

Defensive Signals

Quite often, when I am defending, I would like to literally say to partner – “Partner, I have the setting tricks in spades. Please lead a spade.”

Of course, the rules of bridge forbid me from doing any such thing. In fact, as you know, to do so is considered cheating.

However, there is a perfectly legal way for you to let partner know what you have in your hand. And that is by playing certain cards or playing your cards in a certain order.

We have already learned some of these techniques in previous lessons. For example, if on opening lead you lead the K, then partner knows that you have the Q. Or if you lead the 2 and are playing 4th best, partner knows you have exactly 4 cards in that suit.

In this lesson, we will discuss another set of techniques for letting partner know what you have in your hand. By playing your non-honor cards in a certain sequence, you can let partner know about the holdings in your suits.

We will discuss three sub-topics in this lesson:

- Attitude Signals
- Count Signals
- Suit Preference Signals

Attitude Signals

Suppose partner leads the King (showing the Queen), and the cards in dummy and your hand (you are East) are as follows:

5 4 3 2

5 A 8 5

You would like to let partner know you have the Ace, and your side might be cashing 3 tricks in the suit.

On the other hand, suppose partner leads the King, and the position is as follows:

5 4 3 2

5 8 6 5

In this case, you do not want partner to continue the suit, even if declarer does not play the Ace. In fact, it is possible that declarer, holding both the A and J will let partner win the first trick. Then if partner plays the suit again, either the Queen or a low spade, declarer will win 2 spade tricks.

So, how do you tell partner to continue spades in the first example and to switch to another suit in the second example? In other words, how do you tell him your attitude about continuing spades, that you either would like to encourage him to continue leading spades or discourage him from doing so?

The answer is you can signal partner by playing different non-honor cards to encourage or discourage her from continuing the suit. Normally, if partner leads the King, there would be no reason for you to play anything but your lowest card. However, there is usually no harm in playing another non-honor card besides your lowest card.

Signaling takes advantage of the fact that it usually does not matter which non-honor card you play to a trick. Therefore, you can assign different meanings to different non-honor cards. If you play a high non-honor card, it means you would like to encourage partner to continue the suit. If you play a low non-honor card, it means you would like to discourage partner from playing that suit again.

In the two examples above, signaling would work as follows:

- a) In the first example, where you hold the A 8 5 of spades, you would play the 8 of spades under the King. This is an unnecessarily high card and indicates that you would like partner to continue spades (probably because you hold the Ace or Jack).
- b) In the second example, where you hold the 8 6 5 of spades, you would play the 5 of spades under the King. This is the lowest card you can play. Partner can see the 2, 3, and 4 of spades in dummy, so the 5 has to be your lowest spade. That tells partner you have nothing of interest in spades.

Note that you are just informing partner of what you have. He is free to follow your suggestion or not. For example, if he started with the KQJ of spades, even though you played the 5, he may decide to continue spades because he wants to set up another spade trick.

Here are some common situations where you can provide partner with an attitude signal:

1. Partner has led an honor. You need not play a card higher than partner's honor, and therefore can play one of your non-honors as an attitude signal. The two examples above illustrate this situation.
2. Partner leads a suit and dummy plays a card higher than any card that you have. For example, partner leads a suit and dummy plays the Ace. Clearly you cannot beat the Ace. But, you might have the King for example, in which case you would play a high non-honor card. If you had no honors in the suit, you would play a low non-honor card.
3. Declarer or partner plays a suit which you are out of. You can discard a high card in another suit to tell partner you have something of value in that suit, or a low card in another suit to tell partner you have nothing of interest in that suit.

Another question is, what is a "high" card, and what is a "low" card. Sometimes a 4 can be a "high" card. Other times, a 8 can be a low card. Partner must look at his hand and dummy in order to figure out whether you are playing a high card or a low card.

For example, suppose you lead the K as West and observe the following:

♠ 7 6 5

♠ K Q 10 9 8

Partner plays the 4. Is that encouraging or discouraging?

It is likely to be encouraging. The only non-honor cards that you cannot see between you and dummy are the 4, 3, and 2. Therefore, the 4 must be the highest non-honor card partner has, and therefore must be encouraging.

Let's look at this example:

♠ 4 3 2

♠ K Q 7 6 5

Partner plays the 8. Is that encouraging or discouraging?

It is likely to be discouraging. The only non-honor cards you cannot see are the 8, 9, and 10, so the 8 is the lowest non-honor card that partner has.

There is one another signaling method that some players find very effective. It is known as "odd/even first discard". It only applies to the first discard you make (the first time you cannot follow suit). If you discard an odd card in a suit (for example the 3 or 5), that means you are encouraging partner to lead that suit. If you play an even card in a suit, that means you have nothing of interest to partner in that suit.

Count Signals

Sometimes it is useful for partner to know how many cards you have in a suit. In this section, I will give several examples.

First of all, let's talk about how you give count. Just as with attitude, it involves how you play your non-honor cards. For the moment, don't worry about how partner knows whether a signal is a count signal or an attitude signal. I will explain that below. Just assume you are giving a count signal. It works as follows:

1. To show a doubleton, you play the higher card first, then the lower card. For example, if you held 8 5 in a suit and wanted to show count, you would play the 8 and then the 5.
2. To show 3 cards in the suit, you play the lowest card first. For example, if you held the 8 6 5 in a suit, you would play the 5 first.
3. To show 4 cards in the suit, you play your 2nd highest, then your lowest card. For example, if you held the 8 6 5 2 in a suit, you would play the 6 followed by the 2.

Some people say you play "high low" to show an even number and "low high" to show an odd number. And, in the examples above that is what I did. However, many people do not know the proper way to differentiate between 4 cards in a suit and 2 cards in a suit.

One of the most common situations where you would signal count is when partner makes an opening lead and you would like to trump the third round. This is illustrated in the following example:

♠ 4 3 2

♠ 8 6

Partner leads the Ace of spades, presumably showing the King. You would like to tell partner that you can trump the third round. You would play the 8 on the Ace and the 6 on the King to show a doubleton. Partner would then presumably lead a third round for you to trump.

You may be wondering, "How does partner know I have a doubleton, as opposed to that I am making an attitude signal that I have the Q?" The answer is that partner does not know, but does not really care. The 8 followed by the 6 is encouraging in any case. Whether it is a doubleton or it shows the Q does not really matter.

Let's change this example around a little bit:

♠ 4 3 2

♠ 8 6 5

Partner leads the Ace. With this holding, you would play the 5. Now partner knows that you don't have a doubleton nor the Q. You presumably have 3 small. Partner can now make an intelligent decision as to whether or not to continue the suit.

For example, if he has A K J 9 7 he will continue the suit, because he knows that declarer started with doubleton queen. He can see 8 spades between his hand and dummy and you have shown 3. That makes a total of 11 spades that are accounted for, leaving 2 for declarer. Therefore, partner knows it is safe to cash the K of spades, because the Q will drop and not be set up.

On the other hand, if partner held A K J 7 of spades, he probably would not want to continue the suit. Based on your signal, he knows that declarer holds 3 spades to the Queen. If he chose to cash the King at trick 2, then he would set up declarer's Queen. So he would switch to another suit and hope that you will get in at some point to lead a spade through declarer's Queen. This will allow your side to score 3 spade tricks instead of the 2 you would get if partner continued spades at trick 2.

How do you know whether a partner's signal is count or attitude? The most general rule is that you should signal attitude unless it is obvious that you are signaling count. Even in the example above where you held a doubleton, and played high-low (8 then 6) to show two, that was attitude in a sense. You wanted to encourage partner to play a 3rd round so you could trump the 3rd round.

Let's look at some examples where it is obvious partner is giving count.

Suppose partner leads the A of a suit and dummy holds the following cards:

♠ Q J 3 2

Partner knows that you can't have the Queen or Jack, since they are in dummy. Signaling attitude provides partner with no additional information, since he knows you have no honors in the suit. Therefore, your partner might as well signal count. If you are fortunate enough to have a doubleton, then partner knows he can give you a ruff. And if you have 3 or 4, then partner can figure out what declarer's holding is.

Let us look at a few specific examples:

♠ Q J 3 2

♠ A K 10 9

♠ 8 6

When partner leads the Ace and you play the 8, partner knows you have either a doubleton and are starting a high-low count signal or you have a singleton 8. In any case, he can play 3 rounds of the suit and give you a ruff, since he knows that if you started with two, declarer started with three.

Here is another example:

♠ Q J 3 2

♠ A K 10 9 7

♠ 8 6 2

When partner leads the Ace, you play the 2, showing 3 cards in the suit. Partner now knows that declarer started with a singleton, and realizes it would be foolish to try and cash the King, as declarer would ruff and the Q and J would both be good.

Here is one other common situation where count is important. Say dummy has a long suit with no outside entries and you hold the Ace. For example:

♠ K Q J 10 9

♠ A 8 7

You would like to hold up on the ace until declarer has played his last card in the suit. If you take your ace before declarer is out, declarer will score 4 tricks in spades. And if you delay taking your ace more than is required, then declarer will get an extra trick.

You have 8 cards between you and dummy. Therefore, partner and declarer have 5 between them. The most common situations are when declarer has three and partner has two, or vice-versa. Therefore, when declarer leads a low card from his hand you play low (not the Ace) and look carefully at what partner plays. A good partner knows this is a classic count situation and will give you count. If partner plays a low card, you can assume he has 3, and declarer started with two. So, you can take the 2nd round, confident that you have limited declarer to one spade trick. Similarly, if partner plays high, you can assume he started with two and declarer with three, and therefore you must hold up your ace until the 3rd round, again limiting declarer to two tricks, the minimum number of tricks to which he was entitled.

Suit Preference Signals

Thus far, we have been talking about playings cards in a suit to show what your holding is in that particular suit. And, in fact, the vast majority of the time, those are the defensive signals you will be using – attitude a majority of the time, and count on certain occasions.

However, there is one situation where you can play a card in one suit to show your attitude about a different suit. Let us say you are defending a 4H contract, partner leads the 2 of spades, and you observe the following:

S K Q J 10

H 7 6 5 3

D K 3

C K Q 2

S A 9 6 5 2

H 10 2

D A 8 7

C J 10 5

Let us assume you play that you lead high from 3 small. In that case, you are virtually certain that partner has a singleton spade. He cannot have a doubleton, because he would have led high. Similarly, he cannot have 3, because you can see all the honors, so if partner started with 3 small, he would have led a higher spade.

Therefore, if partner has 2 hearts, you can defeat the contract. You win the ace of spades and give partner a spade ruff. Then partner returns a diamond. You win the Ace and give partner another spade ruff. That gives your side 4 tricks.

Ah, but there is a fly in the ointment. How can you tell partner you want him to lead a diamond back as opposed to a club? If partner leads a club, you can be sure declarer will draw trump before partner has a chance for another spade ruff.

Well, it turns out there is a way. As you can see, it really does not matter which spade you return for partner to ruff, since they are all lower than dummy's spades. Therefore, you can assign different meanings to the different spades you might return. Here are the rules:

1. If you return your highest non-spade honor (the 9 in this case), that tells partner that, after trumping, you want him to return the higher of the remaining non-trump suits.
2. If you return your lowest spade (the 2 in this case), that tells partner that, after trumping, you want him to return the lower of the remaining non-trump suits.

What do I mean by the "higher" or "lower" of the remaining non-trump suits? Well, first of all, the "remaining non-trump suits" are clubs and diamonds. Just as diamonds are considered a higher suit in the bidding, they are also considered a higher suit in terms of this signaling convention.

So, on this hand, you would return the 9 of spades for partner to trump. Because you played a high spade, he would know that you want him to return the higher of the non-trump suits, diamonds in this case. He would therefore return a diamond, and you would defeat the hand.

If, on the other hand, you had the Ace of clubs, you would have returned the 2 of spades for partner to trump. Partner would then return the lower of the non-trump suits, clubs in this case.

This signal is known as a “suit preference” signal. By playing a certain card in one suit, it signals a preference for another suit.

This is the only suit preference signal I recommend you play.

Some people like to play a system known as Lavinthal discards, where every discard is a suit preference signal. I do not feel this is an effective system, because often times you have no preference and end up misleading partner. So I recommend you only use suit preference signals when returning a suit that you know partner will be trumping.