

BASIC SIGNALLING IN DEFENCE

Declarer has a distinct advantage during the play of a contract – he can see both his and partner’s hands, and can arrange the play so that these two components work together harmoniously for maximum effect. However, defenders cannot see their partner’s hand, and to work effectively as a team they need to communicate relevant aspects of their individual hands by way of signals.

Whilst discards are still a form of signalling, we shall ignore these in this discussion. They are a topic within their own right. We shall merely consider what card to play when **following** to a particular suit.

There are five possible forms of signalling, each of which (except one) have their rightful place in the defender’s armoury: **attitude; suit preference; count; no signal**; encrypted (this is actually banned under most licences so will not be discussed further). Most systems incorporate a primary approach, and a secondary approach – the latter to be used when the primary approach would be irrelevant. The method of signalling also depends upon who initiates the play of the suit, **defender (partner) or declarer**. The most common approach, and that most suitable for average club players is ‘attitude’ followed by ‘suit preference’ on partner’s lead, and ‘no-signal’ followed by ‘count’ on declarer’s lead, but some expert pairs put an emphasis on ‘count’ (this does have its merits but I find it puts extra strain on partner). The description and use of each component type is shown below, and I have linked them together to provide the average player with an overall comprehensive approach (in fact the overall package is probably the most common at this level).

In all these aspects remember that a signal is not a command to partner. All you are saying is that based on your own holding you would prefer partner to take a particular course of action.

ATTITUDE

The primary method when following to partner’s play of a suit.

A high card in the suit basically says ‘I’m interested in that suit being continued, whereas a low card says ‘I’m not interested in that suit being continued. The high card must be one that you can afford to safely play.

The most common form of this is a high card followed by a low card in defence to a suit contract, to indicate to partner to continue the suit for a possible ruff. It’s the initial high card which is ‘attitude’. Against a no-trump contract a high card usually indicates a useful honour card to encourage partner to continue the suit.

Note that you would rarely play this type of signal on declarer’s play of the suit. Declarer normally plays a suit with a purpose. The only meaning of a defender’s attitude signal in this situation would be to say ‘*Partner, declarer has made a mistake in playing that suit, and instead I would like you to play the suit if you have the opportunity*’ - you can’t operate a signalling system based on the expectation that declarer has made a mistake.

Within this type of signal there are a number of variations – ‘reverse attitude’; Italian style ‘odd’ (encouraging) –even (discouraging)’; a card specifically higher than a seven is encouraging; etc. These are for the more experienced players, but even then their effectiveness is primarily due to the opponent’s unfamiliarity with them – so to all intents and purposes ignore them.

Examples (you are defender East):

- a) ♥ A73 b) ♥ A73 c) ♥ A73
♥ QJ92 ♥ K84 ♥ QJ92 ♥ 1084 ♥ QJ92 ♥ 864
 ♥ 1065 ♥ K65 ♥ K105
- d) ♥ 853 e) ♥ 984
♥ AK72 ♥ 94 ♥ AK6 ♥ Q732
 ♥ QJ106 ♥ J105

- a) Against South's no-trump contract, West leads ♥Q. You know he now has the jack, so you want him to continue the suit at the first opportunity (if declarer ducks, this is now at trick two). So you play the ♥8.
- b) Similar to (a). Holding the ♥10, you want partner to continue the suit into the third round to enable you to win with that card. Again you play the ♥8 to encourage him.
- c) Similar to (b), but this time you do not want the suit continued (in fact if partner does continue he gives a trick away). So you play ♥4 to discourage him.
- d) The most common situation. Defending against South's spade contract, West leads ♥A. You show attitude with the ♥9 – you want partner to continue with the suit, to get a third round ruff.
- e) Against South's spade contract, partner leads the ♥A. The lead of the ace against a low-level suit contract invariably indicates the king. You want to win the ♥Q on the third round should declarer have a three card suit. So encourage with the ♥7. Switch the ♥Q and the ♥J and East would now discourage with the ♥2.

- f) ♠ K5 g) ♠ 1083
 ♥ 10875 ♥ K107
 ♦ AQJ75 ♦ 74
 ♣ 83 ♣ AKQJ5
- ♠ 863 ♠ A109742 ♠ Q74
♥ 63 ♥ J2 ♥ AQJ5
♦ 103 ♦ 862 ♦ 1096
♣ AKQ962 ♣ 74 ♣ 932
- ♠ QJ
♥ AKQ94
♦ K94
♣ J105

- f) Against South's 4♥ contract, West leads ♣A. East knows he can over-ruff dummy on the third round play of the suit, so encourages with the ♣7. Partner duly obliges, by cashing ♣K, giving partner a ruff, who then cashes the ♠A for one off.

However suppose we switch the ♥10 and the ♥J. East cannot now over-ruff dummy, so he should play the ♣4 on the first round. West will now switch. He should reason that a diamond switch is pointless – if East has the ♦K he will make it eventually. A spade switch doesn't defeat the contract, but it avoids the over-trick (a diamond switch gives South two spade discards).

- g) Against South's 3♦ contract, West leads ♠A. You want to encourage in order to make the ♠Q – or do you? If you encourage with ♠7, partner will continue, you will possibly make ♠Q, and then cash ♥A, but no more tricks (any losing hearts with declarer will go on the clubs. So you must discourage with ♠4. Partner should find the obvious heart switch. You will play a spade back to his king for another heart lead. One or even two off, all due to the correct signal being employed.

SUIT PREFERENCE

The secondary method when following to partner's play of a suit.

McKenney Signals – a high card asks for the higher ranking of the two non-trump suits, whereas a low card asks for the lower ranking.

(McKenney is also one of the primary discard signals against both suit and no-trump contracts. However, that is out-with this discussion).

If it is evident to **both defenders** that a card cannot be attitude, the best secondary use is to indicate which of the other suits to play – i.e. suit preference. (Many pairs play count as a secondary method – nothing wrong in this, but you need to agree with partner. I personally think suit preference is easier to understand). Relevant situations are:

- when defending against a suit contract, partner leads an ace and a singleton appears in dummy. It is highly unlikely (but not impossible) that you want the suit continued. In this situation it is best to indicate which of the other suits (excluding trumps) would be most favourable to your side. A high card indicates the higher ranking of the other two suits, whereas a low card indicates the lower ranking suit.
- when playing a suit knowing that partner is probably able to ruff, a high card asks for partner to return the higher ranking suit (after ruffing), whereas a low card asks for the lower ranking suit to be returned.
- when partner leads an high honour in a suit you have both bid (and hence unlikely to hold a doubleton), and dummy's holding indicates that there are no further tricks available in the suit, give suit preference (but some pairs give 'count' in this situation).
- having already shown attitude on the first lead, the play of the following card should show suit-preference. However this is only for expert partnerships and will not be progressed further here.

Examples (you are defender, East)

h) ♠ KQ93
♥ 7
♦ KJ64
♣ KJ52

♠ 84
♥ J62
♦ AQ82
♣ 10743

i) ♠ AK954
♥ QJ73
♦ K6
♣ K9

♠ 8
♥ A864
♦ A752
♣ 8432

j) ♠ 973
♥ AJ62
♦ KQ10
♣ 642

♠ 64
♥ 54
♦ 9873
♣ AJ83

- h) against South's 4♠ contract partner leads ♥A. It's obvious to both you and partner that you don't want partner to continue hearts, and you would prefer a diamond switch rather than a club. So play ♥J asking for the higher ranking of the remaining suits (A club from partner could result in at least one diamond being discarded from South's hand).
- i) South finishes in 4♠ following a 1NT and Stayman sequence. Partner leads ♥2 – obviously a singleton in the light of the bidding. You win with the ace, and can give partner a heart ruff. But think ahead – you need partner to return a diamond rather than a club, in order to give him a further ruff. So at trick 2 play ♥8 – saying 'when you've ruffed this I want the higher ranking suit (diamonds) returned'.
- j) South declares in 4♥ after both yourself and partner have competed in diamonds. Partner leads ♦A. You both know that you cannot take any more diamond tricks, so attitude becomes irrelevant. You need to give a suit preference signal for clubs – so play a low diamond (3♦), before declarer can discard on the established diamonds.

Trump Signal

We have already established that 'attitude' is of little use in the trump suit. More experienced partnerships play 'trump signals', which is merely a way of indicating suit preference on declarer's or defender's play of the trump suit. Basically the first play of the suit by each of the defenders (including a possible opening lead), indicates suit preference – where there is a choice which will not cost. Three suits are possible, but partner can usually eliminate one suit at the sight of dummy (note that if a defender subsequently makes a discard indicating a different suit, the discard takes preference).

Example

k)	♠ AK864 ♥ KQ63 ♦ KJ ♣ K5	l)	♠ 9742 ♥ 863 ♦ A1053 ♣ AQ	♠ QJ10 ♥ A ♦ QJ8 ♣ 986542
	♠ Q9753 ♥ 82 ♦ A752 ♣ QJ9	♠ A653 ♥ 105 ♦ 9762 ♣ J107	♠ K8 ♥ KQJ9742 ♦ K4 ♣ K3	

- k) Against South's 4♥ contract partner leads ♠2 (which appears to be a singleton). Declarer wins and plays the ♥K. You now must play the ♥8 – a trump signal (high) indicating preference for a diamond. Partner wins with ♥A, plays a diamond to your ♦A, and you now give him a ruff.
- l) Against South's 5♥ contract, West leads a club; declarer wins and plays ♥K. West must play ♥10 – a trump signal (high) for spades. East wins and plays a spade through declarer – one off. Without the trump signal, East has to guess as to whether to play spades or diamonds.

NO SIGNAL

The primary method when following to declarer's play of a suit.

Before this presentation you probably did this in any case.

Since you are not in immediate control, if you start to signal on declarer's suit, you generally give him more information than partner.

Too many people play unnecessary 'count' signals on declarer's play of a suit.

Consider the following situation:

♣ Q975

♣ KJ4

If you are declarer (South), when you play the ♣5 from dummy towards your ♣K, East plays the ♣6, with West winning the ♣A. On regaining the lead you then play the ♣J on which East contributes the ♣2 (showing an even number). You then play the ♣4, West follows. If the defence are signalling truthfully, the decision to finesse West for the ♣10 is made much easier (good defenders will of course try to fool you – but isn't that exactly the same as 'No Signal').

So in defence, on declarer's play of a suit, play randomly unless you can see that it is necessary to convey something relevant to partner. Partner must also be aware when you are playing something positively – not always the easiest thing to do.

COUNT

The secondary method when following to declarer's play of a suit.

Initially this should only be used when declarer is attempting to establish a long suit (usually in dummy), with no other entries. Now it becomes important to advise partner for how long to hold up his ace (or sometimes king).

Example (you are defender, East):

m)	♠ 74	
	♥ Q752	
	♦ 95	
	♣ KJ1095	
♠ 1082		♠ QJ6
♥ A109		♥ K83
♦ 10643		♦ J872
♣ 862		♣ A74
	♠ AK953	
	♥ J64	
	♦ AKQ	
	♣ Q3	

- against South's 3NT, you lead a diamond which declarer wins. Declarer plays ♣Q. It is important to tell partner how long to hold up his ♣A, in order to prevent dummy running the

club tricks, so play ♣2, telling partner you have an odd number. East can now judge that is correct to take the second round (if East makes the mistake of ducking the second round, declarer abandons the suit and switched to the spade suit – making his contract).

(More established partnerships can develop many other situations where it is useful to partner to give count, but these do require a firm understanding).

SPECIAL CASE - KING FOR COUNT

Against No-Trump Contracts

The lead of partner's 'King' against a no-trump contract requires you to:

- a) unblock with any honour.
- b) if no honour, give count.

Partner will have led the king from a sequence such as KQ10xxx

Examples:

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- n) On West's ♥K lead, you must play the ♥J. West can readily continue the suit.
- o) On West's ♥K lead, you must play ♥8 (the ♥6 would also be acceptable). This tells partner that you don't hold the Jack (otherwise you would have played it), and also that you have an even number. Possibly from the bidding, West can tell whether you have two or four. If four, he can safely continue the suit.
- p) Whereas on ♥K lead you play the ♥2. West must *not* now continue the suit – declarer is marked with Jxx.

Against Suit Contracts

This is a more complex area, and various non-standard methods are employed. It should only be pursued with a regular partnership – with one exception which is fairly standard.

The lead of a king against a suit slam requires partner to give count.

Example:

q)

♠ KQ74	♠ J107
♥ A	♥ Q854
♦ 964	♦ KJ63
♣ 973	♣ K7

Against South's 6♥ contract you (West) lead the ♠K. Declarer (South) wins and plays trumps, with you winning the ace. Do you cash ♠Q?

r)	♠ A7	s)	♠ A
	♥ KJ1073		♥ KJ1073
	♦ AQ2		♦ A86
	♣ AJ6		♦ AQ86

If declarer has hand (r) you must cash ♠Q; but if he has hand (s) you must switch – if you try to cash ♠Q declarer ruffs, and uses the established ♠J to discard a diamond.

Partner can help you by giving 'count' on your lead of the king. If he plays a high spade showing two or four you can safely cash ♠Q. If he plays a low spade – three or five – switch ((if it's a three-card suit, declarer is unlikely to be able to discard both losing spades).

SUMMARY

The following table summarises the type of signal you should use in the various situations. I would stress that this is by no means 'universally standard', but it does provide a balance between effectiveness and ease of use for the average club player.

Following To:	Primary Signal	Secondary Signal
Declarer's Play – No-Trump Contract	No Signal	Count
Declarer's Play – Suit Contract	No Signal	Count
Defender's Play – No-Trump	Attitude	Suit Preference
Defender's Play – Suit Contract	Attitude	Suit Preference
Either side's play in trump suit	Suit Preference	