

♠ AJ763
♥ 854
♦ 875
♣ 74

♠ 98
♥ J1092
♦ AKJ2
♣ Q65

Dealer: North
Neither Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
	1 NT	Pass	2 ♣
Pass	2 ♦	Pass	3 NT
Pass	Pass	Pass	

Opening Lead: ♠ 6

The lead gives away a trick, but the defense can recover.

<-Makeable contracts->

....C	D	H	S	NT
....=	=	=	=	==
N	1	4	4	- 1
S	1	4	4	- 1
E	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-

2

♠ 986
♥ K8732
♦ AQ5
♣ 104

♠ 752
♥ AQJ95
♦ 1087
♣ 86

♠ AK
♥ 6
♦ KJ96432
♣ AKQ

♠ QJ1043
♥ 104
♦
♣ J97532

Dealer: East
N-S Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
		2 ♣	Pass
2 ♥	Pass	3 ♦	Pass
4 ♦	Pass	4 NT	Pass
5 ♣	Pass	6 ♦	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Opening Lead: ♠ Q

<-Makeable contracts->

....C	D	H	S	NT
....=	=	=	=	==
N	1	-	-	1 -
S	1	-	-	- -
E	-	5	3	- 2
W	-	5	3	- 2

3

♠ A85
♥ K
♦ J8765
♣ K1072

♠ J762
♥ J9873
♦ 109
♣ J6

♠ Q1043
♥ A1052
♦ 43
♣ A85

♠ K9
♥ Q64
♦ AKQ2
♣ Q943

Dealer: South
E-W Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
			1 NT
Pass	3 NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Opening Lead: ♥ 7

Not the best auction, but this is a class on second hand play. There are several ways for the defense to go wrong on this hand.

<-Makeable contracts->

....C	D	H	S	NT
....=	=	=	=	==
N	5	5	1	1 2
S	5	5	1	1 2
E	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-

4

♠ 10832
♥ KJ10765
♦ A62
♣

♠ AJ4
♥ A4
♦ QJ87
♣ AKQ8

♠ Q5
♥ Q93
♦ 10954
♣ J765

♠ K976
♥ 82
♦ K3
♣ 109432

Dealer: West
Both Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
2 NT	Pass	3 NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Opening Lead: ♥ J

<-Makeable contracts->

....C	D	H	S	NT
....=	=	=	=	==
N	-	-	2	2 -
S	-	-	2	2 -
E	3	3	-	- 2
W	3	3	-	- 2