

THIRD-HAND PLAY AGAINST NOTRUMP CONTRACTS

There is really no solution for eliminating ambiguities regarding third-hand plays and signals. All we can do is reduce them to the best of our ability. That is what this chapter tries to do.

Both the opening leader and third hand must take into account a number of variables when deciding on a lead or third-hand play, a continuation, or a switch to another suit. Has declarer denied (or shown) four cards in the suit led? If not, does he quite possibly have four cards in the suit? Does either declarer or dummy have a long running suit, making it necessary to cash out high cards? Does the bidding suggest a passive or active defense? Is the contract doubled and must be defeated? Is the contract unbeatable, making the minimization of overtricks the goal? If it's an IMP game, overtricks matter little and the emphasis is on defeating the contract regardless of risk.

In deriving these third hand plays, two new concepts are introduced: (1) When showing attitude, three small are often better than two small, and (2) an unexpected five-card length must be shown somehow.

When Partner Leads the Ace

This lead generally asks for "attitude," which usually means playing the top of an honor sequence (e.g., J10 or better), second-best (Foster Echo) with everything else, but the lowest card from five (showing two or five). Playing the lowest from five can sometimes save defenders from embarrassment. When the non-singleton queen is in dummy, four cards justify playing the highest card to encourage.

	(1) 96	
	(2) Q6	
AKJ5		(1) 105432 (2) 9842
	(1) Q7	
	(2) 1073	

In situation (1), when West plays the 2 on the lead of the ace, showing two or five, West can go with the odds and continue with the king and jack. East should not play the 5 on the ace lead to show attitude, because West would lead low next, expecting East to have the queen.

In situation (2), West plays an encouraging 9 (8 would be okay too) if he judges that South has Jxx at best. This could be wrong if West has led from AK5, but that's life. If the queen had been singleton, giving South 10753, playing the normal second-best 8 would be costly. Better to play the 4 and follow with the 9 when on lead (showing two or four cards originally).

It may seem odd to play the middle card from three small, but we have to differentiate between two small and three small, and we can't play high to show a doubleton because we are showing attitude, not count.

When dummy has the king, the lead is probably from AQ109.. Instead of playing second-best, East must play the jack if he has it, and otherwise give standard count, low from three or five, high from two or four.

This signal may enable West to lead his queen on the second round when the jack is now singleton in declarer's hand, dummy starting with Kxx.

When partner leads an ace against a gambling-type 3NT contract, the lead may be from Ax(x), AQx, AJx, etc., so third hand should play a very encouraging card only when holding the king.

Let's look at some specific situations, showing the right card to play when the ace is led and dummy has two or three small cards. A possible West hand is shown for each example.

West (leader)	East (third hand)
1) AKJ9	432 - play the 3, lead the 2 when you get in (three cards)
2) AKx(x)	QJ108 - play the queen
3) AKQ8	1092 - play the 9, 10 next to unblock
4) AKQ7	9862 - play the 6, 9 next (two or four)
5) AK97	J103 - play the jack, denying the queen
6) AK92	Q102 - play the 10, promising the queen
7) AK10x	Q3 - play the 3 (queen would show QJ)
8) AKx(x)	QJ3 - play the queen, promising the jack
9) AKx(x)	J10972 - play the 2 (two or five)
10) AKx(x)	Q10864 - play the 10 or 4, depending
11) AKx(x)	42 - play the 2 (two or five)
12) AKxx	QJ42 - Play the queen if declarer can't have four cards, the 2 (two or five) otherwise.
13) AK109	J82 or Q82 - play the 8

In case 1), the second-best 3 is followed by the 2, promising a higher card. Following with the 4 would show 43 doubleton. Partner may need to know about that third card when you lead through.

In case 2) East must play the queen, top of a high sequence. If West mistakenly switches, East can continue with the 10 when he gains the lead, telling West he has the jack and suggesting that he unblock if he has led from AKx. The jack would be continued from QJ or QJx only, warning West not to unblock.

In case 3) the normal rule of signaling from a sequence (play the top card) is not followed because the play of the 10 is reserved for showing the queen. On the next round play the 10 (showing two, but unblocking governs). This is not foolproof, as West may have AK82 and fear QJ76 in declarer's hand when the 10 is covered, East having 109 doubleton.

In case 4) third hand plays 8 and next time the 9, showing two or four. West will usually be able to tell whether this is from an original four cards or from 98 doubleton.

In case 5) West must switch, knowing that South has the queen. Unfortunately there is no way to show length with less than five.

Case 6) illustrates the play of the 10 to show the queen.

Case 7) If declarer wanted an unblock (as with AKJ10), he could have led the king.

In case 8) East plays the queen but must not unblock if West plays the king on the second round, showing the lead was from AKx.

In case 9) East should play the 2, hoping that West won't play him for 72. Playing the 2 may enable West to drop a doubleton queen in declarer's hand when the play of the jack would cause him to switch. It may also result in declarer making a trick with Qxx when West continues from AKx (he doesn't know about East's J10), but the suit would be blocked anyway. East would need two entries to run the suit without giving up a trick. If that's what he has, he can afford to play the jack on the first round.

In case 10) the 10 may be best. It guarantees the queen, so West will be able to continue the suit. If West has AKJx, however, the x continuation would block the suit if East has to play the queen. East should take a good look at his own and dummy's spots before playing the 10, and play the lowest card instead of the 10 if blockage is possible. Then West will continue with king and jack instead of the x, if he judges that East did not start with a low doubleton.

In case 11) East plays the lowest card, showing two or five cards.

In case 12) the queen play may cost a trick if declarer has four cards, so if that is a possibility it may be better to play the 2, showing five. West will then continue with the king and another.

In case 13) West won't know whether East has the queen or the jack, too bad.

When Partner Leads the King

This lead shows a sequence or broken sequence headed by the king (KQJ.., KQ10..), or a strong suit headed by the ace and king (e.g., AKJ10, AKJ83, AKQ104). It asks for an unblock of any high honor held, otherwise asking for standard count (not attitude).

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	(1) Q92
AKJ106	(2) 9432
	(3) 932
	(4) 92

West leads the king. In case (1) East plays the queen. In case (2) and (4) he plays the 9 because he has an even number of cards. West must guess whether two or four, but the bidding may guide him. In case (3) East plays the 2 to show an odd number of cards in the suit. West knows that he must switch if he wants five tricks from this suit.

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	A85 - play the ace
KQ10xx	98 - play the 9
	976 - play the 6
	9865 - play the 9
	J965 - play the jack

When West leads the king, East's play of a count card rather than a high honor tells West that South has both ace and jack. If South wins the first lead, it will usually mean that he started with AJ doubleton, but not always. The count should clarify the situation for West. Note the clear signals: 9 from 9865, not the 8 or a subtle 6. Playing the 8 would deny the 9.

With only three or four cards, e.g., KQ2, KQ102, KQJ2), an unblock by partner after a lead of the king could be very damaging. Such holdings therefore call for the lead of the queen. See below.

When Partner Leads the Queen

This lead warns against unblocking, so third hand merely shows attitude. However, if the lead is from QJx or KQx a high attitude signal could be costly (perhaps establishing a fourth-round trick for declarer). Therefore an “upside-down” signal is called for, lowest to encourage, high to discourage.

The queen may also be led from AQJ.., or even AQ10.., if dummy has shown a strong hand, so third hand should be aware of that possibility and not assume the lead is from a short suit in that case.

When Partner Leads the Jack

The jack is usually the top of a sequence and the highest card in the suit. If there is a finessable honor in dummy, Scanian (“upside-down”) signals apply (see section 1-6). The lead could also be from QJ9.., which will be obvious if third hand can see the 10 (which he plays if it's in his hand) or partner has shown a good suit in the auction (e.g., via a weak two bid). Holding the ace and 10, third hand of course plays the ace and then the 10. Holding the king and 10, the 10 should suffice when holding three or more cards. Playing the king might look like Kx to partner, who wants to know where the 10 is.

Playing an ace when not seeing the 10 could give declarer two tricks instead of one if dummy is very short and partner has led from J10. However, pursuing the suit could still be the best line, so it's probably best to do that.

When Partner Leads the Ten

The 10 lead shows an interior sequence headed by the jack or 10, or a QJ10 sequence.

KJ10.. AJ10.. AQ109.. AK109.. AQJ10..
K109.. A109.. Q109.. QJ10..

If there is no finessable honor in dummy third hand must usually play his highest honor (or bottom of touching honors). As said before, the ace or queen may sometimes be led from AQ109.. and the ace or king from AK109.. With no high card to play, if declarer wins the 10 with the ace you know that the lead is from QJ10 and declarer holds AK. If he wins with the king you won't know if the lead is from AJ10 (declarer holding KQ) or QJ10 (declarer holding AK), but it isn't likely to matter. Partner may be able to use the Smith Echo to say he has led from AJ10.

One possibly troublesome situation is when dummy has the king and third hand has the ace. The ten must be ducked in case the lead is from QJ10. If declarer has the jack (lead is from Q109) he will win the jack and first hand must have an entry to lead through the king again.

When Partner Leads the Nine

The 9 lead shows a suit headed by 109 with no higher honor. Third hand chooses whatever play seems right.

When Partner Leads the Eight

The 8 may be fourth best, high from weakness, or from a holding such as 987, when the lead of the 9 would show the 10. The 8 is also led from J98.. or A98.., but with K98.. or Q98.. lead fourth best. The reason for this is given in chapter 1-4, Later Leads Against Notrump Contracts. Although the 9, not the 8, is led on later leads from J98 or A98, that discussion applies here. The leader can perhaps use the Smith Echo (page 1-6-3) to imply that the 8 was not from weakness.

When Partner Leads the Seven

An interesting position:

J43	
7 led	Q52

When dummy plays small, East should usually duck, playing second-best. If West has led from A1087 (giving declarer K96) the duck is necessary, and East must not continue the suit if he gets on lead. If West has led from A1087x, then South has K9 doubleton. East must then not only play low on the first round of the suit, but must lead low, not the queen, when gaining the lead. Also, West must lead the ace on the second round if he is on lead.

If West started with K1087 or K987 the duck will do no harm, and may gain by preventing dummy's jack from being an entry. In this case East must continue the suit if he gets in. How can he know whether East has led from the ace or the king? Maybe West should use the Smith Echo with the king but not with the ace.

If West has led from AK107x, AK87x, or AK97x, the duck will not turn out well. Perhaps it is better to lead the ace from these holdings, especially when holding a likely entry. Leading the x should also be considered.

When You Can't Beat Dummy's Singleton

When dummy's singleton honor is higher than partner's lead, and you cannot top it:

-- With a doubleton play low, except when unblocking is called for (e.g., you have Qx and a fast entry). Also play lowest from five, not from three or four small. Partner will be very glad to know you have five if declarer started with only two.

-- From a two-card or longer sequence headed by the jack or better, play the top of the sequence if you think it is safe to do so. Play the bottom of the sequence (or original fourth best, depending) on the next round.

Partner leads fourth best and dummy has a singleton ace. If you have:

KQx, play the king, queen next

QJ102, play the queen, 10 next (bottom of sequence)

QJ32, play the queen, 2 next (present count), or sometimes the jack

With 985 East plays the 5 to the lead of the queen, giving standard count. With J85 he may choose not to play the jack, especially if he has a quick entry, since doing so could give South (as in this case) a second stopper. With no quick entry, he just has to play the jack and hope it doesn't cost a trick.

When Dummy Plays High from Kx

One of the most frustrating situations in notrump defense has dummy winning with a doubleton royal (king or queen) your fourth-best lead from an ace. If it's the king, where is the queen? If in declarer's hand, is it alone? If it's the queen, declarer has the king, but how many? It is horrible to find out later that declarer's royal would have fallen under your ace had you played it when gaining entry. Not only that, but you can't tell whether it's safe to lead low again, and sometimes can't tell that the suit will run when it is led back. How can partner help? The standard play for third hand is to show attitude (some say count), but that may be of little value. Playing second-best from a face card shows attitude but not length, and playing the lowest from any three shows count but not attitude.

Let's start with king-small in dummy, king winning, and you as third hand have some number of small cards. The worst non-singleton holding is a small doubleton, so play the standard lower card to show a very negative attitude. Three small is not so bad, four small is good, and five small is so great that partner must be informed immediately. There is no perfect solution, but playing the lowest card only from two or five and the second-highest from three or four will give partner a chance to find the right continuation when gaining the lead, or to decide on a switch. It will provide excellent information if you get the lead and return the suit. In any event, after playing second-highest from three, play the lowest next, showing an original three, after second-highest from four play the highest next, showing an original two or four, and after lowest from five, play the original fourth-best, showing an original two or five. Yes, this is not "present count," but royalty requires a deviation from standard signaling.

Now, what if you have the queen and/or jack over dummy's king? You must play the queen with any length up to four (the lowest from five), which cannot hurt if the king play is logical. Partner will be glad to know declarer doesn't have it, whether the suit was led from the ace or jack. After playing the queen without the jack, the next card shows present count, so the "deuce" shows an original four. With the jack and no queen, play it from two or four but play second-best from three and the lowest from five. Playing the jack cannot hurt in any case, but playing it only from two or four provides better information than a standard second-best or playing it always. A non-intuitive non-standard play of the ten from J10x promises the jack because you cannot have the queen and the agreed play from three is second-best. If you are the first to gain entry, your lead of the jack is known to come from an original three, which could be important.

A 10xx holding presents a problem. After playing the middle card, what should be led if you lead the suit next? The three-small rule says led the lowest original card, but the 10 might be needed as a "pusher" and/or an unblock for partner's suit. If declarer is known not to have four cards in the suit, leading the lowest card is harmless and gives count. If he does have four and partner has led from AJ98 or J98 (which the 8 lead implies) then of course the 10 should be led.

But what do you do with both queen and jack? No doubt play the queen, but partner won't know whether it's from Qxxx or QJx (not Qxx because declarer would not have played the king with Jxx in hand). Playing the ace with A108x left is safe, counting on you to unblock the jack. However, if the lead was from A98xx the unblock will elevate the 10 if declarer started with 10xx. In that case the next lead must be low to the jack. That doesn't work well if declarer started with Jx and had guessed to play the king on the opening lead. Any solution? Only this: most declarers will think a while before playing the

king with Jx in hand, but with 10xx will shrug and play the king without much thought. Also, a Smith Echo can say the queen was from QJ. This is a very uncommon situation, not a big negative for the method. Leading low the second time caters to a doubleton QJ, the leader lacking the 10, so in case of doubt that is probably best.

What about an AJxx(x) suit for the opening leader? Will the automatic queen play be a problem? With two it is mandatory, unblocking so as to lead the small card if on lead. From queen-third? That gives declarer 10xxx or 10xx. If the latter, the AJ will pick up the 10. If the former, declarer would probably not win the king, very bad news if it loses to the ace. If he ducks to his 10xxx, that costs a trick but the 10 blocks the suit in cases that matter, and the duck wins big if the lead was from QJ. Conclusion: playing the queen from queen-third is all right.

When Dummy Plays High from Qx

When queen-small is in dummy, queen winning, third hand plays in the same manner, jack from two or four, etc. Partner would like to see the jack if the lead was from the king, as declarer could have either the ace or ace-jack. However, playing the jack from jack-third does not provide count, which may be needed if the lead is from an ace. Playing lowest of three when lacking the jack might seem logical, but also gives the wrong count. Since it is often possible for the leader, looking at many spot cards, to read the second-best play as from the jack, it is probably best not to violate the general rules We can't do everything.

When Dummy Plays High from Jx

If third hand can't cover he plays low from two or five cards, second-best from three, including the 9 from 109, and the highest card from four.

J7

	1096
AQ85	10843
	108632

K432
K92
K9

When the 9 is played from 109, South following low, West knows that South does not have the 10, so East must have it with fewer than four cards. When East plays the 10 from 10843, showing four cards, West knows that South has the guarded king. When East plays the 2 from 108632, showing two or five, West can lay down the ace when he gets in.

When Dummy Plays High from Ax(x), Kxx, or Qxx

When the dummy plays high from Ax(x), Kxx, or Qxx, third hand should routinely play the quack (queen or jack) from any number of cards (but lowest from an unlikely five), just to let partner know where it is:

A76

J1043

Q85

K92

If dummy plays the ace on the lead of the 3, East should throw the queen unless he is eager for a shift when West gets in. Declarer would not play the ace with a holding that would benefit from this play. With no quack to play, third hand should play second-best.

East should also play the jack when dummy plays high from Qxx. If declarer has Axx (unlikely, but possible if declarer needs a fast entry to dummy or the bidding places the king with West), partner will want to know where the jack is.

Lacking the jack, East should play second-best from three, highest from four, lowest from two or five. His next card will clarify the situation (high-low shows three, low-high shows two or four, lowest-higher shows two or five). With five, lead the original fourth-best on the next round, but play high to partner's lead of a high honor (present count) unless that could block the suit.

When You Can Beat All Cards Played So Far

-- Follow suit from the bottom of a sequence, play the top of the sequence next.

With QJ10 the rule would dictate that you follow suit with the 10, but this holding is an exception. The play of the jack from QJ10 is the right play against a notrump contract. After leading from the ace, if you play the 10, he will think perhaps you have J10, giving declarer KQx, and may not continue the suit when he gets in. When you play the jack, he will figure you either had QJ or declarer started with KQ10. In either case it can't hurt for him to continue the suit. A benefit of this is that when you do have J10 and play the 10 partner will know declarer must have both king and queen.

Similarly with J109, the ten is played. If the lead was from the king, to partner the 10 seems to deny the 9, so he will place declarer with AQ9 (AQJ9 either unlikely or impossible) when the queen wins, making a continuation safe (the jack must be in your hand). If the 9 is played to the first trick, partner may fear AQJ in declarer's hand.

If the lead was from the ace, however, things could get sticky. If partner or the dummy has the 9, that rules out J109 in your hand. But suppose the lead was from A8xxx, no 9 in dummy. Partner knows you would play the jack from QJ10, so you can't have the queen when you play the 10. That that may look like J10(x), declarer holding KQ9. When gaining entry, partner may lead a low card into declarer's now-singleton king or queen. Is that a guess? Not usually, because declarer would win the queen with KQ doubleton, letting West know that he has the king. If he wins the king he most surely holds the queen (which partner has denied) and another.

Note that it would do declarer no good to know about these agreements, as a holding of QJx or J10x is more likely than QJ10 or J109.

If partner has led from the queen, playing the 10 creates no problem for him that would not normally exist (declarer perhaps playing high from AKJ as a deceptive move).

-- Lacking a sequence, play third- hand- high when there is nothing to capture in dummy. Holding AQx against a notrump contract, however, the queen is nearly automatic to prevent declarer from holding up with the king. A lack of entries is not necessarily a reason for playing ace, then queen, because doing so enables declarer to safely (and successfully) finesse in other suits through partner. If that doesn't look possible, go ahead and play ace-queen when entryless, to make sure partner knows what's going on in the suit. If you do play the queen, your next play (on declarer's suit) should be a high card (if count or deception is not in order) to indicate satisfaction with the opening lead. See Smith Echo in Section 1-5, Signals in Notrump Defense.

Special Situations

There are other situations when the third hand high rule can be violated. Suppose you have a fast entry, K94 in partner's probable five-card suit, and figure that he must have the ace of his suit to beat the contract. Dummy has a small singleton, and the lead was the 7, so declarer has two higher. If you play the 9 instead of the king, declarer may make the mistake of winning the trick with QJxx. If you play the king and then the 9, he will be more likely to make the correct play of ducking the 9.

The same sort of play may be appropriate with AJx (declarer holding K10xx or Q10xx), or with K10x, KJx, A9x, etc. These plays are generally correct only if the holder can see that he himself holds all the early defensive entries in the other suits, so that misleading partner will do no harm.

When partner leads fourth best and dummy is winning the trick with a holding like QJ10, Q109, third hand must show standard count, even when holding Kxx. (playing the king is usually unwise). The reason is that if partner is leading from the king he needs to know if declarer's ace is now singleton. With a five-card holding extremely unlikely, playing the lowest card can safely show three as well as the usual five. However, if dummy's holding is something like KQx attitude is shown (three or more small cards are good, two are bad), so play of the lowest card shows a doubleton or singleton (or an unlikely five).

In a Nutshell

The **ace** asks for attitude, usually second highest (Foster Echo). Play:

Usually play second-best, but:
 Play the top of a two-card or longer sequence
 Play bottom from 2 or 5
 Play of the 10 promises the queen or king

The **king** asks for unblocking.

Play the A, Q, or J
 Else give standard count, high from even, bottom from odd

The **queen** cautions that unblocking may be unsafe, asks for attitude (upside-down)

Play high from weakness, low from strength (to preserve trick-taking ability)

The **jack** is usually from J109.., sometimes from QJ9..

If you can see the 10, no ambiguity (play it if in your hand, usually unblock with ace or king).

The **ten** promises strength.

The **nine** is from 109, denying strength.

The **eight** is ambiguous: fourth-best, extreme weakness, or from J98.. or A98..