

Basic Defensive Strategies

By Neil Kimelman

In this monthly feature I have been focusing on more advanced concepts in the play and bidding. I would now like to spend a few articles on some basic defensive plays, often the weakness of many partnerships.

Signalling to partner is very important. You want to tell them information that will be helpful to the defensive cause. One problem is there are a number of different ideas. So the goal of this series of articles is for you and your regular partners to form agreements in the below, and following, common situations.

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Introduction to Signalling

This is the way you legally communicate with partner when on defence. There are three distinct signals that you can use:

1. **Attitude.** This is the most common signal, and is primarily used when partner leads a high card in a suit, or leads any card, and declarer wins before you get a chance to play.

There are two primary ways to signal attitude, standard or upside down. Playing standard, a higher spot in the suit led shows interest in the suit being continued, while the opposite is true playing upside down. For technical reasons, most partnerships use upside down, and I will use this throughout this series of articles.

2. **Count.** This is the 2nd most used signal – telling partner how many cards you have in a given suit. It primarily applies when declarer is leading a suit, either from dummy or their hand.

There are also two primary ways to show count, standard or upside down. Playing standard, a higher spot in the suit led shows an even number of cards in a suit, while the opposite is true playing upside down. For technical

reasons, most partnerships use upside down, and I will use this method throughout this series of articles.

3. **Suit preference.** The least common signal, it tells partner what suit you wish them to lead, at their next opportunity. An unnecessary high card shows interest in the higher ranking suit, whereas a low card shows interest in the lowest ranking suit.

This is a powerful defensive tool, but is often used incorrectly, when count or attitude signal is applicable.

Suit preference has one common applications, when you set up a suit against a notrump contract, the spot card tells partner where your entry is located.

Signalling on opening lead*

**For the sake of this series I will assume 3rd and 5th best, and upside down count and attitude (UDCA).*

There are a variety of different situations that you will be faced with on opening lead. Let's go through the most common scenarios:

i) Partner leads the high honour, which shows the ace and king.

- If you want to encourage, play low. Easy and straightforward.
- If you want to encourage with a doubleton play low. This is not as clear cut. For example you do not want to encourage with a doubleton if you are void in trumps! (unless you want partner to cash their other high honour).

Another case where you want to discourage with a doubleton, is when you know a switch to a different suit will be better for the defence. Usually, the suit to which you want led is fairly clear.

- If you want to encourage when there is shortness in the dummy, play low. This treatment is not universal, but I strongly recommend this agreement. It is easy on the memory, and does not affect your ability to discourage (see below).

Example 1:

West North East South

1♠ Pass 2♠

4♠ All Pass

Your partner, North leads the ♥K.

Dummy

♠Q84

♥4

♦QJ952

♣Q103

You hold: ♠K753 ♥A652 ♦43 ♣876.

Encourage hearts, by playing the two. This will guarantee a trick for your king of spades, as you can duck the first two spade leads, and now dummy is out of trump.

- If you have the QJ in the suit led, play the Q. This always shows either a stiff queen or the Jack as well.

b) Partner leads anything else. Similar rules apply. You encourage by playing low if dummy wins the trick, otherwise play your highest card*, 3rd hand high, in order to build tricks for the defence.

*When playing 3rd hand high, play the lowest of two or more touching honours. So, for example if you hold KQJ, play the Jack. Playing an honour as 3rd hand, denies the card immediately below the card played. So in this example, the 3rd hand has denied the ten.

When dummy wins the trick and you have an honour sequence

One exception, when a high card is encouraging, is when you have an honour sequence. So, for example, if partner leads the three, and dummy wins the ace, and you hold QJ1093 in that suit, you show your sequence by playing the highest card, here the queen, the card you would have led on opening lead.

c) Partner leads a high honour in the suit you bid.

Assuming partner did not support you, there are two signals you want to send to partner:

1. Whether you want partner to continue the suit, and
2. If the lead is a singleton, which suit do you want partner to lead.