

Defense – Leads, Signals, Discards

Notes by Jim Rasmussen, Feb 12, 2008

Leads

Leads versus NT Contracts

Which suit? Good choices include

- Partner's bid suit
- Your longest and strongest suit
- A suit with a strong honor sequence
- The suit least likely to give away a trick

Which card in a suit?

- 4th best from Hxxx(x)
- Highest card in an honor sequence
- Top of nothing

Leads versus Suit Contracts

Which suit? Good choices include

- Partner's bid suit
- Suit with a singleton
- Suit with an honor sequence
- The suit least likely to give away a trick
- Trump suit

Which card in a suit?

- 4th best (or 3rd best from 3 cards)
- Highest card in an honor sequence
- Highest card from a doubleton

Leading After the First Trick:

- If partner made the opening lead -- and if you're in doubt about what to do when you gain the lead later in the hand -- return partner's suit. This is an especially valuable guideline to follow when defending notrump contracts.

- If you want to switch suits, choose to lead **through** strength and **up to** weakness. Ideally, you want the opponent who holds the most strength in a suit to be the **second** hand to play to the trick. You want the hand with weakness in the suit to be **fourth** to play to the trick.
- Don't be afraid to lead a suit that you know declarer will trump -- you can sometimes weaken his trump holding by doing so.
- Don't be afraid to lead a trump. If it appears that your other possible leads will risk giving declarer a trick, a trump can sometimes serve as a safe exit.
- **Don't** lead a suit if **both** declarer and dummy are void. This is called a "ruff -and-sluff", and it often gives up trick by letting declarer trump in one hand and throw a loser from the other hand.

Signals

To defend a bridge hand well, you need to be alert to -- and be able to process -- all the clues that are available. Some clues come from the bidding, which often gives you a general picture of who holds the length and strength in each suit. Other clues come from how declarer plays the hand. A third source of information comes from your partner who is often able to signal information about his length and honor holding in a suit. There are three basic signals:

Attitude Signal

Tells partner if you like the suit he just led and wish for him to continue playing the suit.
High-low encourages a continuation; low-high discourages

Count Signal

Tells partner if you have an even or odd number of cards in the suit being played.
High-low shows an even # of cards in the suit; low-high shows an odd #.

Suit Preference

Tells partner which suit you prefer led when he next wins a trick. A low card suggests a low ranking suit; a high card suggests a high ranking suit.

The signals are typically given in the following situations:

When partner leads a suit and there is no need for you to try to win the trick, you give an **attitude** signal.

When declarer is trying to set up a suit in dummy and there are no outside entries to the dummy, you give a **count** signal to tell partner how long to hold up his winner(s). Some partnerships also give a **count** signal the first time declarer leads a suit.

When you are leading a suit for partner to ruff and want to tell him which suit to return, you give a **suit preference** signal.

But remember: making the correct bridge play, for example winning a trick, always takes precedence over sending a signal!

Discards

Generally your first discard shows attitude toward the suit you are discarding. If attitude is already known, then it shows count.

Basic Attitude and Count Examples

Your partner leads the ♦Q, and you hold ♦K95. Play the 9, encouraging. Partner has will know you have either the A or K or both, and continue the suit to knock out declarer's A.

Your partner leads the ♣4, and you hold ♣J65. Dummy plays a low card. You must play the ♣J by the "third hand high" rule, and this is NOT an attitude signal. If you "signaled" with the 5, declarer could win the trick with a low card, an undeserved trick that you can't afford to give up. Your partner will probably deduce that the jack is your highest club and not continue the suit.

Your partner leads the ♠Q and you hold ♠A932. The dummy has ♠65. Your partner must have led from ♠QJT in NT or QJ if it is a suit contract. In NT you want to encourage partner to continue the suit, so play the 9. Declarer has the king and will probably take it. If you play the 3 to signal, partner doesn't see the 2 and might think declarer has it. The 9 is a clear encouraging signal. You found declarer's weak suit, and you want partner to keep playing it. If it's a suit contract, what to do is a little hard. What if partner has lots of spades, it might be right to play the A.

Your partner leads the ♥5, and dummy plays the ♥K. You have Q63, so signal with the 6. Partner will know you don't have the ♥A, or you would have played it.

If you have two good suits, it is best to discard a low card in the third suit, because you don't care which of your suit partner leads. If you do have a strong preference, encourage in that suit if possible.

Sometimes you can't safely discard from a suit because it would mean giving declarer an extra trick. If dummy has the ♠AKQ4, and you have ♠J983, that Jack is a trick, so you can't afford to discourage that suit. In this example, partner won't lead it anyway, but you get the idea. Learn to recognize which of your suits are stopping declarer from running winners.

If the opponents are playing in NT and dummy has ♣KQJT98 and you have ♣72 the first time clubs are played you should play the 7 and then the 2 the second round. This tells partner you have an even number of clubs, which can help them plan the defense.

Assume you are defending a 4S contract and hold A9632 in hearts. Declarer leads the suit before drawing trumps and when you win the ace, partner shows out. When you lead a heart for partner to ruff you can suggest which suit he return with a suit preference signal. The 2 of hearts asks for a club (the lower ranking suit) and the 9 of hearts asks for a diamond (the higher ranking suit).