

## Second Hand Low by Ed Rawlinson

Beginning bridge players are often taught bridge slogans such as “eight ever-nine never”, “second hand low”, and “never underlead an ace in a suit contract (opening lead)”. Slogans are good rules, but there are usually exceptions. This tutorial will explore “second hand low”. The reason to look at this rule is that violating the rule is the most common mistake I see inexperienced players make. I’ve also seen players with 2,000 points make the same mistake when they should know better. Why are so many players failing to play second hand low when they should?

- They never heard the rule.
- They’ve never had an explanation of why it works
- They don’t stop to think about it.
- They are terrified of the prospect of “going to bed with their ace”.

So the purpose of this tutorial is to help you understand the reasoning behind the rule, increase your “card sense”, and also know that there are exceptions and what they are.

Let’s start with the worst violation I’ve ever seen.

<p style="text-align: center;">♦-7</p> <p>♦-A832</p> <p style="text-align: center;">♦-4???</p>
--

South was playing a spade contract. West led a club, won by declarer. Dummy had two trumps and a singleton diamond. At trick 2 declarer leads the ♦4. West, who apparently thought that the defense was only entitled to one diamond trick and that “aces are meant for cashing”, played the ace.

This was the full diamond distribution:

<p style="text-align: center;">♦-7</p> <p>♦-A832                  ♦-QJ10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">♦-K9654</p>
---

Had West played low (or the 8), East would win and lead a trump. Declarer would win and ruff a diamond but would be left with at least one additional diamond loser. Since West wasted her ace, declarer subsequently ruffed a diamond, cashed the king, 9, and 6 of diamonds. By cashing the ♦A, West unnecessarily “set up” South’s K. In this example, it should have been an easy decision for West to play low. There are many other situations in which the decision is not so easy.

Second hand low “problems” can arise either for the defense or for declarer. Consider the following situations confronting a declarer in a 3NT contract. LHO leads the ♠2.

<b>Dummy</b>	A. ♠-J3	B. ♠-J3	C. ♠-Q4	D. ♠-Q3	E. ♠-Q54	F. ♠-A93
<b>Declarer</b>	♠-AK4	♠-A104	♠-A10	♠-A54	♠-A3	♠-K104

- A. Play the Jack. It’s the only chance to win 3 tricks.
- B. Play the 3. This guarantees two tricks. If you play the Jack and it’s covered, you have no guarantee of a second trick.
- C. It’s a guess. If you think LHO led from the K, play the Q; otherwise play low.
- D. Play the Queen. It’s the only chance to win two spades.
- E. It depends on the circumstances. For example, if you have 4 sure losers in other suits, you should play the queen. On the other hand, if you can afford to lose one spade and may prevent LHO from getting back on lead (to lead through the Qx), you should play low.
- F. Playing low from dummy creates the potential for winning 3 tricks in the suit (if the missing honors are in separate hands). However, there may be circumstances in which it is correct to

play the Ace at trick one. For example, the ♠K may be the only entry to long-suit tricks in declarer's hand.

Note that, if the declarer was in a suit contract, the correct plays would be the same in A, B, C, and F. In D and E, playing the Q is the only chance to avoid a spade loser.

<b>Dummy</b>	G. ♣-102	H. ♠AK432/♥432/♦AJ2/♣AQ
<b>Declarer</b>	♣-QJ83	♠QJ65/♥A65/♦93/♣10864

In G, the contract is 3N. The opening lead is the ♣4. Declarer has two losers outside of clubs. In H, the contract is 4♠. The opening lead is the ♦4. What is your play at trick 1 in each case?

G. Play low. West has K976 and East has A54. If you play the 10, East wins the A and returns the suit. When you play the J, West ducks. When East gets in later, he will lead the third club through your Q6 into West's A9. If you play low at trick 1, you will have the Q-J-10 remaining, with two sure winners.

H. Play low. East wins the Q and returns a heart. You win and pull trumps ending in declarer's hand. Now finesse in diamonds to pitch a heart loser. The ♦9 was an important card (West had K1086).

<b>Dummy</b>	I. ♦-J54	J. ♦-J5	K. ♦-QJ2	Contract: 4♠
<b>Declarer</b>	♦-A9(2)	♦-A92	♦-103	OL: ♦4

In I and J, the contract is 3N, and the OL is the ♦3.

In I, the odds favor playing low from dummy. Playing low works when West led from K10xx or Q10xx, while playing the Jack works only when West led from KQxx. In J, play the Jack. It's the only chance to win two tricks. In K, if you want to discourage East from leading a second diamond, you can either play an honor from dummy and small from your hand OR you can play low from dummy and the 10 from your hand. If you play low from both hands, East will know you have the 10 and that it's safe to cash a second diamond.

Making "second-hand" decisions is easier for declarer than for defenders simply because declarer gets to see both of the partnership hands. Defenders often must guess about partner's or declarer's holdings, although clues are sometimes available from the bidding, declarer's play, or partner's signals. A useful principle (usually but not always true) is that it's better to use your honors to capture declarer's high cards rather than "air" (low cards).

<b>Dummy (N)</b>	A. Q43	B. Q43	C. Q103	D. KQJ3	E. KQ10	F. KJ943
<b>West</b>	A65	K65	K65	A654	???	A5
<b>South's lead</b>	2	2	2	2	2	Q

Without knowing the entire hand and bidding, it's impossible to claim that there is one correct play for each of these situations. However, it's useful to discuss the general principles and thought processes involved. Assume that the contract is 3N.

A. Play low. Suppose South has either K87 or J87. Playing the Ace will let South get an undeserved extra trick.

B. Play low. If South has J87, he will get no tricks if you play low. If South has A87, he is entitled to 2 tricks.

- C. Play low. If South has A87, he must guess who has the king.
- D. Play low. Look for partner's count signal. If there is an outside entry to dummy and declarer returns to his hand to lead toward dummy a second time, duck again. If you play the ace, the first or second time, you are setting up dummy for 3 tricks. If declarer started with only two cards in the suit, he will only get two diamonds if you duck both times.
- E. This is a "lesson hand" for defenders. Suppose declarer started with 3 small cards in the suit. His hope is to win two tricks in the suit. Assuming he has a re-entry to his hand, declarer will start by leading to the King. If the A87 is behind the king, East must duck smoothly. If East has the ace and wins it, he forces declarer to finesse on the second trick. So declarer will return to hand, lead to dummy's Q10 and must guess what to play. The "rest of the story" is that when West holds A43, he must smoothly duck the first two times declarer leads toward the dummy, again making declarer guess what to play.
- F. If there is an outside entry to dummy, always play the Ace, You're hoping partner has 10xxx. If there is no outside entry to dummy, play low. If declarer started with Q10 or Qx, you will hold him to 1 trick. If you played the ace the first time, he would now get 4 tricks if he started with Q10 and 2 tricks if he started with Qx.