

SIGNALING

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- **Attitude Signal:** This is generally made in response to Partner's lead. For example, in a suit contract, Partner's opening lead is in a side-suit, let's say the $\heartsuit Q$. Dummy goes down with $\heartsuit A54$, and you (sitting over Dummy) hold $\heartsuit K962$. Dummy plays the Ace, and you show the King by encouraging with the Nine. With a lesser holding such as $\heartsuit 962$ you would have discouraged with the Two.
- **Count Signal:** This one is generally made when Declarer (or Dummy) leads the suit. If either defender plays a spot card he will usually indicate his length in the suit ... a high card shows an even number, a low card shows an odd number. This information helps the defenders build a picture of the whole hand, but Declarer is also watching the defenders' signals, so it doesn't pay to be known as a player who slavishly gives count signals (particularly when you happen to hold **J987** sitting in front of Dummy's **AKQ106!**)
- **Suit Preference Signal:** This occurs when your carding indicates a preference for one of the "other two suits". Perhaps an example will make things less unclear ...

	\spadesuit A J 9 8 6 \heartsuit K Q 7 4 \diamondsuit 7 \clubsuit Q J 8	
\spadesuit 10 \heartsuit 10 6 5 2 \diamondsuit A K 10 6 \clubsuit A 6 5 4	<i>North</i> <i>West</i> <i>East</i> <i>Declarer</i>	\spadesuit 5 2 \heartsuit -- \diamondsuit Q 8 5 4 3 2 \clubsuit 10 9 7 3 2
	\spadesuit K Q 7 4 3 \heartsuit A J 9 8 3 \diamondsuit J 9 \clubsuit K	

N-S Vul

	<i>South</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>
1 \spadesuit		Dbf	4 \diamondsuit	4NT!
Pass		5 \diamondsuit	5 \spadesuit	Pass
Pass		Dbf	All Pass	

A spirited auction! 4 \diamondsuit was a splinter, and that bold 4NT was for the minors. 5 \diamondsuit would be down one, but N-S took the push to 5 \spadesuit , and West optimistically doubled.

West cashed a Diamond, and East ostentatiously dropped the Queen. Did she pull the wrong card? Not at all! With a Diamond singleton on the board there was no need for East to give an attitude signal. That $\diamondsuit Q$ was in fact a **suit preference** signal. West was presumably going to shift at Trick 2 to a Heart or a Club, and East was expressing a very strong opinion as to which she preferred ... a high card for the higher-ranking suit, low for the lower, and middling with no particular preference. West could smell a ruff in the air, and returned the Heart Two. That also was suit preference for Clubs! Then, after the Heart ruff, East returned the Club Ten. Yet more suit preference! East was saying "Lead the higher suit (again), I still have a trump left!" Three suit preferences for the price of one! And +500 too!

Attitude Signal

Good signaling makes for good defense, and builds partnership trust. But, trying to spoil this happy picture is Declarer whose job is to confuse the defenders and sow partnership distrust. For example, West is on lead against a suit contract and leads the Ace of a suit he has shown in the bidding:

	Q 7 3		Q 7 5
A K 10 8 4		J 9 5	
	6 2		3
			J 9 6 2

- In the first case, East plays the Five. She hopes that West will read this as low, and therefore from an odd number (presumably three), so that he will know not to try and give East a ruff. But Declarer (South) can throw a wrench in the works by playing the Six. Now West might read East's Five as high (from Five Two), and try to give Partner a ruff. Instead he gives Declarer a chance to throw a loser on Dummy's Queen.
- In the second case, South must play the Two, hoping that West will read his Partner's Three as low from, say, J63. Playing the Two is the only way to avert the ruff, as it gives West a chance to misread the situation.

Studying suit combinations can make the eyes glaze over, but fortunately there is a useful rule. *"Declarer signals as if he was a defender!"* Yes, really! Look again at the first layout ... Declarer wants to encourage a continuation so he plays the "encouraging" Six. And in the second layout Declarer wants to discourage a continuation, so he plays the "discouraging" Two. Amazing (and useful) stuff!

Bear in mind that Declarer's clever carding is not guaranteed to fool the defenders, but it does give them a chance to guess wrong. If we give them enough guesses they are sure to get some of them wrong.

Let's test our discovery on one more eye-glazing suit combination:

	8 4 2	
Q J 10 9		7
	A K 6 5 3	

The auction went 1NT-3NT and West unwittingly attacks Declarer's strong suit. Declarer ducks the first trick in the hope that West will persist, thereby speeding up the establishment of the suit. As he wants West to continue, Declarer will "encourage" by playing the Five. West will notice that the Three is unaccounted for, and may well place his Partner with some holding such as K73.

Smith Echo

The Smith Echo is a form of attitude signal and is best explained by an example.

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

<i>South</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>
1NT	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♦	Pass	3NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

West led a low Spade and Declarer won East's Jack with the Ace! Yes, really! Declarer didn't need a second Spade trick, but he did want to avoid a Heart shift and that extravagance in the Spade suit was just the way to do it. At Trick 2, Declarer led a Diamond to the board, and lost the Club finesse to West's King. Poor West was completely duped into assuming that East had the ♠Q and so he led another low Spade. A chortling Declarer scooped up 10 tricks!

You may be wondering where the Smith Echo was in that line of play. Actually, there wasn't one, and that allowed Declarer's dastardly deception to work. But, playing Smith, when Declarer leads a Diamond at Trick 2, East signals with the Nine (high means "I like your opening lead"), or the Three (low means "I don't"). On the actual deal, East plays the Three, alerting West to Declarer's shenanigans. Now a Heart shift sinks the contract.

So, what happens in Smith is that we signal our approval or disapproval of the opening lead by our carding in *Declarer's* suit. Both defenders can use Smith, it's not restricted to the Partner of the opening leader. Smith is generally used only in No Trump contracts.

Trump Suit Preference

In a suit contract the defenders can exchange **suit preference** signals by the order in which they play their trump spots. Suppose that you were dealt Six-Four in trumps. Playing "normally" is the Four then the Six, and that conveys no special message. But playing Six-Four is a suit preference signal, indicating interest in the higher-ranking side-suit. Of course, there are three side-suits, so disregard the one that was the opening lead.

If you were dealt Six-Four-Two there are all sorts of sequences in which to play them. But let's, for the time being, keep it simple ... high-low shows interest in the higher-ranking suit ... low-high is neutral, sending no particular message.

Count Signals

Here's a common situation. You are defending 3NT, dummy is on your right, holding ♣KQJ105. Just like this, in fact:

	<i>Dummy</i>	
	♣ K Q J 10 5	
<i>Partner</i>		<i>You</i>
???		A 7 3
	<i>Declarer</i>	
	???	

Dummy has some other cards, of course, all of them worthless. In other words, dummy has no entries outside Clubs. Declarer would like to knock out the ♣A and then rattle off the rest of the suit, scoring four tricks. You must stop him by holding up the Ace. If you win the first round, that's just giving up (unless Declarer has a singleton). If you win the second round and Declarer has three Clubs, that's not good either. And it's also not a good idea to win the third round, only to discover that Declarer started with two Clubs. If that happens, then Declarer will have scored two Club tricks, when the defense could have held him to one. So, the task at hand is to take the Ace at the right time ... not too soon ... and not too late. Enter count signals.

- A. Declarer leads the Two, Partner plays the Four. That's easy! Partner has played the lowest missing Club and therefore has an odd number (1 or 3). So Declarer has 4 or 2. If it's 4, you cannot shut out the Clubs, so hopefully it's 2 and you duck the first Club and win the second.
- B. Declarer leads the Two and Partner plays the Eight. That Eight looks big, and high-low shows an even number. If Partner has 4 Clubs, then Declarer is singleton and you should grab your Ace ... if Partner has 2 Clubs, then the Ace must wait until the third round. Which is it? If Partner has 4 Clubs, they are 9864, and with such a holding he would play the *Nine*, following the rule that we always make the signal as clear as possible. So Partner has 2 Clubs (84 or 86), and you must hold up to the third round.
- C. Declarer leads the Six and Partner plays the Four. Where's the Two? At first glance, it seems that Partner is playing high-low from 42, but not so fast! If Declarer is a tricky fellow he may have concealed the Two and led the Six from 62. Now you are in a bit of a fix. When the second Club is led from the board you must make a decision ... do you play the Ace guessing that Declarer started with 62 and false-carded with the Six on the first round? ... or do you duck again guessing that Declarer is playing up-the-line from 986? Good luck on that one! The safe play is to hold up a second time, that's less costly if it's the wrong guess.

Count signals can certainly help the defense, but Declarer would be negligent if he failed to false card in these situations. There's no need to work out all the spot combinations, just delay playing your lowest spot, and hope something good happens (like the defense misguessing in Example C), which it often will!

Suit Preference

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

E-W Vulnerable

South	West	North	East
2♣	2♦	Pass	Pass
4♠	All Pass		

Looking at all four hands it is not difficult to see how E-W can defeat 4♠. The defense goes:

Heart to East's Ace

Heart ruff

Diamond underlead to East's King

And now the setting trick is a second Heart ruff.

But how many E-W pairs would find the winning defense at the table?

Well, first of all, to beat the contract West has to hit upon that Heart lead. Once that hurdle is cleared, East gets to make the key play after winning his ♥A. He's going to give Partner his ruff, of course, but which Heart will he return? Yes, it's a suit preference situation. East has the ♦K which may be an entry back to his hand to give West a second Heart ruff. So East returns a high Heart, requesting a return of the high suit (Diamonds), not the low suit (Clubs). If East had no preference, he would return a middling Heart.

Pretty simple, eh? Yes, but there are still a couple of hurdles to clear. First, East must make his suit preference signal *as clear as possible!* The Six isn't high enough, it looks kind of middling. Even the Nine is not crystal clear, that could look like the middle card from an original holding such as AJ96. No, the best way to make things obvious is to send back the Jack!

The final hurdle is West's. That return of the ♥J sure looks like a high card. But West will not be happy if he underleads his ♦A only to see Declarer win her singleton King! In these situations it's important to:

- (a) Signal reliably and consistently
- (b) Trust your Partner!

Three Bad Habits

Bad Habit #1:

7 5 3
J 8 6 2 K Q 4
A 10 9

West leads the Six, East plays the King and Declarer's Ace wins the trick. That was a mistake by East of course. When playing in third (or fourth) seat, the defender should play the lowest card he can to get the job done. In this case, the job to be done is to force out the Ace and not let Declarer win the trick cheaply. But by playing the "expensive" King, East was denying the Queen. Now West thinks that Declarer started with AQ and this misinformation could cause him to go astray later in the defense. If East had played the correct Queen, West would still be in the dark about where the King is, but that's better than working with completely wrong information.

Bad Habit #2

7 5 3
J 9 8 6 Q 4 2
A K 10

West leads the Six, low from Dummy, and East plays the Queen. Now Declarer goofs by playing the King, giving away to West the fact that East does not have the Ace (he would have played it). Declarer's correct play in these situation is exactly the opposite of the defenders'. Declarer's cardinal rule is to play the highest card he can afford (without blowing a trick). If Declarer wins the Ace, West and East will both be in the dark about who has that King.

Bad Habit # 3

K Q 8 2
7 J 6 3 2
A 10 9 4

The third bad habit is when defenders play their spot cards in completely predictable fashion, usually by religiously playing them up the line. Let's say that East and West are both such players, and that in the layout above, Declarer wants all four tricks. The only danger is that a defender holds Jxxx, in which case there is a guess involved. So Declarer starts by cashing the King, and both defenders play a spot card. Now it's the moment of truth. Should Declarer cash Dummy's Queen just in case East started with Jxxx? ... or should Declarer cash his Ace just in case West started with Jxxx? How can Declarer guess right? Well, actually there is no guess against dedicated up-the-liners. In the diagram shown, West plays the Seven and East the Two. Now all is clear! West has played the highest missing spot so that must be his only spot. Therefore, the only defender who might have Jxxx is East.

To avoid bad habits and to take advantage of others' bad habits, remember this:

- On defense, play the lowest card possible to get the job done
- As Declarer, play the highest card possible to get the job done
- On defense, when playing spot cards, be unpredictable, do not just play them up the line. And, yes, Declarer should also be unpredictable.
- As Declarer, be aware of which opponents play their spot cards up the line, and shamelessly take advantage of them.

Active Defense (1)

We've looked at attitude and count and suit preference signals, and advocated that the defense signals consistently. But sometimes that is not enough and it is necessary for one defender or the other to grab the bull by the horns, in order to tell Partner what's going on.

For want of better we have created the term **active defense** and have three examples on display. Here is the first.

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

E-W Vulnerable
 South West North East
 1♦ 3♠
4♥ All Pass

East's 3♠ preempt pushed N-S into an ugly 4♥ contract which has 5 top losers. But two of them disappeared, allowing an impossible contract to make. Here's what happened, you decide which defender blundered.

West cashed ♣A and ♣K and ♣Q, and then, being unable to reach Partner's Spades, shifted to a Diamond. Declarer now claimed 10 tricks in the red suits. Who was to blame for this fiasco?

Clearly, if the contract is to be beaten, East must alertly ruff that third round of Clubs, in order to cash his Spade winners. Alas, he had sleepily overlooked the possibility that West might be void in Spades.

So, it's all East's fault, eh? Not really! West's Spade void was staring him in the face and he should have considered the possibility that East was having a nap. So there was no excuse for him not to launch into **active defense** mode! On the third round of Clubs, West leads a *low* one, forcing East to ruff. Now the Spades can be cashed and it's down two.

Active Defense (2)

As we said, we follow conventions, such as “top of a sequence” or “fourth best”, to help Partner figure out our holding in the suit. So, when we break those rules, we are usually sending a message to Partner.

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

South	West	North	East
1♠	3♥	3♠	4♥
4♠	All Pass		

Against 4♠ Partner (West) leads the Heart Two which clearly does not follow the rules. It cannot be 4th best when he is known from the bidding to have at least six cards in the suit. What message is her strange lead sending?

She surely has something in mind, what is it? She cannot want us to win our ♥A and continue Hearts, that would be far too normal. She has something else in mind. What could that be? Oh, of course, no doubt she can ruff a minor suit! But which one? Surely not Clubs, as that would give Declarer seven of them. Partner must be void in Diamonds! The full deal is:

♠ J 8 7 ♥ 6 5 ♦ K 9 7 3 ♣ K Q 6 2	♠ 6 4 3 ♥ A 9 3 ♦ 10 8 6 4 2 ♣ A 7
♠ 5 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 4 2 ♦ ♣ 9 8 5 4	Dummy West You Declarer
♠ A K Q 10 9 ♥ 8 ♦ A Q J 5 ♣ J 10 3	

Partner’s **active defense**, alerts us to the winning play. A Diamond is ruffed at Trick 2, then a Club is returned to our Ace, after which a second ruff. Down one!

By the way, at Trick 2, when you were giving Partner her first Diamond ruff, which Diamond did you return? You want a Club return to your Ace, so you give a **suit preference** signal ... as you want the lower ranking side-suit back, you lead your lowest Diamond.

Active Defense (3)

You are West, with a hand that might be seen as an opportunity for a quick nap. Partner has all the defense's high cards, let him to win some tricks, because you don't have any. But that would be a mistake. Here's your chance for some more **active defense!**

	♠ K 10 6 ♥ 4 ♦ 7 5 ♣ 10 8 7 6 5 4 2
♠ 8 5 3 ♥ 9 8 3 ♦ J 10 9 4 3 ♣ J 3	North You East Declarer

South	West	North	East
			1♠
Dbf	Pass	2♣	Pass
4♥	All Pass		

To start things off, which Spade do you lead? We suggest the Three, because the top-of-nothing Eight might be misread by Partner as a doubleton. Partner wins the first trick with the Jack and returns a trump.

Declarer draws three rounds of trumps, and Partner follows suit each time. Next, Declarer plays the ♦A, and now is your chance to be a star. How?

It costs nothing to play the ♦J now! This gives Partner a wealth of information. You wouldn't play the Jack unless you could afford to, so Partner will expect you to have the Ten as well. And the Jack also tells Partner that you don't have the Queen, because with a holding of, say, ♦QJ1043, you could have afforded to play the Queen. When you play that ♦J, you have no particular plan in mind, other than to help Partner, who might be under pressure on this deal. On this occasion you hit the jackpot!

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

Yes, on Declarer's play of the ♦A, thanks to your helpful ♦J play, Partner will drop the Queen like a hot potato! Now, your Ten will win the third round of Diamonds, and the threatened end-play is averted. But, if East had slept through his wake-up call, his Queen would have won the third round of Diamonds, and he would have been forced to return a black suit, giving Declarer his tenth trick. A triumph for **active defense!**

This is a particularly instructive example! First of all, it costs nothing to play the Jack. Secondly, it tells Partner a lot (and without helping Declarer). Thirdly, West does not need to visualize East's impending doom from an end-play. So, once a player realizes that such a play exists, it should be routine to spot one next time it arises!

P.S. Could East have thrown the ♦Q anyway, without East's helpful Jack? Not really, he would look very foolish if Declarer started with ♦AKJ.

Opening Leads Against Suits

The suggested lead in **bold**.

- A K 2** K from AKx(x) used to be standard ... nowadays it's more common to lead the Ace. Leading an Ace which is not backed up by the King is to be avoided unless there is a reason (cash-out situation, trying to give Partner a ruff, or Partner has bid the suit). But, with AK doubleton, we lead the King, specifically for the purpose of showing that doubleton.
- 8 7 4** MUD was popular, now mercifully not. That leaves the Eight or the Four. If you have to lead this suit, you can lead the Eight and risk Partner playing you for a doubleton, or you can lead the Four, in which case Partner might play you for an honor in the suit. So choose the one which looks least likely to fool Partner on that particular hand.
- 9 8 4** When the sequence gets high enough, lead the top. The Nine seems about high enough to us
- 9 7 6 3** We like 3rd and 5th against suits, others prefer 4th best. Same if the suit were, say, K763.
- 9 7 6 3 2** 5th from five, unless you are a 4th bester.
- K Q 3 2** Top of a sequence.
- K J 10 2** Top of an interior sequence. Some play "Nines and Tens show 0 or 2 higher" which basically translates to leading the second highest from an interior sequence.
- Q 10 9 2** See the previous entry.

In high-level contracts, particularly after wild and woolly competitive bidding, the defensive tricks have a habit of disappearing unless they are cashed promptly. So, at the 5-level and higher, the following usually works well:

- A lead of the Ace asks for attitude ... normally the opening leader does not have the King, and his Partner's encouragement would show the King.
- A lead of the King asks for count ... more often than not, the opening leader also has the Ace, and a count signal from Partner and a look at Dummy will reveal whether a second one is cashing, or whether the defense should look elsewhere for tricks.

Opening Leads Against No Trump

- K 7 5 3** Fourth best is almost universal, even among those who prefer 3rd and 5th against suits.
- 8 7 4** No reason to lead low with that holding.
- 8 7 4 3 2** 4th best is common ... other players lead second highest as a warning to Partner not to expect an honor. Similarly with four small.
- K Q 10 9** Yes, the Queen is now standard with that holding. Partner is requested to drop the Jack, and if he does not have it he gives count.
- A K 6 4 2** 4th best usually works well with this holding. Cashing the Ace or King at Trick 1 will break communications in the suit if Partner has a doubleton.
- A K J 10 7** This suit may very well run if played from the top, and, by convention, the Ace asks Partner to unblock an honor (if he has one). In this case the unblock of the Queen will confirm that the suit is indeed running. If Partner has no Queen to unblock he is expected to give count. This will help the opening leader to figure out whether Declarer holds Qx or Qxx, and whether he should try to get to Partner's hand for a lead through Declarer.
- A K J 4** With this holding, we'd like to know about the Queen, so Partner is expected to encourage holding that card. In general, when the opening lead against a No Trump contract is the King, Partner will encourage whenever he has the Ace or Queen or Jack.