

Chapter One: The Power of Honors

Before you can learn anything about the play of the hand at Contract Bridge, you must first understand that each card has a value and a meaning. Of course, you know that the Ace is the highest card in a suit, and that the King beats the Queen, and that a Queen is always better than a Jack, and so on. But it is entirely possible that you have never learned the full power of these cards, for they will do far more, if properly handled, than merely win a trick over any lower card.

First of all, then, you must study the relationship of the various cards in the pack to each other; and you must particularly study the relationship of the honor cards (the five highest cards in each suit, namely, the Ace, King, Queen, Jack, and Ten). Do not be contemptuous of this seemingly elementary knowledge, for only if your basic knowledge is sound can your later refinements be worth striving for. The player who thinks he knows, because he has participated in a few hundred rubbers, and who wants to plunge immediately into squeeze plays and coups, will never be a good Contract player. His parboiled knowledge has not allowed for the general principles of play which must be the higher law of every hand. Someone who masters the general principles, but cannot for the life of him tell you what a Double Grand Coup is, will win more points than the specialist in the Grand Coup--for those miraculous plays come very seldom in a Bridge player's lifetime.

The various "honor-trick" and "quick-trick" valuations, as well as the different "point" counts used in valuing honors, are not arbitrarily determined by the experts who recommend them as a basis for bidding. Every such valuation is theoretically based upon the relationship of those honors and honor combinations in the play of the hand. The fact that an Ace is given the value of "1 honortrick" means that the Ace is almost certain to win a trick in the play. The King is usually valued at "1/2 trick" because it will on the average, win a trick about half the time -- that is, a guarded King, without the Ace, will win 1 trick about 50 times out of 100 (on the average), and be captured by the Ace or by ruffing the other 50 times out of 100. It is thus clear that all bidding valuation, to be of any use, must be based on what is expected to happen in the play. If you understand the relationship of honors--and also of lower cards--in the play, your bidding should then become more imaginative and more accurate. In fact, the ultimate object of anyone undertaking to learn more about the play of the hand at Contract Bridge should be to improve upon the mathematical averages ascribed to honors and other cards for bidding purposes. Your object should be, not to take a trick with a guarded King half the time, but sixty percent of the time!

The Meaning of Rank

Each card in the pack holds a special rank one position above the next highest card of the same suit. Thus any Ace outranks the King of the same suit by one position, the Queen by two positions, the Ten by four positions, and so on. The King outranks the Queen of the same suit by one position, but the same King outranks the Jack of the same suit by two positions. It would therefore seem that the Ace should take the first trick in a suit, the King the second in that suit, and so on. Everyone knows that this is not necessarily true, for the first trick in a suit--the first round, as we say -- may be won by a low card like the seven-spot. Why does the Ace not always win the first round? Simply because there is no compulsion for a player to win a trick with his Ace (except when it is the only card he holds of the suit led) -- he may find it better to keep his Ace until a later round, when it may actually be more valuable to him. The manner in which he decides to play his Ace (or King, or any other high card), sooner or later, is explained in this book. Just now the important thing to learn is that as each round of a suit is played, the rank of the remaining cards (those as yet unplayed) changes. It is obvious that if the Ace and King of a suit are played on the first round, the Queen thereupon becomes the highest card of the suit -- the Queen is promoted to the position of first command, so to speak. The Queen now controls the next round of the suit; that is, the holder can win the next round with the Queen, if he so wishes. The foregoing principles may be stated as a general truth: Whenever an honor is played to a trick, each lower card automatically goes up one position in rank.

Suppose that yours is the South holding (J 10 2). Ordinarily you would not regard the Jack as being of much value. But suppose that East (the Opponent on your right) leads a low card (the threespot), and you play the Ten, East plays the Queen, and North, your Partner, plays the King. Your Jack now suddenly becomes of much greater value, for it has been promoted to second position in the suit--only the outstanding Ace can beat it. In other words, you are now able to take the third round of the suit, when, before the first round had been played, you could not even expect to take the fourth round! Suppose that East led his Ace at the first opportunity, and your Partner led his King at the next opportunity, and the Queen was played from the West hand on the third round--your three cards would have fallen on the three leads, without winning a single trick. It is apparent, then, that the manner in which the cards of a suit are played may greatly affect the rank of the cards in the suit.

The principle of this axiom could be carried on indefinitely. For instance, if three honors are played to a trick, the card next below the lowest of the three played honors gains three positions in rank.

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