

The Advancing Player

Position And Promotion

When To Cover Honors With Honors And When Not To Cover

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The two most basic principles underlying much of our Declarer play are position and promotion. Position in bridge is much like neighborhood in real estate—hugely important. [I discussed this a bit last issue, but brief review here before we move to promotion.] Here is an example. You hold the following lovely hand:

★AQxx ♦x ♠AQxx ♣AQxx

If you get to open the bidding, you plan on opening in diamonds and jump shifting (unless partner responds 1★ in which case you will splinter to 4♦ showing the equivalent of 20 HCP with four spades, and a singleton or void in hearts). Suppose, however, that RHO opens 1♦. You make a takeout double and partner JUMPS to 2★—showing a 4-card (or longer) suit and 9-11 HCP. I hope you are thinking of slam!! If your partner has no wasted cards in hearts, slam is almost guaranteed to be a laydown. Whatever Kings are not in your partner’s hand will be in RHO’s hand—and finessable.

By contrast, how would you feel if LHO opens 1★ before the bidding gets around to you? Your ★Q is now probably worth nothing. Both minor Kings are highly likely to be sitting BEHIND your AQ combinations. Your glorious 18 HCP are worth a lot less in this auction.

Position should always be in your mind as the bidding progresses. You upgrade and downgrade honors in your hand as the opponents reveal information about their hands. If RHO overcalls 1★, your Kx is a good holding. If LHO overcalls 1★, your Kx in the suit is probably useless. Visualizing strength and different honor holdings around the table (as the bidding develops) will improve your accuracy in bidding.

Promotion is a principle that too many people ignore in both defense and declarer play. The most basic principle around covering honors is: “Cover an honor with an honor IF AND ONLY IF you might promote something in your hand or your partner’s hand.” If there is nothing to promote—don’t cover!

Here is a classic example. Declarer leads the ★J (which is trumps) from the hidden hand and you hold Q2 while Dummy holds A74. Some people automatically “cover an honor with an honor” and play the Queen. In scenario #1, Declarer plays the Ace—which she was going to play all day long—and your partner’s singleton King falls! How do you feel now?

On Scenario #2, Declarer started with KJ1098 in the suit and was on a “fishing expedition.” She was planning on playing the Ace and finessing your partner for the Queen. (With 8 trumps, you generally want to cash ONE high honor first, and finesse for the Queen on the second round. With Axx in Dummy, she can pick up Qxxx on her right, but not on her left (where you are) if she cashes the King first. You have just revealed the location of the Queen of trumps and lost it. If you had played low smoothly, you would have gotten a trick with that Queen.

Generally, covering an honor with an honor in their trump suit is not a good idea. Neither you nor your partner has enough length to promote anything to winning rank later in the hand. Of course if Declarer errs and plays an honor when you have ALL THE CARDS UNDERNEATH TO PROMOTE, by all means, do cover. If Declarer leads the Jack (of trumps) with Axx in Dummy and you hold Q109, do cover! You are promoting your 10 or 9 to a third round winner.

In side suits, you must consider the number of cards in the suit involved in your hand, and in Dummy, and estimate how many Declarer and partner have. If Dummy holds Q432 and you hold K986 behind, you should cover the Queen when it is led. If partner has Jack or 10, your 9 will be promoted very rapidly. If Declarer has AJ105 and partner has the singleton 7, Declarer will lose the 4th round of the suit to your 9, 8, or 6.

Suppose Dummy holds QJ109 and you hold K543. Do NOT EVER COVER. If Declarer has Axxx, you are doomed no matter what you do. If Declarer has Axx, Declarer can only get three tricks—unless you cover. If you cover, Declarer gets four tricks! If Declarer has Ax, s/he can only get two tricks initially—as long as you do NOT cover. If you cover s/he gets four. With Ax, Declarer needs two more entries to Dummy—and enough trump, to get to Dummy and lead one of the remaining cards in this suit. You do cover then and s/he ruffs. Declarer needs another entry to Dummy to get back and cash the last winner. S/he is still getting only three instead of four cards as long as you do not cover until s/he is out of the suit.

Worst case scenario, with QJ109 in Dummy, you cover the first round and partner’s singleton Ace kills your King while Declarer hums a happy tune.

A general guideline is: “Cover the LAST of touching honors—if any.” So, with QJ43 in Dummy and you hold Kxx, when Declarer plays the Queen (first), DUCK. If Declarer continues with the Jack, cover the Jack. What you are doing here is protecting your partner’s possible 10xx. If Declarer starts with A98 and you cover the Queen on the first round of the suit, s/he can then finesse your partner out of the 10 and lose zero tricks in the suit. If you wait and cover the Jack, your partner’s 10 will own the third round of the suit. [And if Declarer plays low on the second round, you also play low, trusting partner to have 10—or that Ace is doubleton—and your King will own the third round of the suit.]

What if the honor is coming from the hidden hand? If you see a Jack, wait for a Queen. So, if Declarer leads the Jack in a side suit in which A43 is in Dummy and you hold the King, do NOT cover the Jack. Wait for the Queen. It may be that partner has the Queen, not Declarer. When Declarer has J10x opposite Axx, Declarer must hope for misdefense to get two tricks. If you cover the Jack with the King, Declarer hops Ace and plays the suit back toward the 10x. Your partner must go up with the Queen, and Declarer gets two tricks. If you DUCK the Jack, your partner’s Queen will kill it. When Declarer regains the lead (in a different suit) and tries the 10 in this suit, you DO cover with the King and promote your partner’s 9. Declarer gets only ONE trick in the suit. Huzzah!

Declarers often mess up principles of promotion. They are very apt to play lower honors toward higher honors, thinking they are finessing, but it is often incorrect. General principle: “Giving up two honors for one opposing honor is NOT a good deal unless you have lower ranking cards you are promoting.”

So, with AJxx opposite Qxxx OR Jxxx opposite AQxx, do NOT play the lower ranking honor toward Dummy! You do NOT own the 10. If LHO covers your Jack (or Queen) and forces the Ace from Dummy, all you have done is to promote the opponents’ 10 to a third round winner. You’ve expended two of your honors to “catch” one of theirs. The ONLY chance for all the tricks with these combinations is to find a doubleton King in front of the AJxx (or AQxx) The proper play is LOW to the Jack and cash the Ace (hoping the King falls) OR low to the Queen and cash the Ace. If the King is Kxx, you were always slated to lose one trick.

The corollary for defenders is: “Getting two of Declarer’s honors for one of yours is often a good deal.” [The exception is waiting for the Queen when the Jack comes from the hidden hand and only the Ace is in Dummy.] Here is a common example: you hold K76 and Declarer leads Jack from hidden hand with AQ4 in Dummy. COVER! If partner has the 10, you must cover to promote that 10 to winning rank on the third round of the suit. If partner does NOT have the 10, you are doomed anyway. Ditto if Declarer leads the Queen from the hidden hand and the AJx is in Dummy. COVER with your King. The “two for one” deal ensures that your partner’s 10—if s/he owns it—will be promoted to a third round winner. If you duck, Declarer will always get three [undeserved] tricks. In these cases, there are usually two honors in Dummy.

If you would like a handout on covering honors with honors, click [here](#).