

## Intermediate Corner: Finessing with “Unsupported” Honors

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We are usually taught to lead honor cards only when they are supported by the card below them. Consider these two suit combinations:

QJT9 opposite A432

Q642 opposite A753

In the first suit, leading the Q for a finesse is effective, because if the queen is covered, this promotes your JT9. However, in the second hand, leading the Q for a finesse is ineffective, because if the queen is covered, this instead promotes the opponents’ JT9.

While this reasoning is generally correct, textbooks don’t often mention that if you have very good spot cards, it can pay off to lead “unsupported” honors. In effect, your spot cards support the honor but on a later round of the suit, eventually gaining a trick. For example, let’s make the spot cards stronger in the second hand:

A972 opposite QT83

With this suit, your best play is to take a double finesse for the KJ. It is assumed that you will lose a trick so the goal is to take three tricks. To take the double finesse, lead high cards from the QT83 intending to let them ride if not covered. It is marginally better to run the T first, then run the Q next time because it allows you to get three tricks when there’s a void behind the QT. If an honor is covered, then you are guaranteed to take three tricks. This is a 78% chance.

This idea works even with lower honors. Consider these suits:

J642 opposite A753

J932 opposite AT84

With the first suit, your best play is the Ace and then low on the next round, hoping for example for KQ doubleton. That would produce three tricks about 2% of the time. But, on the second suit, the stronger spot cards give you a much better chance to take three tricks in the suit. It is right to run the Jack and then the 9, taking a double finesse against the KQ or a 75% chance to take three tricks. Again, if the Jack is covered it promotes the opponents’ honor on the next round, but, because of your spots, promotes your cards on the third round.

Ready to put your learning to the test? Take the North seat in 4 spade, on the Jack of spades lead. This hand was played by Australian professional player Peter Hollands, from his website [www.bridgevid.com](http://www.bridgevid.com). Decide how you plan to play the spade suit before reading on.

N ♠9854 ♥AK ♦K42 ♣K642

S ♠AQ73 ♥542 ♦A87 ♣A53

You have two unavoidable minor suit losers, so your problem is to hold the trump losers to one. If the ♠K is onside doubleton or tripleton, you can achieve this by leading a low spade to the queen, but that’s only half of the 3-2 splits or 34%. Look at your spots! A better play is to lead high spades twice from North, taking a double finesse against the JT in East. You make 56% of the time—considerably better than finessing the queen.

We can’t cover all positions here, but the idea that spot cards can change the way you play a suit applies to a variety of suit combinations. We leave you with a challenge for the reader. With this suit combination, what’s your best play to take advantage of the strong spot cards?

A964 opposite J832