

Amit Chakrabarti

11. Honor among Thieves

Let me introduce you to a hand recently played in an A-X pair game. The contract is 6S and as the field is pretty strong, you know almost everyone will be in 6S. So the issue here is to make an extra trick. You have no loser outside S and you hold

Q J 9 x (dummy)

A 8 7 6 (in your hand)

How do you play? In IMP it is easy; just play the 6 of S toward dummy and lose 1 spade trick safely, making 6. But as I have explained, the issue here is to make 7. Whatever the lay out might be, you will play the Q from dummy first time. There are two very interesting layouts:

Q J 8 x (dummy)

10 x

K x x (1)

10 x x

Kx (2)

A 9 7 6 (in your hand)

And there are two interesting questions:

- A) If Right hand opponent (RHO) covers the Q, which layout is more probable?
- B) If RHO does not cover the Q, which layout is more probable?

One would think that with Kx holding, RHO would want to cover the Q immediately to protect partner's T x x holding. So if the Q is covered immediately, you will consider the layout to be as in (2) and then hook the 8 from dummy next to make 7.

Now consider the real interesting situation. What I call the *honor among thieves* situation. In bracket A-X event, RHO knows that if he covers the Q, a competent declarer will read the layout to be an in (2) and partner's T will be hooked out. So RHO has to decide NOT to cover the Q. This is "silly" because it might give an extra trick immediately if the declarer plays small from board next. But the declarer might think that the lay out is an in (1) and play the J from dummy next and lose an unnecessary trick.

I will now introduce you to a few other situations (similar in spirit to the above hand) where an unusual cover is necessary to protect your honor among thieves.

Example 1.

	J T 8	
7 5 2		K 9 4
	A Q 6 3	

As the textbook play is not to cover when the declarer leads the J from board, if you *cover* the J, declarer will consider the lay out to be

	J T 8	
9 7 5 2		K 4
	A Q 6 3	

and might hook the 8 the next time.

Example 2.

	K Q 9 7 3	
A J 5		8 6 2
	T 4	

If declarer leads the T from hand and you suspect it to be singleton you need to cover to protect yourself. You also need to cover in the layout shown above because the declarer might think the layout to be instead something like:

	K Q 9 7 3	
A J 8 5		6 5 2
	T 4	

and decide to hook the 7 the next time.

Example 3.

	Q J T 9	
A 8 4 2		K 7 6 3
	5	

In a suit contract, covering the Q is important if you suspect declarer to be short in the suit. Your K can be felled by a ruffing finesse but partners A cannot be. This is an important situation to take note.

And then finally to show that this game has vast complexity built in it here is example 4.

Example 4.

	Q J 3	
4 Led		K 6 3

Covering the Q from dummy is right if declarer has A9x and wrong if declarer has A98.

References:

1. My sincere thanks to Elizabeth Jankord for sharing the hand with me that forms the basis of my discussions in the first part of the column.
2. Examples 1-4 are taken straight from Rodwell's masterpiece, *The Rodwell Files*.