

DECLARER'S PLAY FROM DUMMY AT TRICK 1

When a defender is on lead, the declaring side will be playing second to the trick. Should they play high or low? Should they cover an honour with an honour?

There's no simple answers to these questions. The purpose of this handout is to provide some examples and general principles. We'll only be looking at one suit at a time, but will point out situations where the choice of play might be affected by the rest of the hand.

We'll concentrate on the play at trick 1, starting with low card leads and following up with leads of honour cards. For each example suit we first consider the issues at NT, then discuss whether there's any difference for a suit contract.

For simplicity we'll assume that South is the declarer, thus making North the dummy. This makes it easier to refer to the opening leader (West) or his partner (East).

Declarer's objectives when playing from dummy at trick 1

Whether playing in NT or a suit contract declarer's main objective at trick 1 is usually to make as many tricks as possible in the suit led. He'll often have better prospects than if he was leading the suit himself because West's opening lead of a low card might have been away from an honour and thereby given a trick away. Even the lead of a high card might sometimes weaken West's holding and allow declarer to make a trick that he wouldn't otherwise have made.

At a NT contract declarer should also try to make it difficult for the defence to establish and then cash winners. At a suit contract declarer will also usually try to minimise immediate losers in the suit.

The opening lead at NT is usually from a long suit that might include the ace. The opening lead at a suit contract can also be from a short suit and will also virtually never include the ace.

If West's opening lead is from a suit bid by East, South might be able to deduce that West is short in the suit. If so, he should give serious consideration to winning the first trick in order to prevent West from ruffing the next round.

WHEN THE OPENING LEAD IS A LOW CARD

Generally play 2nd hand low

There is a proverb: “third hand high, second hand low”. This advice is mainly aimed at defenders, but it often applies to the declaring side too.

North J 4	When West leads a low card declarer guarantees one trick for his side by playing low from dummy. It's possible that South will be allowed to win the first trick with his queen. East will often prevent this by playing the ace or king, but now dummy's jack and declarer's queen will be equals against the remaining high honour.
South Q 6 2	

It would be a serious mistake to contribute dummy's jack on the first round, especially at NT. If the missing ace and king were in different hands East would win the first trick and lead through South's remaining Q6 and the defenders would win at least the first four tricks.

North K 4	When West leads a low card at NT South makes sure of a trick (and a stopper) by playing North's 4. Playing the king would be very costly if East holds the ace and West the queen. At a suit contract East is virtually certain to hold the ace, so the only chance of avoiding two quick losers in the suit is to play low from dummy. Nothing is lost if East holds both the ace and queen.
South J 6 2	

North K 4	When West leads a low card South guarantees two tricks for his side by playing North's 4. Playing the king would cost a trick whenever West held the jack. (It might cost several tricks at a NT contract if West has AJxxx and East has an entry to lead through South's queen.
South Q 10 2	

North A 4	When West leads the jack or any lower card declarer ensures two tricks by playing low from dummy. Either his queen wins the first trick or East wins with the king and declarer has two tricks to come. Playing dummy's ace would be costly if West held the king, especially if East had an entry to led through declarer's queen.
South Q 6 2	

If East has bid the suit it might sometimes be right to play North's ace at a suit contract in case the opening lead is a singleton. This also applies to the next two suit combinations.

North A Q 4
South J 6 2

Declarer will always win at least two tricks here, regardless of his play from North at trick 1. But if West holds the king (not unlikely at a NT contract) playing the 4 will allow declarer to win the first trick with the jack and subsequently finesse dummy's queen to make three tricks in the suit. If declarer plays the queen at trick 1 he won't make a third trick in the suit because West will cover South's jack with his king to promote a defender's 10.

North A Q 4
South 10 6 2

This is a trickier situation. In general it will be best for dummy to play low, which gains a trick whenever West holds the jack. If he holds the king and not the jack declarer will still make two tricks by finessing dummy's queen later.

At a NT contract it might sometimes be right to play the queen if there's danger from a switch to another suit. At a suit contract the queen could be right if declarer can later discard a loser on another suit.

When South has four cards in the suit led it can be even more important to play low from dummy at trick 1:

North K 4
South Q 9 8 2

West leads the 5 against a NT contract. It might look natural to play dummy's king, but if East started with Ax or Axx declarer will finish with only one trick in the suit. If he plays dummy's 4 he'll easily make two tricks against these holdings. East is more likely to contribute the 10 or jack at trick 1, but South wins with the queen and can now use the remaining K98 to build up a second trick in the suit.

Sometimes play North's higher card from a doubleton

So far we've seen several examples where it's right to play North's lower card from a doubleton because the higher card combines well with South's holding. But sometimes this isn't the case and the only way to make use of North's higher card is to try to win the first trick with it. Here are some examples:

North Q 4
South A 6 2

If East holds the king he won't play it on North's 4, so declarer must hope that West has led away from the king and try dummy's queen.

North
J 4
South
A Q 2

Declarer should make exactly two tricks in this suit whether he plays high or low from North. Even so, at NT it's right to play dummy's jack. If this holds the trick and declarer can keep East off lead his remaining AQ will provide two stoppers. If not, playing the jack has probably cost nothing.

North
J 9
South
A 6 2

West leads the 5 against a NT contract. Declarer's only chance of a second trick in the suit is to play dummy's jack, hoping that West has led away from KQ. There's no point in trying dummy's 9 because even if this forces out East's queen or king dummy's jack will still fall underneath the remaining high honour.

Often play North's middle card as a free finesse

North
Q 10 4
South
K 5 2

West leads the 3 against a NT contract. He'll normally have either the jack or the ace and South caters for both holdings by playing dummy's 10. If East covers with the jack South wins in hand and retains dummy's queen over West's ace. If declarer plays dummy's 4 East will play the 9 from J9x and also perhaps from A9x, in which case South has left himself with a guess on the second round.

North
J 9 4
South
A Q 2

West leads the 6. If this lead is away from the king it doesn't really matter how declarer plays because he'll always make exactly two tricks in the suit. But if West has led away from the 10 South can make three tricks by inserting dummy's 9. If he plays low East might decide to withhold the king after which the suit is frozen, in that neither side can play a second round without giving away a trick.

Sometimes trick 1 play is dictated by the rest of the hand

North
A J 4
South
K 5 2

This example could have been placed in the previous section, but is shown here because the best play is less obvious. If making a third trick in this suit is one of several possibilities to make the contract (or avoid a loser in the suit) declarer should try dummy's jack at trick 1. If not, playing low from dummy will often be better because it keeps better control of the hand if East has the queen and West has no immediate entry.

Now let's consider the following situation:

North Q 6 4	If the suit is considered in isolation it doesn't matter whether South plays low or high from dummy. He'll always make two tricks if West has the king and only one if East has it.
South A 5 2	If declarer want to win two tricks in the suit without losing one first he should play dummy's queen, but this leaves the suit wide open if East covers with the king. If West can be kept off lead it's often better to play low from dummy because dummy's queen would then prevent the opponents from cashing two tricks in the suit. Declarer can always lead towards dummy's queen later if he wants to establish a second trick in the suit.

North K 4	West leads the queen against a suit contract. Most of the time it won't matter how declarer plays because he can't win a trick in the suit and a second round might be led anyway. But sometimes defenders will take the opportunity to switch to another suit. If the NS holding in the suit is vulnerable to an attack from East declarer should play low from dummy. If an attack from West would be more damaging then declarer should cover with dummy's king.
South 2	

WHEN THE OPENING LEAD IS AN HONOUR

Often play 2nd hand low

The opening lead of an honour normally promises the card below and denies the card above, so declarer can use this information to plan the play of the suit. He'll often want to retain dummy's high card until later, whether or not he has a high card in hand.

An honour lead might sometimes be a singleton or the higher card from a doubleton. This won't usually be the case, but becomes quite likely if East has bid the suit.

North K 10 4	When West leads the queen declarer places him with QJ9, perhaps with some smaller cards. Leading from this holding carries some risk and South takes full advantage by winning the first trick with the ace. At some stage he can finesse dummy's 10 to make all three tricks in the suit.
South A 5 2	

North
K 7 4
South
Q 9 2

West leads the jack. If East hasn't bid the suit West will normally have the 10, so covering with dummy's king can't achieve anything. East has the ace he'll win the first trick and return the suit to set up West's 10. If declarer plays dummy's 4 he'll probably be allowed to win the first trick with the queen, after which the suit is frozen.

If West has led from AJ10 (at a NT contract) playing the king is an even more costly mistake.

The situation is entirely different if East has bid the suit. Now West's opening lead is likely to be from Jx, in which case it's essential to cover with dummy's king. When East wins with the ace South retains Q9 over East's 10. If South plays low from dummy East will also play low, leaving him with A10 over dummy's queen.

When South has no high cards in the suit it's still usually right to play low from dummy at trick 1. Here is a typical suit layout:

North
K 7 4 3
South
5 2

West leads the queen against a suit contract. Placing East with the ace South plays low from dummy and does the same at trick 2 if the suit is continued. He might now be able to ruff out East's ace and score dummy's king. Against NT South should still play low from dummy at trick 1, but he might sometimes want to try the king at trick 2. If West has led from AQJx he'll switch to another suit and dummy's king will no longer be worth a trick.

CONCLUSION

The proverb "second hand low" is a good one for declarer to remember, but it doesn't always apply at trick 1. Declarer must consider how to make the best of the opening lead and the correct approach is sometimes dictated by the situation in other suits. It's therefore important for declarer to make a plan before playing to the first trick.

Now test your skill with some practice hands on declarer's play from dummy at trick 1:

[Level 1 hands](#)

[Level 2 hands](#)

[Level 3 hands](#)