

THE POWER OF SPOT CARDS

When evaluating your hands, it is important to upgrade hands that have good intermediate spot cards, and downgrade hands that have few good intermediate cards. Due to honor promotion, 10's, 9's, 8's and even 7's can rise to winning rank relatively rapidly. On the other hand, 2's, 3's, 4's, 5's and 6's are rarely helpful.

If, for example, you open 1NT and your partner bids 2NT (inviting game), you should base your acceptance (or pass) on (1) HCP; (2) spot cards; (3) whether or not you have a 5-card suit. A 5-card suit is usually worth about a point (because you can often set it up to run in no trump. Good intermediate spot cards get promoted rapidly. Consider the following hands:

AK3	QJ10	234	10987
KQ2	AJ10	KQ4	AK98
A432	KQJ9	AQ	AQ10
456	Q109	KQ432	K108

Pass	Bid 3NT	Consider 3NT	Bid 3NT
Your spot cards are horrible.	Your spot cards are great & will promote rapidly.	Your spot cards are awful, but you have a 5-card suit.	Fabulous spot cards. You expect to make game.

Notice your spot cards when you have long suits. Often, you have to do some unblocking with intermediate cards so that you can run a long suit, or to preserve entries to one hand or the other. If you hold KQ109 in clubs and dummy has A5432 and the Jack is third (rather than doubleton), you will have to somehow get rid of the 10 or 9 of clubs before you can go over to the Ace and run the suit (assuming dummy has no outside entry).

Spot cards are important when playing “third hand high” in no trump. If, for example, your partner leads the 3 of hearts (which is probably 4th-best) and dummy comes down with J45 and you hold Q106, if Declarer plays low, you should play the 10 (keeping your queen over dummy's jack). Only if Declarer plays the jack would you play your queen. However, if you hold Q96, it is generally right to insert the 9 if Declarer does not play the Jack. Occasionally that will give Declarer an extra trick, but usually not.

“Honor promotion” applies to spot cards as well. Suppose you lead the 10 of spades from 10982. Dummy comes down with J5. Declarer covers your 10 with the Jack. Partner plays the queen and Declarer takes the Ace. Your 9 of spades is now 2nd in line (after the King of spades!) to take a trick. Therefore, your 8 of spades is guaranteed to take the 3rd round of that suit. If an opponent leads 9 of hearts and dummy has J32, while you have AK87, cover the 9 with J (forcing queen from RHO). Later, finesse RHO for 10 & lose no tricks!

Honor promotion is the reason for the jingle: “Cover an honor with an honor.” However, it is vital **NOT to cover an honor with an honor when: (1) you and your partner cannot possibly have anything to promote and when (2) Declarer has several touching honors.** With touching honors, you cover the last of the touching honor (if any). If, for example, dummy has QJ9 in a suit and you have K43, do NOT play the King if Declarer plays the queen first. Wait and cover the jack. (If you cover the queen, Declarer takes Ace and can then lead low to 9 and finesse your partner's 10—losing no cards in this suit. If you cover the 2nd honor (the jack), your partner's 10 is guaranteed to take the 3rd round of that suit. If Declarer opens 1S (promising 5) and Dummy comes down with J10542 and Declarer plays the Jack of dummy with you holding K3, play the 3 as smoothly as possible. Declarer has to guess whether to play for you to have the King or for your partner to have the singleton King offside. Sometimes, Declarer will go up with the Ace. (When Declarer has 6 spades, s/he will often go up with the Ace if you play your 3 smoothly.) If you hold K432 and dummy has QJ109, do NOT cover. Partner has nothing to promote. Declarer may be “forced” to play the Ace 2nd or 3rd round.