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Third Hand Play to Opening Lead

Partner has made the opening lead and you can see the dummy. Now you need to evaluate the hand, how the defense is likely to work, and help partner by giving him information by the card you play to this trick.

If partner has led a low card, he probably has an honor in the suit. If you have an honor as well you should probably play it (third hand high, remember), unless you can tell from the dummy that partner does not have an honor.

For example:

Partner leads the 2, dummy has Jxx, and you have the Q. Play the queen, and if it holds, lead back the suit. If declarer plays the A, partner's K is now good.

Partner leads the 4, dummy has AQxx, and you have KJ10x. Cover the queen if it is played, otherwise the 10.

Always play the **lower(est)** of touching honors. (This is the opposite of the opening leaders card choice. For some reason this seems to cause enormous confusion even for players who are not exactly new.) The reason for this is that it allows partner to infer the situation in the suit from what declarer plays to win the trick (if they can). For example, you lead fourth best from Jxxx, dummy has two small, and partner plays the Q. If declarer plays small, it is a reasonable (although not certain deduction) that partner also has the K (and maybe the A). But suppose that partner does hold the KQ, and plays the K on trick 1. Now you have to assume that declarer has the Q, because the play of the K denies a touching lower honor. (Partner might have the A – when following to partner's lead, play the lowest of touching honors.)

A few examples:

Partner leads the 4, dummy has AQxx, and you have KJ109. Cover the queen if it is played, otherwise the 9. (Playing the J would deny having the 10.) When your 9 holds the trick, partner will know declarer does not have any hearts higher than the 8.

Partner leads a small card, and you have QJ10x. Unless dummy plays the A or K, play

the 10. Partner should at least suspect that you have the J and maybe the Q also.

Partner leads a small card, dummy plays small, and you have KQx. Play the Q. Playing the K would deny possession of the Q.

Partner leads a small card, dummy plays small, and you have AKx. Play the K, which denies possession of the Q. Playing the A would deny possession of the K.

If you do not have an honor, and cannot beat the card that dummy plays, then you need to send partner a signal by the card you choose to play. There are three types of signals:

- Attitude (would I like this suit to be continued?)
- Count (how many cards in the suit do I have?)
- Suit Preference (which suit would I like to see you switch to?)

But how do you and partner know which kind of signal it is? **The rule is that attitude comes first, then count, and only if neither attitude nor count make sense, then suit preference.** In other words, if the situation allows the signal to be attitude, partner will assume it is. Only if it is clear that an attitude signal is impossible should partner interpret the signal as count. Only if neither of these is possible should your card to the first trick be considered suit preference.

Some examples will help clarify this.

1. Partner leads the 4 (implying an honor) dummy plays the ten, and you have 9,6,3. You play the three as attitude (I have nothing in this suit, partner). Your play of the three does not say anything about count, because it can be (and is) attitude.

2. Partner leads the 4 (implying an honor), dummy plays the A, and you have Q 9 3. You play the 9 to show interest in the suit. Your play of the 9 is attitude, not count.

3. Partner leads the A (promising the K also) and dummy shows the Qxx, and you have 9,6 in the suit. You play the 9 to show count. How does partner know it is count and not attitude? Because he can see the A, K, & Q, so you cannot possibly have a good holding in the suit. Therefore, your signal must be count, because it cannot be attitude. Remember that with an even number of cards in the suit, you play high-low, and with an odd number of cards you play the lowest one first to show count.

4. Dummy

S-KQxx H-x D-Qxxx C-xxxx Contract is 4 Spades

Partner			You
Leads Heart A	S-xxx	H-963	D-AKJx C-xxx

Clearly there can be no point in continuing hearts, because dummy will ruff. Partner cannot possibly care about your attitude or count with respect to hearts. It is clear a switch is required, but partner needs your help to decide which of the remaining 2 suits you want him to lead. You really want a diamond lead (the higher ranking of the two remaining suits, so you play the 9 on the A of heart lead.

Similarly, with the same dummy and lead as before, you have:

S-xxx H-963 D-xxxx C-AKx

Now you really want a club lead, so you play the 3 to indicate that you want partner to lead the lower ranking of the remaining two suits.

Finally, if you have:

S-Axx H-963 D-xxxx C-xxx

Now you don't care which suit is led, so you play the 6 to say you have no preference, and partner should do whatever he thinks best.

Of course, you will not always have the perfect cards to send a clear signal. If you are dealt the 4,3,2, you will have to play the 4 if you want the higher-ranking side suit and hope that partner can figure it out. Similarly if you have the 3,2, and want to give count, you have to play the 3 and hope partner will notice the 2 is missing. If you have been dealt the 9,8,7 of a suit and want to discourage, the seven is the best you can do. With luck partner can see the 6,5,4,3,2 and realize it is your lowest card.