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THIS new series aims to review and evaluate the various signalling (and discarding) methods popularly employed by club and tournament players in this country.

Why is it useful to have a method of signalling to your partner?

Since bridge is a game in which facial expressions or physical signals are not permitted, it is important to have a means of communicating beyond the bidding. Thus, various signalling methods have appeared over time, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.

These methods also entail varying degrees of complexity to the extent that confusion reigns for many social and club players.

When do signals occur?

When playing as a defender, it is possible to give a signal after partner has led, when declarer leads, or when throwing away (discarding).

For all signalling methods, the underlying principle is that when faced with a choice of cards to be played, different meanings can be attached to each choice.

This is a point that is often misunderstood, as one can only signal when faced with a choice of cards, and a played card cannot perform two duties at the same time. Therefore, one cannot try to win a trick and signal at the same time!

Let's start by considering the most common form of signal employed when partner has led ...

The Attitude signal

A new series exploring signalling and discarding methods

The Attitude signal

Attitude signals are most useful when partner has led a high (honour) card which you cannot beat. Given that you will not be expected to win the trick, you will now be free to tell partner how you feel about his choice of lead. Throughout this article, I shall assume that standard leads are played.

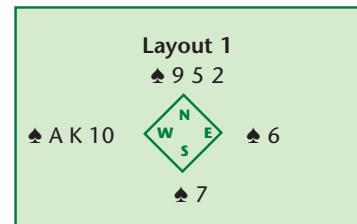
For example, defending against a 4♦ contract, your partner leads the ace of hearts (showing the king in that suit), and dummy has ♦4-3-2. Without the use of signals, your partner would be inclined to assume that he has found a good suit to attack, and would doubtless continue with the king of hearts at trick two and would probably play a third heart at trick three. This would be a good idea if you held the queen of hearts or a doubleton heart (in which case you could trump), but would not work so well if declarer was now able to win the third trick with the heart queen.

Using Attitude signals, at trick one, you can tell partner whether you wish him to continue playing hearts (assuming you have a choice of cards to follow with). The 'standard' way to do this is to throw a *high* card to *encourage* the opening lead, or a *low* card to *discourage* the lead ('*Low means No!*'). Those who employ 'reverse', or 'upside-down' signals convey the same meanings in the opposite way, so a high card is discouraging, whilst a low card would encourage the lead.

How do you know whether partner has played a high card or a low card?

This is often a stumbling block for those coming to terms with the idea of signalling. Two main principles are commonly used. One is that 'high' and 'low cards' are assumed to be non-honour cards (two through the nine). The second is that it is the relative value of the card which is important.

In practice, a two will always be deemed to be low, and a nine will be assumed to be high, whilst a card like a five or a six will often appear ambiguous. However, if the opening leader can see the two, three, four and five of the suit led between his hand and the dummy, then partner's six will be his attempt to play low. And if the opening leader can see none of the two, three, four and five, then it will be fair to assume that partner is trying to play high when throwing his six. For example:



You, West, lead the ace, East follows with the six, and South plays the seven. Has East encouraged or discouraged?

Though East's play of the six may appear hard to interpret, it is likely that he was attempting to encourage. Unless South holds both the three and four (and has managed to conceal both of them), then East has played one of his higher cards. He may have started with Q-6-4-3, or Q-6 and either the four or the three. Either way, West will usually do best to continue the suit.

Should one ever signal with an honour card?

Signalling with an honour is less frequent, but the principle is that *one should signal with an honour in the same way that one would lead an honour*. Therefore, if partner leads the ace of hearts, then throwing the queen of hearts is indicative of either of two things:

1. This is the third player's only card;
2. The third player also holds the ♥J.

This idea is useful, as it means that the opening leader can continue with a low card at trick two, knowing that either partner can win with the jack of hearts, or he can trump. It also follows that if the third player holds $\heartsuit Q-x$, he should not throw the $\heartsuit Q$ under the ace of hearts, but instead play his small card. If the opening leader can judge to continue with the king of hearts at trick two, his partner will have to play the queen, but the opening leader will now know that partner has no more cards left in the suit.

How does the third player know whether to encourage the opening lead?

Again, the general principle is to ask yourself whether you would like partner to continue playing the suit he has led (either at the next trick, or when he later regains the lead). This is usually the case when holding an honour adjacent to the one partner has led. Thus, when partner leads the ace, you assume he has the king, and signal *encouragement* when holding the queen. Had partner led the king, you would assume he held the queen, and thus signal encouragement when holding the ace or the jack.

Efficient use of Attitude signals, however, requires a good deal of intelligence and logical thinking, as a signal should be given in the context of the whole deal, and it may be necessary to discourage the opening lead with an apparently useful holding if the third player would prefer the opening leader to switch suit. Consider the following two situations:

- Defending a spade contract, partner leads the $\heartsuit A$, and you hold a doubleton heart. Should you always encourage the opening lead? If dummy also has a doubleton heart, it will only be a good idea for partner to play the king of hearts and a third heart if you can overruff dummy. If, however, your trumps are too low, it will be better to discourage the opening lead.
- Once again defending a spade contract, partner leads the $\heartsuit A$ and, as East, you can see the cards in layout 2 (top of next column). How should you signal? If you encourage with the nine of hearts, West will likely play the king of hearts followed by a third heart. Even if South follows to the third round of hearts, you may no longer win two diamond tricks.

Layout 2			
♠ K Q 7		♠ 9 5 4	
♥ 8 5 3		♥ Q 9 2	
♦ K 5		♦ A Q 7 3	
♣ A K Q J 6		♣ 10 7 3	
			

However, if you discourage with the heart two, West should switch to diamonds (dummy's weakest suit after hearts), and you can win your ♦A-Q before reverting to hearts.

Should the opening leader always defend in line with partner's signal?

It is important to appreciate that signals work best when used as a means of providing information rather than giving commands. So, it will not always be necessary to receive a signal to determine the best line of defence. If the opening leader holds $\heartsuit A-K-Q$, he will lead the ace of hearts and partner will not surprisingly discourage. This does not mean that the opening leader should automatically change suit. It is simply the third player's way of saying that he cannot win the third round of the suit. However, if dummy has three low cards, the opening leader can win the third trick himself, and does not need his partner to tell him what to do!

If however, the opening leader held $\heartsuit A-K-J$, then his partner's discouragement would mean that switching suit would be a very good idea, as continuing with the king would promote declarer's queen of hearts (if declarer holds three or more cards in the suit).

Why are Attitude signals most useful when partner leads a high card?

If the opening leader starts with a low card, it will be necessary for the third player to try to win the trick, and it will therefore not be possible to give a signal.

If declarer starts the trick, then there is an assumption that this suit will not usually be the best suit for the defenders to continue playing, so it is more useful to give another form of signal, which we shall cover in the next issue. 

CLUB PLAYER'S BIDDING QUIZ

ON each of the following problems, you are West. What should you bid with each hand on the given auction?

Julian Pottage gives the correct answers on page 44.

Hand 1	W	N	E	S
♠ 10 8 6 ♥ A K 10 8 5 4 ♦ 7 ♣ Q 7 4				1♠ ?

Hand 2	W	N	E	S
♠ A K J 10 4 2 ♥ J ♦ 9 2 ♣ A Q J 10 5				1♦ ?

Hand 3	W	N	E	S
♠ Q ♥ 4 ♦ A K J 5 2 ♣ A K 10 6 4 3				1♠ Pass ?

Hand 4	W	N	E	S
♠ 7 6 3 2 ♥ A K 10 9 8 ♦ J 9 ♣ Q J	Pass	Pass	1♦ Pass 1♥ Pass	3♦ Pass ?

Hand 5	W	N	E	S
♠ A K 3 ♥ A Q J ♦ A Q J ♣ K Q 10 9	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass ?

Hand 6	W	N	E	S
♠ A 9 5 ♥ A J 10 7 ♦ A J 8 ♣ 10 9 3	1NT	Pass	2♦* 2♣ ?	*Transfer to hearts