

The use of signals and discards in defence

Defence is usually considered to be more difficult than being declarer. This is because when we are declarer we can see both our and our partner's hands and can therefore plan the best approach for making the contract; in defence we can't see partner's hand so there is less certainty in how we go about trying to defeat the opponents' contract. In this article we are going to look at some ways that we can exchange information with our partner when defending.

Signals and discards

It's very useful when defending against no trump and suit contracts to provide your partner with as much information as you can regarding your hand. Ways of doing that include **signals**, which can be **attitude**, **suit preference** or **count signals**, and the **discards** you make when you cannot follow suit. It's important to realise that signals and discards **do not demand** a particular response from partner but they do provide information that partner can use to advantage.

Attitude signals

If partner **leads a low card** that is usually interpreted as showing interest in a suit and implies partner has an honour in that suit.

When partner **leads an honour** their partner uses attitude signals to indicate whether or not they like that suit. Some players play a (relatively) high card as encouragement to continue the suit – this is 'normal attitude' signalling whereas others prefer to use a low card to encourage – this is 'reverse attitude' signalling. Which system is used requires partnership agreement. In this article I'll use reverse attitude signalling - 'low to encourage'. Assuming we are playing 'low for encourage', then following the Q lead (implying the top of a sequence e.g. QJT9) partner would play the 2 from a K82 or A82 holding (encourage), the 4 from K854 (encourage), the 7 from 754 or 972 (discourage). These signals provide important clues to partner regarding the location of missing high cards.

A couple of simple examples follow. Let's say south is playing in a 4H contract and the distribution of spades is as shown below.

♠ 973
♠ AKT2 ♠ Q84
♠ J65

If east leads the ace of spades it is likely they also hold the king. Given west holds the queen they should encourage a spade continuation. So, using low for encourage, east should play the 4S – east-west then make three spade tricks.

If, however, the spade distribution is

♠ 973
♠ AKT2 ♠ J84
♠ Q65

then east should discourage continuation of the suit by playing the 8S. If east can get the lead later in the play south's QS can be trapped by leading the JS.

In the following example

♠ 984
♠ KQ3 ♠ J762
♠ AT5

if west leads the KH then east should encourage with the 2S.

But if the distribution is as follows

♠ 864
♠ KQ3 ♠ T972
♠ AJ5

Then east should discourage with the 7S.

There are, of course, exceptions to the use of signals in this way. For example, if partner leads the Q from the top of a sequence and you hold a doubleton - the AX or KX in the suit, then you must play the A or K on the first trick in order to unblock the suit.

Suit preference signals

Suit preference signals are used less commonly and generally in specific circumstances. Two of these circumstances are illustrated below.

Firstly, when you are playing a suit you expect partner to ruff, lead a high card to request the return of the higher side suit and lead a low card to request the return of the lower side suit.

In the example below the bidding went: 1H (S); 2D (N); 3D (S); 4H (N). You are sitting east and partner (west) leads the 5D.

Dlr: South ♠ J2
Vul: EW ♥ KQT4
 ♦ KQ82

♠	♣ QT9	♠ AT43
♥		♥ 8
♦ 5D lead		♦ AT43
♣	♠	♣ 8743
	♥	
	♦	
	♣	

The 5D lead screams out as a singleton based on the bidding and the visible hands. So east takes the AD and intends to return a diamond to allow their partner to ruff. East has another obvious entry, the ace of spades, so, after taking the AD should return the TD, their highest diamond, which requests the return of a spade. After taking the third trick with the AS, the lead of another diamond for a second ruff sinks the contract.

In the next hand the holdings are a little different.

Dlr: South ♠ J2
Vul: EW ♥ KQT4
 ♦ KQT2

♠	♣ QT9	♠ T943
♥		♥ 8
♦ 5D lead		♦ A843
♣	♠	♣ AJ43
	♥	
	♦	
	♣	

Now, after taking the AD on trick one, you should lead your lowest diamond, the 3D, to request the return of a club. Again this leads to a defeat of the contract.

Secondly, when partner leads a suit and when dummy is tabled it reveals a singleton in that suit, play a relatively high card to request the higher ranked side suit or a low card to request the lower side suit.

In the example below the bidding went: 1H (S); 2D (N); 3D (S); 4H (N). You are sitting east and partner (west) leads the AS.

Dlr: South	♠ 2	
Vul: EW	♥ KQT4	
	♦ KJT2	
♠ AS lead	♣ QJT9	♠ T63
♥		♥ 8
♦		♦ AQ4
♣		♣ A96432
	♠	
	♥	
	♦	
	♣	

When partner leads the AS and dummy reveals a singleton spade there is no point in using an attitude signal. Instead use a suit preference signal. Your diamonds are strategically placed over dummy's diamonds so you should signal for a diamond. This is the higher of the other two suits (diamonds and clubs) so play the TS. This then results in two diamond tricks and one club trick and again the contract is defeated.

Discards

When you cannot follow suit or ruff then the card you discard can be used to suggest interest in a particular suit. Some players use attitude discards where a high or low card in the suit discarded has the same meaning as they use in attitude signals (discussed above); others play odds (encourages the suit discarded) and evens (high to request the higher side suit and low to encourage the lower side suit); other players use revolving or rotating discards – a low card shows interest in the suit below the discard and a (relatively) high discard shows interest in the suit above the discard.

As with attitude signals it is obviously important to have partnership agreement on what system to use. In this article I will use revolving (rotating) discards.

In the following hand south is in 4S and west leads the KH followed by the AH.

Dlr: South	♠ Q92	
Vul: EW	♥ 9863	
	♦ A93	
♠ T5	♣ T86	♠ 7
♥ AKJT72		♥ 4
♦ 75		♦ JT8642
♣ A53	♠ AKJ8643	♣ KQJ92
	♥ Q5	
	♦ KQ	
	♣ 97	

On the second trick east discards the 2D, showing interest in clubs. West then leads the AC followed by another club and the contract is defeated. Without the information provided by partner's discard of the 2D west may have played a diamond or another heart, in both cases allowing declarer to win the trick and discard a losing club on a third diamond trick.

In the following hand south is in 4S and west wins the first three tricks with the A, K and Q of hearts.

Dlr: South	♠ K975	
Vul: EW	♥ T86	
	♦ KQ6	
	♣ K96	
♠ 6		♠ 4
♥ AKQ52		♥ 74
♦ T83		♦ A97542
♣ 7543	♠ AQJT832	♣ JT82
	♥ J93	
	♦ J	
	♣ AQ	

On the third trick east should discard a high club, say the TC, asking for a diamond lead. East wins the trick with the AD and the contract fails. On the fourth trick if west leads any card other than a diamond south will make their contract, eventually throwing the JD on the third club trick.

Count

Providing count information to partner can be helpful in several situations, both when defending against no trumps and suit contracts. When playing 'natural count' a (relatively) high card, followed by a lower card shows an even number of cards in the suit; a low card, followed by a higher card shows an odd number of cards in the suit.

Using count when defending against a no-trump contract

Sometimes when defending against a 3NT contract it is obvious that declarer is trying to establish a long suit in dummy e.g. KQJT4, but with no outside entries. Defence must try and stop communication between declarer and dummy by holding up their ace until declarer has no more cards left in that suit. The defender not holding the ace must inform their partner how many cards they hold in the suit so that the ace-holding defender can work out the number of cards declarer holds in the suit. They can then determine on which trick to play the ace. When declarer starts to play the suit the defender without the ace must provide a count signal – playing high indicates an even number of cards (usually two in this scenario) and playing low indicates an odd number of cards (usually three in this scenario).

In the following hand south is in 3NT and west leads the 5C.

Dlr: South ♠ 853
 Vul: Nil ♥ 964
 ♦ KQJ95

♠ J972	♣ 96	♠ T4
♥ 82		♥ QJT73
♦ 83		♦ A76
♣ KJ752	♠ AKQ6	♣ Q84
	♥ AK5	
	♦ T42	
	♣ AT3	

Declarer takes the third club trick with the AC breaking communication between the defenders.

Declarer can see six certain tricks and needs to establish dummy's diamonds to find the other three tricks. However, diamonds are the only possible entry to dummy so if east holds up the AD it is possible to defeat the contract. East needs to know how long to hold up the diamonds. When south plays a diamond towards dummy, west must show count in diamonds – by playing the 8D (a relatively high card) west is showing an even count in diamonds – almost certainly a doubleton. This means that declarer has three diamonds so east must hold up for two rounds and play their ace on the third round. That ends declarer's chance of making the contract.

In the next hand south is again in 3NT and west again leads the 5C.

Dlr: South ♠ 853
 Vul: Nil ♥ 963
 ♦ KQJT5

♠ 9652	♣ 96	♠ T4
♥ 82		♥ QJT74
♦ 942		♦ A73
♣ KJ752	♠ AKQJ	♣ Q84
	♥ AK5	
	♦ 86	
	♣ AT3	

Declarer takes the third club trick with the AC breaking communication between the defenders.

Declarer can see seven certain tricks and needs to establish dummy's diamonds to find the other two tricks. East again needs to know how long to hold up the diamonds. When south plays a diamond towards dummy west must show count in diamonds – by playing the 2D (a low card) west is showing an odd count in diamonds – almost certainly three cards. This means that declarer has

only two diamonds so east must hold up for only one round and play their ace on the second round. That limits declarer to eight tricks. Note that if east holds up for three rounds on this hand declarer will take nine tricks and make their contract.

Using count when defending against a no-trump contract or a suit contract

In one of their excellent books Seagram and Bird suggest the following additional approach to signalling and count:

- If partner leads the K (from a suit that may be AKXX or KQXX) then partner should give count;
- If partner leads the A (from a suit that may be AKXX or, unusually, AXXX) then partner should give attitude;
- Playing against a 5-level or 6-level contract if partner leads the A (from a suit that may be, unusually, AXXX) then partner should give attitude, encouraging only if holding the K.

In the following hand south is in 3NT. West leads the KS.

Dlr: South	♠ A76	
Vul: Nil	♥ QT82	
	♦ QJ73	
♠ KQT94	♣ K6	♠ 852
♥ A73		♥ 964
♦ 82		♦ T95
♣ 875	♠ J3	♣ QJ94
	♥ KJ5	
	♦ AK64	
	♣ AT32	

Dummy ducks and east plays the 2S, indicating an odd number of spades (hopefully not one!). West now knows that declarer (south) has only two spades and continues with the QS. If dummy ducks again a third spade draws the ace. Eventually declarer will have to play hearts enabling west to play their ace and make two more spades to defeat the contract .

In the next hand south is again in 3NT and west leads the KH.

Dlr: South	♠ KT7	
Vul: Nil	♥ 743	
	♦ AQ7	
	♣ JT84	
♠ 943		♠ J865
♥ AKJ95		♥ 82
♦ T6		♦ J983
♣ 765	♠ AQ2	♣ A92
	♥ QT6	
	♦ K542	
	♣ KQ3	

Dummy plays low and east plays the 8H, showing an even number of hearts, almost certainly a doubleton. Thus south must have three hearts including the QH. So west should now switch to another suit and hope east can get the lead and play their second heart through south. Eventually east will get in with the AC and play their 2H. West now takes four more heart tricks to put the contract down two.

Leading the K to get a handle on count can also be useful when defending suit contracts.

In the following hand south is in 4S. The bidding was: 1C (N); 1S (S); 2D (W); 2S (N); 4S (S).

Dlr: South	♠ AJ63	
Vul: Nil	♥ K53	
	♦ Q8	
	♣ KJ52	
♠ 9		♠ 85
♥ T74		♥ AQ962
♦ AKJT76		♦ 952
♣ T94	♠ KQT742	♣ 763
	♥ J8	
	♦ 43	
	♣ AQ8	

West leads the KD and east plays the 2D, indicating an odd number of diamonds. This is likely to be three, placing south with two diamonds, so west now plays the AD and takes a second trick. The defence now needs two more tricks and has to decide which suit to play. If east was a clever player they would play the 9D on the second trick, showing suit preference for the higher of the other two suits i.e. hearts. Even if that doesn't happen hearts should seem to be the best bet as it was the only suit not bid. Two heart tricks defeats the contract.

In the following hand south is in 5D and the defence needs three quick tricks if it is to defeat the contract.

Dlr: South	♠ K5	
Vul: Nil	♥ J6	
	♦ AKJ94	
♠ JT6	♣ QJT7	♠ 8742
♥ A842		♥ KT975
♦ 7		♦ 65
♣ K952	♠ AQ3	♣ 83
	♥ Q3	
	♦ QT832	
	♣ A64	

Since hearts have not been bid west decides to risk the AH lead. Showing attitude west plays the 5H, guaranteeing the KH in a five-level contract. A second heart trick is made and eventually west makes their KC to defeat the contract. If the defence did not take its heart tricks immediately declarer would be able to discard one of their heart losers on dummy's third spade.

In the next hand south is in 6S and west leads the KD hoping to score two quick diamond tricks.

Dlr: South	♠ J76	
Vul: EW	♥ J54	
	♦ Q963	
♠ 42	♣ 864	♠ 85
♥ K863		♥ T972
♦ AKJ5		♦ T842
♣ T93	♠ AKQT93	♣ 752
	♥ AQ	
	♦ 7	
	♣ AKQJ	

When west leads the KD east plays the 8D (high card) indicating an even number of diamonds. Given south is playing in 6S it is highly unlikely that south has three diamonds, so south's 7D is almost certainly a singleton. If west plays the AD, this will not only get ruffed but will also set up dummy's QD. West decides to safely exit with a trump and later in the play makes their KH to defeat the contract.

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