

Splitting Honors

The phrase splitting honors refers to a defender's decision about playing from one of two touching honors when declarer leads a suit. The most common situations are when a defender holds KQ, QJ or JT, with at least three cards in the suit. One of the general defensive principles is "second-hand low," but it can be difficult to know which is best. As with all defensive decisions, the auction and dummy will help us to determine when to split. The most important consideration is whether playing an honor can cost or gain. Some rules:

• We rarely split in the trump suit

It is rarely correct to split honors in the opposing trump suit. It can often resolve a guess for declarer, or worse, cost a trick outright. Remember that declarer cannot see our hand.

Examples:

| | | |
|-----|----------|-------|
| ♠ J | ♠ 543 | ♠ KQ2 |
| | ♠ AT9876 | |

The contract is 4 ♠. Declarer leads the 3 ♠ from dummy. East must play the ♠ 2. If declarer has the AJT♠, we are entitled to only one spade trick either way. Splitting does not help us and can actually cost a trick outright; here crashing partner's J♠.

| | | |
|-----|---------|-------|
| ♠ 3 | ♠ 9654 | ♠ QJ2 |
| | ♠ AKT87 | |

This is another example where splitting is wrong. Holding nine trumps, declarer does best to lead to a high honor in hand and will almost surely do so. By playing the 2 ♠, our QJ♠ will be a certain trick after that. If we play an honor, declarer could change course and finesse against our other honor later. If declarer plays to the T♠ on the first round, hold your cards back.

Exception

Every rule has an exception and there are times where it is best to split. When we want to protect sure tricks, we can split. Typically these are when dummy is short in the trump suit.

| | | |
|-------|----------|-------|
| ♠ 543 | ♠ 2 | ♠ KQT |
| | ♠ AJ9876 | |

This is a situation where East should play the K♠ (or Q♠). East can see they will get two spade tricks for certain this way, since declarer cannot lead the suit any more from dummy. Playing the T♠ allows declarer to insert the J♠.

• Do we have or need quick tricks established?

Splitting honors suggests urgency. Either we want to prevent declarer from establishing a quick trick, or we have tricks of our own to cash. Example:

| | | |
|--------|--------|-------|
| ♠ A654 | ♠ 32 | ♠ QJ7 |
| | ♠ KT98 | |

Declarer leads a spade from dummy. East can consider playing the J♠ or Q♠ immediately. If declarer suspects that West has the A♠ from the bidding, playing low allows declarer to insert the 8♠ and force partner's Ace. Splitting nets the defense two quick tricks.

• **Is the trick apt to go away?**

One of the reasons for playing low with touching honors is that if we are entitled to a trick, we are apt to get it sooner or later. Splitting can help declarer resolve a guess, or even worse, crash an honor in partner's hand. However, sometimes we want to make sure our trick does not run away. We must use the bidding and play to decide. Example:

| | | |
|-------|---------|-------|
| ♠ KQ7 | ♠ AJ983 | ♠ T62 |
| | ♠ 54 | |

Say the contract is 3 NT and declarer wins the opening lead and plays the 4 ♠ from the closed hand. Clearly declarer is hoping to set up ♠s. Playing a ♠ honor in front of dummy might convince declarer that we have the KQ. They can play low on the first spade, finesse the J♠ later and win four total ♠ tricks. By playing low, declarer might well insert the 9♠, losing to West's T♠. Even if they don't, declarer will need to reach dummy (if they are able) separately to enjoy the long spades, and we will still almost certainly get a spade trick.

| | | |
|-------|-------|---------|
| ♠ 962 | ♠ 87 | ♠ KQ543 |
| | ♠ AJT | |

This time the contract is 7 NT and dummy leads a low spade. We don't want declarer to win a second spade trick cheaply so we would want to split in this situation. Taking one trick will suffice.

• **Does splitting give partner helpful information?**

There are times where we can split to give partner helpful information about a suit layout.

| | | |
|-------|--------|-------|
| ♠ A42 | ♠ Q983 | ♠ JT5 |
| | ♠ K76 | |

Declarer leads the 3 ♠ from dummy hoping to develop tricks. We might wish to play a spade honor on the first round, not because we fear declarer will take a deep finesse but in this instance we want to let West know that we have a potential second spade trick for our side. The J♠ or T♠ is not a card we would normally volunteer, so partner can expect us to have both the JT♠ or a singleton. The bidding often helps to distinguish which is most likely. Consider that by you playing low, partner may think declarer has KJx(x)♠, and thus three spade tricks. This may cause partner to make a poor shift.

Another element of splitting honors is a matter of partnership agreement. There is debate on WHICH honor to split with. Some prefer the higher, some the lower. Most important is to recognize the positions where we want to split and be in agreement with partner.

Also note that when holding THREE consecutive honors/cards such as KQJ or QJT it is more attractive to split as it is even less likely to cost. (Usually play the highest one in the series - the one you would lead if you were the leader.) There are still exceptions, such as the opposing trump suit.

Let's look at some full-deal examples and see how we can base our decision.

Board 1

North Deals
None Vul

♠ K 7 6 4
♥ 8 3 2
♦ A J 10 9
♣ A J

♠ —
♥ J 10 9 7
♦ K Q 4 2
♣ 8 5 4 3 2



♠ Q J 10
♥ K Q 5
♦ 8 7 5
♣ 10 9 7 6

♠ A 9 8 5 3 2
♥ A 6 4
♦ 6 3
♣ K Q

| <i>West</i> | <i>North</i> | <i>East</i> | <i>South</i> |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | 1 ♦ | Pass | 1 ♠ |
| Pass | 2 ♠ | Pass | 4 ♠ |
| All pass | | | |

Auction Commentary: After the raise to 2 ♠, South has more than enough for game.

Opening Lead: J♥ promising the 10♥. Don't lead Jx unless x=T. (Unless it's partner's suit.) Leading from a 3-card sequence doesn't rate to give anything away, and if partner has an honor or two, it can establish tricks for the defense. The K♦ might be a consideration with a different auction, but with LHO having opened the suit, that rates to help declarer more than the defense.

Planning the Play: Things are looking good when dummy hits the table. The only danger is if trumps are divided 3-0. Otherwise we have 6 ♠s, a ♥ trick, a ♦ and 2 ♣s off the top. How might declarer succeed when trumps divide unkindly? The only other hope is to discard a losing ♥ on dummy's ♦s. Unfortunately the defense has attacked ♥s, our weakness. We must hope that the defender who wins the ♦ trick does not have a ♥ to cash. To that end, ducking the first trick is our best bet. A **holdup play** is more common in a notrump contract, but it does happen in suit play as well.

Win the 2nd ♥ and test trumps by playing the K♠, then A♠. We need to lead ♦s from hand. Unfortunately the trumps are 3-0. Now a ♦ to the 9♦. We are hoping East has only two ♥s and one of the ♦ honors, but alas... Pinpoint defense will set us but it's the best we can do.

Planning the Defense: East likes the opening lead, but the 5♥ may not appear encouraging. Overtaking the Q♥ sends the right message. While the Q♥ might be a singleton, the auction will generally rule that out, and partner can view it as encouraging. A play of the hand nugget for you: Overtaking an honor is generally an encouraging play.

Takeaways: "Lowest of equals" refers to 3rd hand play when holding touching honors (AK, KQ, QJ) We are helping partner place the missing honors. Playing the higher allows them to "think" that declarer has the lower one. Playing the lower might mean we have the higher.

Make clear signals on defense. If East were to play the 5♥ at trick 1, that might not look encouraging to West ("high = aye").

When everything looks rosy as declarer, consider what holdings might cause us trouble. A 3-0 trump split here is what declarer needs to fear! Ask yourself "what can go wrong?"

Board 12West Deals
N-S Vul

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

Auction Commentary: After West's textbook 1 NT opener, South has an attractive suit and a good hand and bids 2 ♠. No one else has anything to add.

Opening Lead: Q♥ Another attractive sequence lead combining safety and an attacking element. We want to avoid leading from Aces versus suits, particularly against part-scores. We prefer our Aces capture an enemy honor.

Planning the Play: Counting losers, there are 2 ♥s, 1-2 ♦s, the Ace of trump, and a ♣. Initially the plan would be to hope the A♦ is with East, then our K♦ will be the eighth trick. Declarer must also remember the bidding. The Q♥ lead places East with the K♥. Basic arithmetic tells us that West must have the A♦ to be able to open 1 NT. Rather than try something we know will lose, we can hope that the ♦ position is as above, and that we can catch East napping when leading a ♦ from dummy. If they play low, ♦ we'll try the T♦.

Planning the Defense: East likes the opening lead and can encourage with the 9♥ at trick one. The 9 is clearly high, so West should have no trouble reading that card. West can expect partner to hold the K♥ for that play. West can see he has most of the defensive assets. The goal should be to avoid giving declarer anything for free. ♣s and ♥s are safe. West should avoid panicking and cashing the A♦, as dummy offers nowhere to put ♦ losers.

East must be paying close attention as well. The defense knocks out the A♥ and is able to cash their winners and put declarer in dummy with a ♣. A low ♦ is next. Should East split? The defenders need only 2 ♦ tricks at this point. Remember the bidding. West has shown up with 11 HCP so far and must have the A♦ to get up to 15. Ducking risks losing a trick. We might well duck with this holding in a different situation, but here we have an immediate need for tricks. Split.

Takeaways:

Remember the bidding. There are often clues out there to help both declarer and the defenders.

The decision to split is often based on urgency. That's why we rarely do so in the trump suit, as our trump tricks will not disappear. If we have/need fast tricks it's more attractive to split. That's the case here, because EW need two fast ♦ tricks.