

When to Cover an Honor with an Honor

Bridge is a challenging game and defense is the most difficult element of it. This lesson will cover one of the common defensive principles: "Cover an Honor with an Honor."

In itself, this is pretty good advice but we can improve on that with some study. We must remember the bidding at all times. Every deal is different, but we will look at some circumstances where/when we should cover and others where we should not.

Ultimately the decision to cover comes down to whether we can see a tangible benefit in doing so. If covering can never gain a trick, we should avoid doing so. If covering cannot cost, we should. Below are some common situations for when to cover and when not to. After that, we will then use some example deals to put our newfound knowledge to good use.

Principle: Do not cover touching sequences until the last one is played. If you do not see the card behind it you MUST cover to promote a trick in partners hand.

Do Not Cover When ...

- *Only cover the last of visible touching honors.* Example:

♠ QJ93
♠ T82 ♠ K54
♠ A76

The Q♠ is led from the North hand. The QJ♠ are "touching" honors. Since the J♠ is visible, East should not cover the Q♠. If East covers the Q♠, South wins the A♠, can finesse dummy's 9♠ and take 4 tricks.

- *When the opponents have known length.* Example:

♠ A6543
♠ K7 ♠ ---
♠ QJT982

Let's say declarer has opened 2♠ and the opponents are in 4♠. South leads the Q♠ from hand. Should we cover? Remember the bidding. South has advertised 6♠s and dummy has 5 more. Covering simply cannot gain. Play low and hope declarer goes up with the A♠ (to drop the K♠ in W).

- *When a short honor is visible / expected.* Example:

♠ A3
♠ K654

South leads the Q♠ from the closed hand. Dummy has a "short honor" in ♠s. The A♠ outranks our K♠, but our ♠s are longer than dummy's. This is a harder decision but consider that declarer could have ♠QJT2. Covering the Q♠ gives declarer three ♠ tricks off the top.

Do Cover When ...

- *When we have the immediate lower honors/spots.* Example:

♠ A3
♠ KJT9

Dummy has the same holding as above but if declarer leads the Q♠ we can cover with the king knowing that the JT9♠ will be promoted.

Do Cover When...

- *When we have short honors.* Example:

♣ T3
♣ K862 ♣ J4
♣ AQ975

Declarer at some point gains the lead in dummy and leads the T♣. Should we cover? Yes. The J♣ is going to fall regardless. Covering with the J♣ forces declarer to spend the Q♣ in this example. Partner's 8♣ will be worth a trick by covering. By playing low, partner's K♣ "catches air."

- *Cover the last of visible touching honors.* Example:

♠ QJ93
♠ T82 ♠ K54
♠ A76

We see the first example again with the first trick completed: Q♠, 4 ♠, 6 ♠, 2 ♠. If the J♠ is led, that's the last touching honor, so East covers with the K♠. West's 10♠ wins the third round. Covering the second honor is the only way to prevent declarer from taking four spade tricks.

Some deals we will have to make an educated guess, but by keeping the auction in mind, and asking whether covering can actually gain a trick for the defense, goes a long way in getting those decisions right.

Board 7

South Deals
Both Vul

	♠ K J 7										
	♥ 8 6										
	♦ Q J 10 9										
	♣ 7 6 4 2										
♠ 9 5 2	<table style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto; text-align: center; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 10 8 4 3
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ K J 7 4 3		♥ Q 9 5									
♦ 3 2		♦ K 8 7 6									
♣ K 9 8		♣ Q 10									
	♠ A Q 6										
	♥ A 10 2										
	♦ A 5 4										
	♣ A J 5 3										
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>								
			1 ♣								
Pass	1 ♦	Pass	2 NT								
Pass	3 NT	All pass									

Auction Commentary: Some Wests might make a light 1♥ overall but otherwise the auction from the previous board should be duplicated. With a small doubleton♥, North should prefer a 1♦ response to 1NT. Opener shows the balanced 18-19 again. North knows the partnership has 25-26 HCP, enough to try for game in 3NT.

Opening Lead: 4♥ (Five card suits against notrump contracts are appealing. West has a normal fourth best♦ lead, hoping East can produce a helpful card.)

Planning the Play: Once again, the opponents have found our weak spot. It is often sound strategy to hold up in situations where we hold only an Ace stopper, to limit the defender's communications. With this layout, that is not a critical element to the play.

Our goal is nine tricks. 3♠s, 1♥, 1♦ and 1♣ are ours to start. Our best bet is the♦ suit. If East has the K♦ with three or fewer, that will provide us the extra three tricks needed.

Not only do we need to establish the necessary tricks, we need to have access to them. Say we cross to the K♠ and finesse the Q♦. Then the J♦. Then the 9♦ with East kind enough to produce the K♦ on the third round. Dummy's fourth♦ is our ninth trick, EXCEPT, we can't get there to cash it. We must foresee the need for a late entry and take care in the♠ suit by leading to the J♠. The K♠ then remains as an entry.

This time, provided the defenders do not err, we cannot make our contract.

Planning the Defense: After declarer holds up the♥ suit hoping to exhaust the RHO with no more♥s, he crosses to dummy with the J♠ and plays the Q♦. RHO must NOT cover an honor with an honor when we see the cards behind it. There is nothing to gain. Declarer cannot make 3NT as there are only 8 tricks. 3♠-1♥-3♦-1♣


Takeaways:

Remember the bidding, it often provides us with clues as to declarer's distribution. When setting up tricks, make sure you have the entries needed to enjoy them. This often means taking care earlier in the play. Do NOT cover touching solid honors; the layout tells us it can never gain a trick.

Board 12

West Deals

N-S Vul

	♠ 10 7 5 2		
	♥ 4		
	♦ 7 4 2		
	♣ A K 10 9 6		
♠ A 9 4 ♥ Q J 7 6 5 ♦ K Q J ♣ Q J		♠ Q J 8 ♥ A 10 9 8 ♦ A 10 9 3 ♣ 5 4	
	♠ K 6 3		
	♥ K 3 2		
	♦ 8 6 5		
	♣ 8 7 3 2		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1 NT	Pass	2 ♣	Pass
2 ♥	Pass	4 ♥	All pass

Auction Commentary: Despite holding five ♥s, with 16 HCP and a balanced hand, 1 NT is the better description of the West hand. Opening 1 ♥ gives us a rebid problem over a 1 ♠ response. Stayman finds the ♥ suit and East, with 4 ♥ and 11 HCP simply raises to game.

Opening Lead: A♠ (promising the K♣ behind it) - An AK lead is an appealing option, particularly against suits. We get to see dummy as well as partner's play at trick one and can judge accordingly.

Planning the Play: Our contract is pretty comfortable with solid values and a nice nine card fit. After the opponents take their two ♣ tricks, our hopes will rest on the location of the major suit kings. The first order of business is to draw trump, no reason to risk ruffs. Lead the Q♥ from hand to be able to repeat the finesse if it wins. Win or lose, draw the remaining trumps and lead the Q♠ from dummy. Dummy's ♦s will provide a discard for a low ♠, so we need only two ♠ tricks. Here one finesse works and one doesn't, so 10 tricks.

Planning the Defense: The most common signaling method is standard attitude. "High = Aye" "Low = No". On the A♣ lead, South has no help for clubs and should play the 2♣. If North has AKJx♣ and declarer Qxx♣, we might prefer not to set up declarer's Q♣. North sees the 2♣, but declarer's J♣ suggests cashing a second ♣, catching the Q♣. North would like to make a safe play, but everything is a risk. A ♣ should be ruled out as this is certain to give declarer a "ruff-sluff". Here either red suit is safe, but here nothing North does will matter.

When South wins the K♥ they should be looking for a safe exit, too. In this instance, the trump suit is safe giving declarer nothing. South will have a decision to make when dummy leads the Q♠. Once again we are faced with a decision: to cover or not? Did this position ring a bell? It's our old friend, the last of touching honors. South should play low on the Q♠ and plan to cover the J♠ with the K♠. Covering the Q♠ would allow declarer to lead to dummy's 8♠ if necessary to grab an additional trick. If declarer has the 10♠ nothing is lost.

Takeaways: A "ruff-sluff" is when the defenders lead a suit that both dummy and declarer are void in, against a suit contract, allowing declarer to discard from one hand and ruff in the other. This is generally something to be avoided.

Defensive signals are important on every deal! Even when our holding isn't of interest to us, it often is to partner. ;))