

# Carding Agreements

By Neil H. Timm

On the back of the ACBL convention card, there is the section called **DEFENSIVE CARDING**. Within the designated area, there are three basic sections labeled: Standard, Upside-Down, **FIRST DISCARD**, and **OTHER CARDING**.

This section of your card should be completed by all Club members since it conveys to your opponents your defensive carding agreements. Before declarer play the opponents may look at your card to understand more fully your agreements. A blank section conveys no information. And, if it is blank one may not understand what you should say regarding your agreements, if you have any! Hence, how do you complete this section of the card? We treat each section in some detail to help you complete your card.

Note that the defensive carding section has two columns: vs. SUITS and vs. NT. These are separate because the procedures you employ versus each of these contracts may be different.

The first section is marked as Standard:          vs SUIT          vs NT  
    ,

## Standard (THIS MEANS THAT YOU DO THE FOLLOWING)

Give Count as Follows.

High-low shows an even number of cards in that suit, while low-high shows an odd number of cards.

Give Attitude as Follows:

A high card shows interest in that suit, low-high shows disinterest.

Show Suit Preference as Follows when Obvious (Partner Leads an Ace and a King is in Dummy)

Playing a low card shows preference for the lower-ranking off-suit (not trump and not the suit led); playing a high card shows preference for the higher-ranking off-suit.

If these definitions describe your agreement, check the boxes under **vs SUITS** and/or **vs NT**. This is the default method of discards; hence the term Standard. If you have some exceptions, check the **Except** box and write them in the lines provided.

The next section of the card is labeled Upside-Down (WHAT IS THIS?)

## Upside-Down:

If your agreement is the opposite of standard, then you are playing upside-down. While it is permissible to play any combination of standard and upside-down signals against suits

and notrump, you must mark your card correctly and CLEARLY. Check the appropriate boxes to indicate when you play these discards. Either note the upside-down portions as exceptions or draw a line from the **Except** box to the appropriately checked boxes under **Upside-Down**:

The next section of the card is labeled **FIRST DISCARD**.

#### **FIRST DISCARD:**

On these lines, describe your discards. If you check nothing, you are announcing standard discards, with the emphasis on attitude.

#### **Lavinthal**

Check this box if you tend to discard suits you don't like while giving suit preference for other suits. A low card says you dislike the suit led, but like the lower of the other two suits excluding the suit led. A high card says you dislike the suit led, but like the higher of the two suits excluding the suit led.

#### **Odd/Even**

Check this box if you discard odd-ranked cards to encourage in the suit led and even-ranked cards to discourage in that suit, where again a low even card again says you like the lower of the other two suits and a high even card says you prefer the higher of the other two suits, excluding the suit led.

Whatever it is you are playing, either check the appropriate boxes or write it on the line and check whether it applies **vs SUITS** and/or **vs NT**.

The final section of the section is labeled **OTHER CARDING**.

In this section, list other defensive signals that you play. We explain each in turn.

#### **Smith Echo**

Devised and published in 1963 in the "British Bridge World" magazine by I.G. Smith – of Great Britain. The Smith Echo is an attitude signal most often used against notrump contracts to show partner either the desire to continue leading the opening suit, or to switch to another suit. Unlike the usual suit signals, the Smith echo is not made on the opening lead but when declarer is next on lead.

When declarer begins to run his own or dummy's long suit, a high-low signal in this suit by the defenders (opening leader and partner) has the following meaning:

If made by partner of the opening leader, it shows good support for the opening lead and asks partner to continue the suit led when regaining the lead. If made by the opening leader, it says that the suit led was weak and that partner should switch to another suit when gaining the lead.

When playing defense, we are all taught to return partner's suit! However, consider the following situation.

North	
♠ 8 3 2	
♥ 9 4	
♦ A Q 3	
♣ A 10 8 6 3	
West	East
♠ A Q 10 4	♠ J 9 6 5
♥ Q 10 5 3	♥ J 8 6
♦ 7 6	♦ 10 9 2
♣ 9 4 2	♣ K 7
South	
♠ K 7	
♥ A K 7 4	
♦ K 8 5 4	
♣ Q J 3	

Against 3NT, West leads fourth best 3♠ which was covered by East's Jack; declarer wins the King and returns the ♣Q and west sees that that declarer has four club tricks, possibly 3 diamonds and two hearts. The only hope in setting the contract is in spades. Playing Smith Echo, West follows with the 9♣ telling partner NOT TO RETURN HEARTS. Winning with the ♣K, East does not return a heart, his partner's lead. He can see that the only possible return is a spade: for down one!

For pairs that use UDCA singles, they use Reverse Smith Echo.

The Smith Echo is not used when declarer is not running his or dummy's long suit but is attempting to knock out defender's stoppers, nor can it be used when playing a high card can cost a trick (for this reason some play reverse Echo, low-high encourages) or if declarer is trying to establish dummy's length lacking side entries. A disadvantage of the Smith Echo is that it interferes with partnerships that use count signals on leads. But, because attitude signals are more common some may want to incorporate into their carding agreement.

When used against a suit contract, the long suit is usually the trump suit.

### Foster Echo

This carding procedure was devised by Robert Frederick Foster of New York. He also invented the "rule of eleven".

There are several versions of this convention used primarily against notrump. One is used when the opening lead is an honor and the 3<sup>rd</sup> hand wants to show 4 cards in the suit headed by an honor.

With 4 cards, the Foster echo always begins by following with the third highest card. If the suit lacks an honor, on the second round partner follows with the 4<sup>th</sup> highest card, but if headed by an honor one follows with the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest. For example, suppose you (3<sup>rd</sup> hand) hold:

Hand (1) 8 7 5 2    Hand (2) Q 7 5 2

And, partner leads the king, with hand (1) you play the 5 followed by the 2 (high-low: have no honor); with hand (2) the 5 is followed by the 7 (low-high: have an honor). This version of Foster echo allows the opening leader to locate the missing honors in the suit and to help choose the right continuation. If you were playing the up-side down carding system, one would discard the 8 with hand (1) to discourage and the 2 with hand (2) to encourage. This shows count when you cannot beat dummy.

Another version (less used) combines an unblocking play with giving count. If the third hand cannot top either the card led or the card played by dummy, he follows with his second highest card; with a 4-card holding, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> round plays the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest card, next the highest, reserving the lowest for the last round. However, with a 3-card holding, on the first round partner also plays the second-highest card in the suit and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> round the highest card. This may cause some ambiguity if the suit is headed by two honors. Holding, for example, Q-10-x or J-10x partner would play the 10 on the first round, hence the leader doesn't know if the higher honor is the queen or the Jack.

Or just remember, depending on your carding agreement, simple give count when you cannot beat the card in dummy on partner lead!

### **Trump Suit Preference**

The most basic trump echo signal is when declarer begins to draw trump. A high-low shows an odd number of trumps and a low-high shows an even number (upside-down count). Instead of showing count, it is often better to tell partner where your strength is outside the trump suit (trump suit preference). Now going up the line shows strength in a lower-ranking suit and high-low shows strength in a higher-ranking suit.

**SPECIAL CARDING PLEASE ASK:** Check this box if you have agreements that are unusual and/or cannot be clearly noted on the card. As Declarer it is always a good idea to check a defender's card and ask questions when you see that this box has been checked. For example, Against notrump contracts many agreements include coded 9's and 10's. If not noted on the convention card, YOU HAVE TO ASK.

The carding system that a partnership employs is critical to a successful defense. An effective carding system is the only mechanism the partnership has to convey information in defense of a contract.

Signals employed by a partnership fall into three general categories:

1. Attitude signals show whether or not one should continue or discontinue a suit lead.
2. Counts signals show suit length
3. Suit preference asks partner to lead a specific suit. We look at each of these in turn and make recommendations for carding agreements playing any strong two club system or Precision.

### **Attitude signals**

The most widely used attitude signal used worldwide is the “standard” echo (the high-low signal or come-on signal). Using this method against suit or notrump contracts, a high card is encouraging and a high-low signal shows a doubleton. In suit contracts, one is more likely to use the echo while in notrump a low card is used to discourage. Knowing that the opponents are using standard signals, declarer may false card by playing a higher card than necessary, rather than a low one, to interfere with the defenders.

Even though the standard method is used by many players around the world, a superior method is to employ “upside-down” signals. The method reverses the standard signal. Now low is good, high is bad and low-high shows a doubleton! Why waste high cards to encourage. Now a low-high signal shows a doubleton. Furthermore it is harder for declarer to falsecard since only a single card is needed to show encouragement.

Let’s look at an example:

In notrump you hold (1) A43 and partner holds KJ102. Playing standard singles partner has a problem. Using the standard method (high-low) what do you discard? Playing upside-down, you do not have a problem, discard the two.

Suppose you hold (2) KQ106 and partner holds 985, and you lead the king seeing 43 in the Dummy. Partner plays the five and declarer plays the seven. Playing standard signals, does partner have J952 or A52? Declarer holds AJ72 and false cards the seven. Playing upside-down signals, partner discards the nine and declarer is unable to falsecard.

**Recommendation: If you play standard attitude signals, consider changing to upside-down signals. They are the superior of the two methods.**

Is there an even better method? Yes, it is called Scanian Signals developed by the Swedish bridge expert Anders Wirgren co-author of the book “I fought the Law of Total Tricks” with Mike Lawrence.

The method is based upon the following principles:

1. The method used should not give away tricks.
2. The method should be able to give partner accurate information.
3. The method should not block partner's suit in a notrump contract.
4. The signaling rules should be easy.

The Scanian Signal method uses both standard and upside-down signals:

Upside-down signals are used when

(a) Dummy has a finessable card or (b) if partner has 4+ cards in the suit led

Standard signals are used when partner has at most three cards in the suit led.

Simple, but how does the opening leader know whether partner is "long" or "short"?

The signaler is consider "long" (upside-down used) if

1. He has bid a suit.
2. When he has made a lead directing double.
3. When the lead is top-of nothing or shortness.
4. Dummy has a finessable card.

If the rules make the signaler short (and dummy has no finessable card), standard signals are use.

Using these guidelines in our two examples, one has four cards in the suit led, so one uses upside-down signals. In the second example, one uses standard and discards the nine.

For more information on this method, one may consult the 1991 "The Bridge World Magazine".

### **Count signals**

Attitude signals usually have priority over count signals. The count signal is particularly useful when dummy has a long suit which may be established when there is no outside entry to the suit and when it is obvious that a hold-up by the defenders is necessary. They are used in the following situations.

1. Against notrump when an ace is lead and partner does not have an honor to unblock?
2. When partner's lead is won in dummy by the queen or lower (both against a suit contract or notrump).
3. When declarer leads his own suit toward dummy's long suit or tries to establish his own suit.

Playing standard count signals, high-low shows and even number of cards and low-high shows an odd number. Alternatively, one may reverse this sequence know as upside-down signals. Now the reverse is true, high-low implies odd number of cards, and low-high is an even number.

Again while most partnerships play “standard” count singles, upside-down is again superior.

Let’s look at an example.

	Q964	
AJ3		102
	K875	

Declare leads the four toward his hand and east wants to show his doubleton; using the standard method (high-low), he must use the 10. Now declarer covers with the king and west plays the ace. Next declarer finesses west’s jack and takes three tricks in the suit. If instead upside-down carding is used, east plays the two and declarer can make only two tricks in the suit.

**Recommendation: If you play standard count signals, consider changing to upside-down signals. They are the superior of the two methods.**

### **Suit preference signals**

#### **(1) When the opponents are on lead and you cannot follow suit**

Playing standard carding, a high card shows the suit partner likes while a low card shows a suit partner does not like. Similarly, playing upside-down carding, a low card shows a suit one likes and a high card discourages. With either method, playing a discouraging card never shows the suit one wants. This is a disadvantage of both methods. Playing the standard method, why would you discard a high card for suit preference? Clearly, a low card is better (the upside-down method).

Is there a better method? Yes, it is called Modified Lavinthal discards. Using this method, low is good (encouraging), shows the suit you want and high is discouraging. A high card is discarded in a suit you do not want; this means you want the highest ranking suit in notrump contracts, (in suit contract, the trump suit is excluded).

The Modified Lavinthal option is not the same as Lavinthal discards, hence the word “Modified”. Using Lavinthal discards, any suit discarded is not wanted. A low card indicates the lower of the other two suits in a suit contract (excluding the trump suit) and the lower of the other three suits in notrump contracts. A high card discourages showing

the highest of the other three suits in notrump and the higher of the non-trump suits in a suit contract.

**Recommendation: Use Modified Lavinthal discards to show suit preference against both suit and notrump contracts.**

An alternative to Lavinthal discards is a method known as revolving discards. For this method the suits form a circle ♠ - ♥ - ♦ - ♣ - ♠. Discarding a low card in one suit asks partner to lead the next lower ranking suit (ignoring the trump suit in suit contract); and discarding a high card calls for the next higher ranking suit (ignoring the trump suit). Again, one never asks for a lead in which a discard is made.

Revolving discards are very similar to the Lavinthal discard method. The advantage of both methods is flexibility.

Another method is called odd-even discards; it is similar to the Modified Lavinthal carding method. Now however, only an odd card is discarded to indicate the desired suit (not just a low card). A low even card is discouraging suggesting the lower of the others suits (not the suit led). Similarly, a high card suggests the higher of the other suits (again excluding the suit led). Modified Lavinthal is superior to the odd-even carding method; however, the odd-even method is superior the Lavinthal.

## **(2) When partner is on lead and you need to signal a shift**

In a suit contract, they are useful when dummy has a singleton. They are also useful when you lead a singleton and partner has an entry in a side suit which allows him to return the suit for a ruff. And they may be used in notrump contracts to tell partner where he has an entry allowing him to cash some established cards.

Playing standard signals, a high card denotes a shift to a higher ranking suit and a low card denotes a shift to a lower ranking suit. Alternatively, you may also employ upside-down suit preference signals. Now low means a higher ranking suit and high means a lower ranking suit; again, the opposite of standard.

**Recommendation: Do not use upside-down signals for suit preference on leads.**

**Finally, if partner leads the Ace or Queen, attitude is usually being requested, while a King lead requests count. The primary signal when partner leads is attitude; however, when the opponents lead, give count.** Again, discuss this with your partner.

Other agreements include coded 9's and 10's and Rusinow leads; among others.