

Esther Discusses "When Should *Second Hand*, in Fact, NOT Play 'Low'?"

Bruce Thompson

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<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

Esther: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will discuss "**When Should *Second Hand* in Fact NOT Play 'Low'?**"

Bruce: Well, Esther, thank you for talking to us today.

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

Bruce: Errr, very sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Well, I must admit, I am *QUITE* confused. I thought bridge was a competitive game strictly governed by principles. For example, "Eight ever-Nine never"! Isn't "**Second Hand Low**" one of the most *senior, Cardinal Principles* of all the *numerous, many, numerous* bridges **Cardinal Bridge Principles?**

Esther: Well, my *Malodorous Misanthrope*, bridge is indeed a game of *senior, Cardinal Principles*! However, Bruce, bridge is also a game of **NUMEROUS EXCEPTIONS** to *senior, Cardinal Principles*! One of the most influential bridge experts of modern times was Alan Truscott.¹ Truscott wrote the daily bridge column for the New York Times for 41 years, from 1964 to 2005, and served as Executive Editor for the first six editions of The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge from

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¹ Alan Truscott's 1990 "Pastimes" bridge columns are available in digital form, *free* to NYT subscribers, in the NYT digital archives:

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>

1964 to 2002. On August 18, 1973, Truscott published a column titled, "Second-Hand High Can Mean Partners Finish Second Best", in which he wisely noted, although *generally* Second Hand *should* play low, "It is, of course, possible to carry a good principle too far." [emphasis added] So, there are indeed exceptions to the bridge *Cardinal Principle*, "**Second Hand Low**". Here, I cover a *few* of these exceptions.

It is somewhat frustrating that bridge is a game of so *many exceptions* to **Cardinal Principles**! But, in fact, this is exactly what makes bridge so fascinating, challenging, and FUN!

Reasons For Playing "Second Hand Low"²

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, could you first briefly review some of the reasons for playing "**second Hand low**", before you discuss possible *exceptions* to this Cardinal Bridge Principle?

Saving Your Ace Sitting Second When an Opponent Leads "Low"

Esther: Well, my *Simpering Simpleton*, of course. Let's say, **first**, that Declarer leads "low", and sitting second you hold the Ace:

	NORTH	
	D: Q 6 3	
YOU		EAST
D: A T 7 5		D: J 8 4
DECLARER		
	SOUTH	
	D: K 9 2	

If you play your Ace sitting second, N/S will drop their 2 and 3, and N/S will not have lost *any* Honors, and also you now have "promoted" both their King and Queen into "winners". Your Ace has failed its primary duty to "kill" an Opponent's Honor, preferably a King!

Alternatively, if you play your 5, Declarer SOUTH will likely play his Queen in the NORTH Dummy. And *now* as WEST you are sitting "behind" Declarer SOUTH's King, and so you are well-positioned to capture SOUTH's King! Of course, the

² These examples are modified from those on the "nofearbridge.co.uk" website.

same situation obtains if Declarer is leading from Dummy, and you are sitting second holding the Ace!

Bruce: Errr, well, is there any other reason **for** generally playing "**second Hand low**"?

Giving Opponents Every, Possible Opportunity to Make a Mistake

Esther: Well, my *Bodacious Bupkus*, a very important **Cardinal Bridge Principle** is that (1) bridge is a game of "mistakes", (2) you will win when you make *fewer* mistakes than your Opponents, and (3) you always want to afford your Opponents *every, single, possible* opportunity to make mistakes.

	NORTH	
	D: K J 7	
YOU		EAST
D: A 9 5		D: Q T 6 4 3
	DECLARER	
	SOUTH	
	D: 8 2	

If Declarer SOUTH leads the 2, and you sitting second WEST play your 5, the Declarer may play his Jack, which your Partner sitting 4th as EAST, may overtake with his Queen. Of course, in the *unlikely* event that Declarer plays Dummy's 7, EAST can then overtake with his Ten! *Give your Opponents the opportunities to make mistakes!*

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, it sounds like playing "**second Hand low**" is *definitely* the way to go. Is that correct?

Esther: Well, Bruce, usually, yes! But playing "**second Hand low**" will not inevitably work to your benefit 100% of the time. I would estimate that playing "**second Hand low**" is best about **70 to 80%** of the time. And there are *exceptions* when you should indeed not play "**second Hand low**"!

Reasons For NOT Playing "Second Hand Low"³

³ Ralph Welton has an *excellent* computerized, web-based Practice Activity about playing "**second Hand low**" on his *excellent* "**Bridge Bears**" website:
<https://www.bridgebears.com/bridge-card-game/defense/secondhand.html>

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what are some cases when sitting second one should not play "**second Hand low**"?

Exception #1: Even Sitting Second, Cover an Honor with an Honor, Usually!

Esther: Well, my *Dandruff-ridden Dufus*, the most common exception involves the Bridge Principle, "**Even Sitting Second, Cover an Honor with an Honor, Usually!**" As Larry Cohen says, "The old saying for defense is: '**Second Hand Low, Third Hand High**'... The major exception is 'cover an [H]onor with an [H]onor' (which has exceptions). Don't you just love bridge?"⁴

Bruce: OK, Est... Errr..., I mean, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What are these "*Exceptions to the Exceptions*" to the General Cardinal Bridge Principle to "**Cover an Honor with an Honor**"?

Exception "A" to Exception #1: **Do Not "Cover" if Covering Will Not "Promote" Cards in Partner's Hand!**

Esther: Well, Bruce, Exception "A" to Exception #1 is: **Do Not "Cover" if Covering Will Not "Promote" Cards in Partner's Hand!** Declarer SOUTH leads his Jack. The cards held by you sitting WEST and the NORTH Dummy are:

	Dummy
	NORTH
	A K T 9
YOU	
WEST	
Q 8 7 4 3	

As Cohen says with respect similar holdings in his example, playing your Queen on these holdings will not promote any cards held by your Partner sitting EAST. Because these 2 Hands hold 9 of the 13 cards in the Suit, including the top 4 of the Suit's top 5 Honors, and the Declarer leading the

⁴ See Larry Cohen's very succinct web article, [Defense—2nd Hand Play](https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/defense-2nd-hand-play):
<https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/defense-2nd-hand-play>

Jack, there are simply no cards left to "promote" in Partner EAST's Hand.⁵

Bruce: OK, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What is Exception "B" to Exception #1 to the **General Bridge Principle** to play "cover an Honor with an Honor"?

Exception "B" to Exception #1: **If You See High "Touching Honors" in Dummy, or Suspect that Declarer Holds High "Touching Honors", "Cover an Honor with an Honor" the Second Time an Honor is Led, and Not the First Time!**

Esther: Well, Bruce, Exception "B" to Exception #1 is: **If You See High "Touching Honors" in Dummy, or Suspect that Declarer Holds High "Touching Honors", "Cover an Honor with an Honor" the Second Time an Honor is Led, and Not the First Time!** For example, if Declarer leads the Dummy NORTH's Queen, and the cards held in the Suit in the 4 Hands are:

	Dummy	
	NORTH	
	Q J 8	
		YOU
		EAST
WEST		K 7 4
T 9 5 3		
	Declarer	
	SOUTH	
	A 6 2	

EAST should suspect that Declarer SOUTH holds the Ace, but once WEST does not play the Ace on Trick #1, then EAST is certain that SOUTH holds the Ace. EAST should "duck" the Queen led first, then once the NORTH Dummy's Jack is led, "cover" the second time, which will force SOUTH to play his Ace, and "promote" remaining "winners" in Partner WEST's Hand, by effectively spending one of your Honors, the King, to knock out 2 of Opponents' Top Honors, the Jack and the Ace, on a single Trick!

⁵ Cohen suggested that if the Dummy NORTH instead held A,K,9, then covering would be appropriate, because Partner may hold the Ten, which could be "promoted".

Exception #2: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Kill
Declarer's "Entry" to a Long Suit in Dummy⁶

Dealer: **SOUTH**

	NORTH (7)	
	S: 6 4	
	H: A K T 9 5	
	D: 9 4 2	
	C: 6 5 2	
YOU		
WEST (11)		EAST (1)
S: K Q J 8 3		S: T 7 2
H: Q 6		H: J 8 7 3
D: K 3		D: T 8 7 5
C: T 8 4 3		C: 9 7
	SOUTH (21)	
	S: A 9 5	
	H: 4 2	
	D: A Q J 6	
	C: A K Q J	

Bidding

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2NT	PASS	3D!	PASS
3NT	PASS	PASS	PASS

You sitting WEST lead the Spade King, Declarer SOUTH on his **3NT** contract plays the Dummy's Spade 4. EAST, because E/W are playing "inverted" or "Upside Down Attitude" (U.D.A.), plays his Spade 7, denying holding an Honor. Declarer SOUTH once Dummy comes down, sees 7 "Quick Tricks", and possibly more if SOUTH is sitting "behind" EAST holding the missing Honors. Declarer SOUTH, following the "**Rule of 7**", subtracts **2** Spades in Dummy + **3** Spades in his Hand, subtracts 2 + 3 = **5** from 7, and since 7 - 5 = **2**, decides he will "duck" **2** Rounds of Spades. Declarer SOUTH then takes the **#3** Spade Trick with his Ace.

⁶ The remaining examples are modified from those in John Blakeship's excellent article on the <https://www.northerncoloradobridge.com> website, "Exceptions to Third Hand High and Second Hand Low", which obviously *also* covers exceptions to the "**Third Hand High**" principle.

Contract: 3NT SOUTH

		NORTH (7)								
	S:	6	4							
		2	1							
	H:	A	K	T	9	5				
					4					
	D:	9	4	2						
				5						
	C:	6	5	2						
				3						
YOU										
	WEST (11)				EAST (1)					
S:	K	Q	J	8	3	S:	T	7	2	
	1	2			3		3	1	2	
H:	Q	6				H:	J	8	7	3
		4					4			
D:	K	3				D:	T	8	7	5
		5								5
C:	T	8	4	3		C:	9	7		
YOU										
SOUTH (21)										
S:	A	9	5							
		3	2	1						
H:	4	2								
		4								
D:	A	Q	J	6						
		5								
C:	A	K	Q	J						

Note. "Winning" Tricks are presented in **bold red**. The numbers in *italics* designate the Trick number for each Trick #1 - #5.

On Trick #4, Declarer SOUTH then leads his Heart 2. **Should you sitting WEST play "second Hand low" and "duck" with the Heart 6, or go "up" with the Heart Queen?**

WEST plays "second Hand low" on SOUTH's led Heart 2. If you sitting WEST "play low" with your Heart 6, Declarer SOUTH may then play Dummy NORTH's Heart 9, and EAST will "win" with his Heart Jack. If EAST then returns his Diamond 5, thinking that WEST may hold some of the missing Diamond Honors he does not hold, or see in the NORTH Dummy, Declarer SOUTH then play his Diamond Ace, leaving WEST holding the Diamond King.

N/S have now lost 3 of the 5 first Tricks, and won 2 of the 5 first Tricks. On Trick #6 Declarer SOUTH can now lead his Heart 4 to Dummy's A,K, and once he does so will also win the Heart

Ten. NORTH Dummy then leads the Club 5 to "cash" Declarer's 4 Club "winners" for a total of $2 + 3 + 4 = 9$ Tricks.

If WEST does not play "second Hand low" on Declarer SOUTH's led Heart 2 on Trick #4. Alternatively, if WEST plays "second Hand HIGH" on Declarer SOUTH's Heart 2, by playing his Heart Queen, Declarer SOUTH will "cover" the Heart Queen with Dummy's Heart Ace or King, because Declarer SOUTH will want to try to prevent WEST "cashing" 2 more Spade Tricks. Declarer SOUTH will then be tempted to lead a small Diamond from Dummy NORTH to try a Diamond finesse through EAST, and play the Declarer SOUTH's Diamond Jack, which WEST will win with his Diamond King. WEST will also then "cash" his 2 remaining Spade "winners", the Spade Jack and 8, for a total of $2 + 1 + 2 = 5$ Tricks, contract down 1.

If the Declarer SOUTH is not greedy, does not finesse on the Diamond lead, and Declarer SOUTH instead plays his Diamond Ace, Declarer SOUTH can then Lead to Dummy's 3 Spade winners, return to Declarer SOUTH's Hand, and take his 4 Club "winners", for a total of $2 + 3 + 4 = 9$ Tricks, contract making. But most N/S teams will be especially tempted to try that Diamond finesse, because when WEST shows 3 Top Spade Honors, the odds are strongly that EAST ought to hold several Honors, notwithstanding the fact that on this Board EAST is a "bust" Hand!

Exception #3: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Preserve Precious Entries to Partner's "Long" Suit Holdings

Dealer: **WEST**

	NORTH (12)	
	S: 8 7 4	
	H: 8 5	
	D: A K Q	
	C: Q J T 8 3	
WEST (7)		YOU
S: Q J T 9 3 2		EAST (5)
H: T 4 2		S: 6 5
D: 6 3		H: J 9 7 3
C: A 6		D: J 8 7 2
		C: K 9 7
	SOUTH (16)	
	S: A K	
	H: A K Q 6	
	D: T 9 5 4	
	C: 5 4 2	

Bidding

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2s ⁷	3C	PASS	3NT
PASS	PASS	PASS	

Declarer SOUTH wins Tricks #1 when WEST leads his Spade Queen, and SOUTH plays his Spade King. On Trick #2 Declarer SOUTH then plays the Diamond 4 toward Dummy NORTH's 3 Diamond A,K,Q "winners". On Trick #3, Declarer then leads his Club Queen from the top of his 3 "touching Honors".

Sitting EAST, should you violate the "second Hand low" commandment, and play your Club King, or "duck" with your Club 7? Here, you **must** play your Club King "second Hand HIGH"! You know that Partner WEST now holds 5 remaining Spades. You need to protect your Partner's hopefully-held Club Ace "side Suit entry", so that Partner WEST can possibly later re-gain the lead, and run those long Spades. If Partner WEST does not hold the Club Ace, your Partnership is probably "up the proverbial creek" anyway, so you **must** play your Partner for holding the Club Ace. *When there is only one way to play for a positive outcome, then that is the way that you **must** play!*

In this case, sitting EAST once your Club King "wins" Trick #3, lead your 1 remaining Spade 6 on Trick #4, and "knock out" Declarer SOUTH's Ace. You expect that WEST holds the Club Ace, because Declarer SOUTH did not "overtake" your Club King when he played "low" on your King. Hopefully Partner WEST can later play the Club Ace, and do horrific damage to N/S with his remaining 4 Spade "winners". N/S will take 2 Spades, 3 Hearts, 3 Diamonds, for a total in these Suits of 2 + 3 + 3 = **8** Tricks. Either you as EAST will eventually gain the lead with your Diamond Jack, or your Heart Jack, and can lead your Club 7 back to WEST. Or N/S may stumble with a Club lead to WEST's Ace!

⁷ WEST quite correctly is making a 2-level preempt bid, promising Partner (1) 6+ Spades including either (a) 2 of the Top 3 Spades, or 3 of the Top 5 Spades, and (2) a "weak" Hand. Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Lesson #24: 2-Level Preempts and Responses Thereto".

Exception #4: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Prevent Declarer from "Endplaying" Your Partner

Dealer: **WEST**

	NORTH (9)	
	S: Q 9 8 3	
	9 3 2	
	H: 9 7	
	5 4	
	D: 6 4 3 2	
	6	
	C: A K 3	
	1 7 8	
WEST (14)		YOU EAST (1)
S: J 6		S: 7 2
3 2		3 2
H: A T 8 3		H: 6 5 4 2
4 6 5		9 6 5 4
D: A Q T		D: J 7 5
C: Q J 8 7		C: T 6 5 2
1 9 8 7		1 8 7
	SOUTH (16)	
	S: A K T 5 4	
	2 3 9 8	
	H: K Q J	
	6 5 4	
	D: K 9 8	
	C: 9 4	
	1 7	

Bidding

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1 C	PASS	PASS	1 S
2 H	3 S	PASS	4 S
PASS	PASS	PASS	

On Trick #1, WEST leads the Club Queen, which Declarer SOUTH "overtakes" in the SOUTH Dummy with his Club Ace. EAST plays his Club 6, possibly suggesting that EAST holds an "equal Honor" in Clubs. Declarer draws all trump Spades on Tricks #2 and #3 playing his Spade A,K to preserve the NORTH's Spade Queen as an extra entry to Dummy. On Trick #4, Declarer SOUTH then leads the

Heart Jack which WEST takes with his Heart Ace. WEST then leads his Heart 3, and on Tricks #5 and #6 Declarer SOUTH "cashes" his Heart K,Q. On Trick #7, Declarer SOUTH leads his Club 4, which he takes in the NORTH Dummy with his Club King. On Trick #8 Declarer leads the Dummy NORTH's Club 3, which Declarer SOUTH ruffs with his Spade 4. On Trick #9 Declarer SOUTH leads his Trump Spade Ten, which he wins in the NORTH Dummy with the Spade Queen.

On Trick #1- Declarer leads the NORTH Dummy's Diamond 3. Do you sitting EAST follow the edit "**second Hand low**", and play your Diamond 5? You as E/W have taken 1 Trick so far: the Trick #4 Heart Ace. To set SOUTH's 4S contract, you must take 3 Diamond Tricks. You must play your Diamond Jack on Trick #10.

If you WEST do not play the Diamond Jack on Trick #11, Declarer SOUTH will play his Diamond 8, which WEST will win with his Diamond Ten. That's the "good news". The "bad news" is that by playing "**second Hand low**" you have now "endplayed" your Partner, EAST! WEST playing "low" on Trick #10 means that SOUTH will definitely "cash" his Diamond King. N/S will then exactly make their 4S contract, and E/W win only 2 Diamond Tricks, because EAST when *instead* by playing "high" with your Diamond Jack you could have set the N/S Game-level contract by -1!

Exception #5: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Prevent Declarer from "Manufacturing" an "Extra" Trick Using Trickery

Dealer: WEST

	NORTH (10)	
	S: J T 9 3	
	H: 8 6	
	D: Q 6 3	
	C: A Q J 5	
WEST (6)		YOU EAST (6)
S: 8 6 2		S: A 7 4
H: A Q 9 7 3		H: J T 4
D: 9 4		D: J T 7 5 2
C: 7 4 3		C: 9 2
	SOUTH (18)	
	S: K Q 5	
	H: K 5 2	
	D: A K 8	
	C: K T 8 6	

Bidding

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1NT	PASS	2C	PASS
2D	PASS	3NT	PASS
PASS	PASS		

On Trick #1 your Partner, WEST, leads his Heart 7, the 4th card from the top of his "longest and strongest" Suit. You sitting EAST play your Heart Ten, which Declarer SOUTH "overtakes" with his Heart King. On Trick #2 Declarer leads his Club 6 to enter the NORTH Dummy. Declarer SOUTH then leads the Spade Jack from Dummy, the top of 3 "touching honors", in the hopes of "promoting" Spades, or faking you into "ducking" "**second Hand Low**" in the expectation that this is a finesse toward SOUTH's Ace, which is actually held by EAST.

Sitting EAST, should you play your Spade 4 "**second Hand low**", or go "up" with your Spade Ace? You as EAST know that Declarer SOUTH has denied holding a 4-card Major. You also know that Partner WEST is leading 4th from the "top" of his "longest and strongest" Suit, Hearts. Using the "**Rule of 11**", you subtract 7 from 11 = 4, which means that NORTH, EAST, and SOUTH together hold exactly 4 cards higher than the 7. Once Dummy comes down, you see that Dummy NORTH holds 1 card higher than the Heart 7. You hold 2 cards higher than the Heart 7. Because $4 - 1 - 2 = 1$, you sitting EAST know that Declarer SOUTH has 1 Heart higher than WEST's led 7. And that Heart is the King!

If you "duck" the Spade Jack from the NORTH Dummy, Declarer SOUTH will "duck" in his Hand. The Declarer will know that you sitting EAST hold the Spade Ace. He will in this case next lead the Spade Ten. If you "duck" again, he will then lead the NORTH Dummy Spade 9, and will force you to then "win" with the Spade Ace. Declarer SOUTH has been sucking up gratuitous Spade "winners", while you Partner WEST is sitting there with boatloads of Heart "winners".

Instead, you must go "up" with your Spade Ace on the first Round of Spades led off the Dummy. And immediately then Lead your Heart Jack. Once that "wins", lead your Heart 4, and let WEST then work his remaining Heart magic!

Summary

Bruce: OK, Est... Errr..., I mean, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. That was a lot! Would you briefly summarize all your Major points, to help me digest all this stuff?

Esther: Well, sure, Bruce. Here are the "key" concepts:

Reasons For Playing "Second Hand Low

1. Saving Your Ace Sitting Second When an Opponent Leads "Low", so that you can later "kill" an Opponent's King.
2. Giving Opponents *Every, Possible* Opportunity to Make a Mistake, since when you play "high" you force Opponents to make the "no brainer" choice to simply just "dump" their "losers".

Reasons For NOT Playing "Second Hand Low"

Exception #1: Even Sitting Second, Cover an Honor with an Honor, Usually!

- A. Exception "A" to Exception #1: Do Not "Cover" if Covering Will Not "Promote" Cards in Partner's Hand!
- B. Exception "B" to Exception #1: If You See *High* "Touching Honors" in Dummy, or Suspect that Declarer Holds High "Touching Honors", "Cover an Honor with an Honor" the Second Time an Honor is Led, and Not the First Time!

Exception #2: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Kill Declarer's "Entry" to a Long Suit in Dummy.

Exception #3: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Preserve Precious Entries to Partner's "Long" Suit Holdings.

Exception #4: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Prevent Declarer from "Endplaying" Your Partner.

Exception #5: Even Sitting Second, Play "High" to Prevent Declarer from "Manufacturing" an "Extra" Trick Using Trickery.

Bruce: Thanks so much, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Like Tony the Tiger says on the corn flakes cereal commercial, "You are **GREAT!!!**"

Esther: Well, Bruce, yes I am indeed!