

Common Sense in Defense



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Suit preference signals

In a previous article, we discussed the normal “count or attitude” signal usually given on the opening lead. Let’s assume your partnership uses attitude as the primary signal.

After the opening lead, the next signal can often be suit preference. Suit preference simply means that the size of the spot or honor card you play might indicate preference for one of the remaining suits, excluding trumps. A high spot card signals interest in the higher ranking of the two remaining suits, and a low spot card suggests the lower suit, or no opinion.

Let’s say partner leads the ♥A or ♥K against a 3♠ contract, and the dummy has three low hearts. If you play the 2, then the 3 from a holding such as ♥9 3 2, your signals are not very informative. You may like the lower-ranking suit (clubs) or you may not like anything. But if you signal the 2, then the 9, and partner suspects that you have the 3 (perhaps declarer played the queen on the second round, for example), you have shown “interest” in diamonds, the higher ranking suit.

You probably have used suit preference signals already. Partner leads a singleton diamond against 4♥. When declarer plays trumps, you win the ace right away to play a diamond so partner can ruff it. The card you play for partner to ruff can indicate a way for partner to get back to your hand for another ruff — or to set up another defensive trick. Your low spot card tells partner to return a club after ruffing. A high spot suggests spades. That is probably the most common usage.

Here’s another example. You lead the ♠K against 3NT from:

♠K Q J 10 9 ♥A 2 ♦9 8 7 6 ♣9 8.

Declarer wins the ♠A on the third round, and starts playing the minor suits. You can’t signal to partner to play a heart to you when she gets in, because your heart spot is so low. But you can show your heart entry by the way you play your spades!

Play your spades from the top: king, queen and jack. Playing all high ones indicates suit preference for the higher of the remaining suits, hearts in this case. If you held the ♣A instead of the ♥A, play your spades in this order: king, of course, the standard lead, then the 9, to suggest clubs, the lower suit.

Suit preference at trick one by third hand is relatively rare. Just because you indicate no interest in the suit led, by playing a low card, it does not ask for the lower-ranking suit. It simply suggests a switch. Partner must look at the dummy and her hand and decide what to switch to. The “standard” switch is to the weaker or shorter suit in dummy. And common sense must always prevail. When there is a long, strong suit in dummy, assume partner will not switch to that suit.

I do recommend suit preference at trick one in these situations, which involve singletons:

1. Dummy has a singleton in the suit led, or it is obvious that continuation is futile. A good example of the latter is when partner leads the ace of a suit, dummy has K-Q-J, and you supported the suit! In this case, I sug-

gest you play that a high spot is suit preference for the higher of the remaining non-trump suits, a low card suggests the lower of the remaining non-trump suits, and a middle card says, “I don’t care, use your own judgment.” If you signal a middle card, partner may decide to switch, continue the “hopeless” suit or even play a trump.

2. If your partner is leading an obvious singleton, it is often possible to tell her where your possible entry is at trick one. Say the dummy has A-K-Q and your partner leads her singleton in that suit (you can usually tell when it is a singleton). Does partner care what your attitude is for that suit? Does she care how many cards you have in that suit? Not likely, so the size of the spot card you play at trick one can be suit preference. Let’s say partner led her singleton spade against a contract of 4♥, and dummy wins the queen from ♠A K Q. A low spot card such as the 2 or 3 suggests a possible club entry, and a high one, the 8 or 9, suggests diamonds.

There are many opportunities to help partner, and suit preference often plays a key role. It is best to agree that these signals are never commands. At most, they are “informational” or “suggestive.” □