Third Hand High – Sometimes

North
♠9 3
♥A Q 9
♦A Q J 8 6
♣A 6 2

East
♠A J 4
♥8 5 4
♦K 7 4
♣J 10 9 3

West	North	East	South
	1♦	pass	2NT[(1)]
Pass	3NT	all pass	

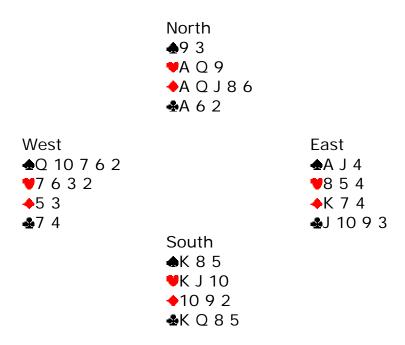(1)   Forcing, 12-14 points

West leads the fourth best ♣6

You are East. How do you plan to set the contract?

You see two sure tricks with the ♠A and the ♦K. You need 3 more tricks to set the contract. Let's try to figure out where partner's strength lies, because if the contract is to fail, your partner must supply the missing tricks.

South's jump to 2NT showed 12-14 points. You see 17 points in the dummy and you hold 9 points yourself. That's a minimum total of 38 HCP's. Your partner led low from spades which promised an honor in the holding. It could only be the ♠Q. Let's hope she has an honor.   If not, the declarer will have a walk in the park. The only hope of setting the contract is if the lead was from a 5-card suit headed by the ♠Q, and you can get 3 more tricks from spades.

The key here is not to block the spade suit. You want to be able to get into partner's hand with her ♠Q and let her clear the suit with her remaining spades.

Here's the whole deal:

North
                    ♠9 3
                    ♥A Q 9
                    ♦A Q J 8 6
                    ♣A 6 2

West   East
♠Q 10 7 6 2   ♠A J 4
♥7 6 3 2   ♥8 5 4
♦5 3   ♦K 7 4
♣7 4   ♣J 10 9 3
                    South
                    ♠K 8 5
                    ♥K J 10
                    ♦10 9 2
                    ♣K Q 8 5

Notice that when you automatically play the ♠A, "third hand high", you will have to lead back the ♠J. South can hold up on this lead (as well he should) and will win the third spade trick with the ♠K. Now you will be out of spades when you win the ♦K. Whatever you lead back, declarer will win and take the remaining tricks.

However, if you win the initial lead with the ♠J without thinking a long time, declarer will assume you don't have the ♠A. He will probably win the trick with the ♠K. Then later, when you win the diamond finesse with the ♦K, you play the ♠A and follow with the ♠4. This gets you into partner's hand, who then sets the contract with her two remaining spades.

Like most "rules", third hand high is just a guideline that helps you in most situations. But it shouldn't be used without thought. There are exceptions to all the guidelines. That's why they're called guidelines.