

Play in defence Part 2 - Signalling

Defence is often rather overlooked when learning bridge, as we concentrate more on bidding and declarer play. Yet on about half of the hands you ever play, DEFENCE is what you will be doing, and it is one of the trickiest aspects of bridge.

Last time, in Lesson 25, we looked at one part of defence – the opening lead. In this lesson, we’re going to continue our focus on defence, and look at signalling – the skill of exchanging information between you and your partner in defence, by careful choice of what card to play, and by paying attention to what partner plays, and interpreting accordingly.

When the opposition are declaring, your objective is either to

- **DEFEAT** their contract, and by as many tricks as you can.
- Even if they make, to hold them to as few tricks as possible (often *vital* in duplicate pairs. Sometimes a contract will be unbeatable whatever you do. But in those cases, you should aim to hold declarer to as few tricks as you can- minimizing their overtricks will get you a good score)

When playing as declarer, there’s no need to signal – you can see dummy and your own hand. But as defenders, you can’t see partner’s hand. You need to help each other by giving useful signals about what cards you hold and what you’d like your partner to do.

And that DOESN’T mean coughing, pulling a face, groaning, shaking your head, smiling, playing a card very quickly, deliberately hesitating, playing a card very deliberately to draw your partner’s attention to it, or whatever. Those are all strictly illegal! It is often very difficult not to react, especially when partner leads a suit you’d very much rather they hadn’t. But you must try your best not to. In fact, you should always strive to be expressionless during the play of the hand, and to play cards “in tempo” (ie at roughly the same speed).

You SIGNAL by what card you play.

If you’ve ever played against very good players, they will usually seem to have an uncanny knack of knowing what cards to play to make your life difficult, or impossible. A big part of their skill is to use **signalling** to good effect. This lesson is to help you and your partner to be able to do the same and become a DEFENSIVE TEAM.

I want to start with five concepts in defence:

No 1: **Remember the bidding.**

It will often guide you about what suit to lead or not to lead.

For example:

- if partner has overcalled in a suit during the auction, it’s usually a good idea to lead that suit.
- if your right-hand opponent has bid a suit, it might not be a good idea to lead that suit – you’ll probably be leading into strength, not through it.

No 2: In defence, most cards you play can and should provide **INFORMATION** to partner, for example

- What cards you hold
- What cards you do NOT hold
- What suit you would like partner to lead to you

Spot cards also matter!!! (the 2 to the 9), not just honours/ high cards. Which one you choose to play can convey useful information!

It is important to have agreement with partner, so that the information conveyed is understood! What we’re looking at in this lesson is a standard system you can agree on.

No 3:

In signalling in defence, it **matters** whether the trick was led by the (declarer/ dummy) or led by your side, and it **matters** whether you are leading to a trick or following to a trick already in play.

This might seem confusing at first, or even unnecessarily complicated, but it is VITAL, to allow your system to work properly.

No 4: what **sort** of information can the card I play convey?

ATTITUDE: do I like this suit (and would like it led/continued), or dislike it (and would like partner to switch to another suit)?

COUNT: how many cards have I got in my hand of this suit? In defence, it is very useful, as we'll see, for both defenders to play their cards to give COUNT when declarer or dummy lead to a trick.

SUIT PREFERENCE: which OTHER suit would I like partner to switch to?

No 5:

Signalling is not everything in defence, it is a PART of the picture. Take it as a help, a provider of extra information, NOT as a command. If partner signals that they'd like you to lead a spade, you don't **have** to do that, if you have a good reason to do something else.

- Sometimes partner will be unable to signal, not having a suitable card, or not want to, because they'd be using a potential trick taking card, or be giving away information more useful to declarer than to partner.
- There is usually other information to guide the choice of play, not just partner's signal. Partner can see her own hand, so will have information you do not.

Let's explore how it all works.

I have mentioned three things signalling can convey- **attitude**, **count**, and **suit preference**.

But how will I know **which** piece of information a card is indicating?

When **you or partner** leads a suit, show **attitude** as a first priority.

and when **declarer or dummy** lead a suit, show **count** as a first priority.

This is fundamental to making defensive signalling work!

But if attitude or count can't be meaningful, the information should be interpreted as indicating **suit preference**.

So....how to signal with spot cards:

Signalling ATTITUDE:

If **YOU are leading a suit**, a high spot card says you don't hold any honours in the suit (high for hate).

Leading a low spot card says you like that suit and are indicating something useful in that suit (low for like). Your partner will take it that you'd like the suit led back.

But if **PARTNER leads the suit**, and you don't have to contribute to winning the trick, a high spot card is encouraging (high means "aye"- I like this suit).

A low spot card is discouraging – I don't have anything in this suit (low means no)

I've just said that in showing attitude, you need to choose between low spot cards and high spot cards.

But what is a low spot card, and what's a high one?

Often it will be obvious – a 2 or a 3 is small, an 8 or 9 is high.

But sometimes you need to look a little more deeply – eg what other cards in the suit can you see? For example, if partner holds ♦K 5 3 2, playing the ♦5 might be her best shot at a "high" card signal.

You won't always be able to get it spot on, but very often you will, and it's great to have good partnership communications in defence.

Here's an example. You're on lead against 1NT; there were no other bids. You hold:

♠A 6 ♥8 7 6 5 4 2 ♦K 8 2 ♣K 4

You clearly are reluctant to lead a spade, a diamond, or a club.

The normal lead would be 4th highest, ie ♥5. But you want to tell partner you have length, but no strength, in hearts. Lead a high spot card – here I prefer leading the ♥8, as it makes the message a bit clearer, and less likely to be misunderstood - though some players prefer 2nd top.

A high **spot** card v NT says I have a long suit but containing no high cards. Partner can see dummy, and her own hand, so will work out what your ♥8 means (ie not 4th highest) - a great help in choosing the best way to defend.

Now we know how to signal **attitude** to a suit, ie when **you or your partner is leading it**.

What about **count**?

When declarer or dummy has led a suit, you should take care to play your cards in the right order to give your partner the count:

- If you hold two cards, play high then low. That's called a "peter" - (as in petering out = getting less)
- If you hold an odd number of cards, play low first, then next lowest.
- If you hold 4 cards, play second highest, then third highest. Because the second card you play is lower than the first, it's also a peter. You "peter" with your middle two cards.

So partner knows when you play high then low, you have an even number, and when you play low then high, you have an odd number. This comes most often into its own when partner needs to know whether you have 2 or 3 cards in a suit.

Here's an example:

North (dummy)

♠5 3
♥9 7 5
♦4 3 2
♣K Q J 9 3

East (you)

♠J 10 6 4
♥Q J 10
♦8 6 5
♣A 4 2

South, dealer, opened 2NT and North raised to 3NT.

Partner leads ♦Q. The lead tells you that partner does NOT have ♦K but does have ♦J and possibly ♦10 as well.

Declarer wins ♦K and leads ♣10. Partner plays ♣5 and dummy ♣3. What should you do?

You can see that dummy has no entry outside clubs, so if declarer is to make four club tricks the entry to cash them must be in the club suit. You are pretty sure that if you play your ♣A on trick 1, declarer will regain the lead, and play a second club towards dummy, and cash all the clubs. So, you HOLD UP on the first round of clubs, and await developments.

Next trick, declarer plays ♣6, partner ♣7, and dummy ♣J. DO YOU TAKE YOUR ♣A?

The key is knowing whether declarer has a 3rd club. You have been taking care to notice partner's play. She has played ♣5, then ♣7, giving her **COUNT** on the club suit, a suit led by declarer. You know she started with 3 clubs, and declarer started with only two. You can confidently win your ♣A, knowing dummy's clubs are now stranded. If you held up again, the extra club trick might be enough to let declarer make her contract.

Here is the full deal:	North (dummy)	
	♠5 3	
	♥9 7 5	
	♦4 3 2	
West (partner)	♣K Q J 9 3	East (you)
♠Q 9 7		♠J 10 6 4
♥6 4 3		♥Q J 10
♦Q J 10 9		♦8 6 5
♣8 7 5		♣A 4 2
	South (dealer)	
	♠A K 8 2	
	♥A K 8 2	
	♦A K 7	
	♣10 6	

If you mistakenly duck the second club, declarer will play three rounds of hearts. When the hearts break 3-3, declarer has nine tricks (two spades, three hearts, two diamonds and two clubs). If you win the second club, declarer will only make eight tricks, for one down.

That's why it's so important to

- Play your spot cards in the right order
- Pay attention to the cards partner plays. Statement of the obvious: signalling won't work if you and partner don't notice the spot cards each other plays!!

In defence, whenever **declarer or dummy leads to a trick**, get into the habit of giving your **count**. Don't just automatically play your lowest one on the first round of the suit!

And get into the habit of watching the cards your partner plays. The more you and partner practice, the better you will get.

We've talked about **ATTITUDE**, and **COUNT**. Those are the main elements of defensive signalling. But I also mentioned a third, **SUIT PREFERENCE**. Let's look at that. Sometimes it will be obvious from the way the cards lie that **SUIT PREFERENCE** is what makes sense.

Here are some examples of a **SUIT PREFERENCE** signal:

The bidding has gone 1♠ by South, 4♠ by North, all pass, and partner leads ♦A.

Dummy is tabled, and you see

♠A 9 4 2
♥K 8 3 2
♦6
♣K 8 5 2

Only 10HCP, but an unbalanced hand, with 4-card spade support for partner, and 7 losers. North has clearly raised to 4♠ on the basis of Losing Trick Count.

Here's your hand, sitting East

♠K 3
♥A Q 7 6
♦9 7 4 2
♣7 5 4

You place ♦K with partner for the ♦A lead (she knows not to lead an unsupported A!)— that's 7 points, and you have 9. You can work out that NS are in a 24-point game, based on shape. You have a good idea that all the other 14 points are with declarer. But partner isn't going to continue with ♦K at trick 2 – dummy will ruff. **You are keen for a switch to a heart, NOT a club!**

Then you can win both your ♥A and ♥Q, and wait for the setting trick with your ♠K.

Don't just woodenly play ♦2 at trick 1. Play a HIGH SPOT CARD! The ♦9.

Your signal can't be about your attitude to diamonds, as it is irrelevant seeing dummy's singleton— so it **MUST** be suit preference. "Partner, please switch to the HIGHER of the other two suits (other than trumps and diamonds)"

Partner sees your signal, and duly plays a heart at trick 2. Without your signal, she might well have played a club, and declarer would make her contract.

SUIT PREFERENCE example No 2:

This time the contract is 4♥ by South. Partner leads ♠7

North (dummy)

♠A Q J 10

♥A Q 4 3

♦7 5

♣7 5 4

East (you)

♠K 9 8 3 2

♥6 2

♦J 9 8

♣A J 10

Declarer tries ♠10 from dummy. Seeing the 4 good spades in dummy, and holding 5 spades yourself, you read partner's lead as a singleton. You win ♠K and return a spade for partner to ruff. But WHICH spade?

If you'd held ♦A rather than ♣A, you'd lead back ♠9, saying "after you ruff my spade, lead back a diamond" (the higher of the other two suits). I will win and give you a second spade ruff." Here it's more subtle. You lead back ♠2, saying "please lead the LOWER of the other two suits".

Partner ruffs your 2♠ and leads back a club. You win your ♣A and lead back a spade for a second ruff. Contract 1 down.

Perhaps the most obvious opportunity to give suit preference is when **discarding** – when you are out of the suit which is led.

Since you are not following suit, the card you play cannot be showing attitude or count in the suit led. It must be suit preference. Next time, in Lesson 27, we will look at how best to signal with discards.

What we've looked at in this lesson is

- a SYSTEMATIC approach to card play in defence
- as easy as possible to remember and get right during play (with practice!)
- and which provides maximum opportunity to convey the information you want to convey.

There are many **artificial*** systems, but I don't recommend you pick one of those. They can look attractive, but all have their problems

- Sometimes they force you to give a false signal (when you don't have a suitable card)
- They can be hard to remember in play, and so cause confusion.
- They require you to be playing with a regular partner, to understand and agree the artificial system.
- Signals can seem more like commands, rather than providing information for partner to consider, alongside what else she knows is going on in the hand.

What I've been talking about, and what I recommend, is the "NATURAL", or Standard, defensive signalling approach. Once you get used to it, you'll find it becomes second nature, and your scores will improve dramatically.

*Examples: Odds & Evens, Lavinthal, Dodds, Reverse Dodds.

Here's a recap, and some additional pointers for good defence:

When **LEADING** to a trick

- A low spot card is encouraging, indicating you hold an honour, and would like the suit returned ("Leading Low for Like")
- A high spot card is discouraging, saying you're not really interested in partner returning the suit, and you don't hold an honour ("leading High for Hate")- but as we've seen it can also be the start of a peter. But note that a doubleton is often not a great choice of suit for an opening lead, unless you have nothing better, or unless partner has bid the suit.
- Leading an honour generally indicates the touching card below but DENIES holding the touching card above. If you lead J, your partner knows 100% that you don't have the Q (though you will usually have the 10). Always **lead** the higher of touching high cards, eg K from KQ, Q from QJ10, etc.

When **FOLLOWING** to a trick that **PARTNER** has led,

If you don't have to contribute to winning the trick, show **attitude** to the suit

- A high spot card is encouraging, indicating you would like the suit returned or continued ("Following High means Aye")- but beware of wasting a potentially trick-taking card just to signal
- A low spot card is discouraging ("Following Low means No") – I have nothing of interest in this suit. Please try something else.

Play the LOWER of touching honours. If you play the Jack, you do NOT hold the 10, but you might hold the Q.

When **FOLLOWING** to a trick that **DECLARER or DUMMY** has led,

If you don't have to contribute to winning the trick, show your **count** in the suit.

- With two cards, play high then low (ie peter)
- With an odd number of cards, start with the lowest, then the next lowest.
- With four cards, peter with your middle two cards (second highest then third highest)

Therefore, with an even number of cards, your first card played is always higher than the second, and with an odd number, always lower.

Signalling in defence takes two players to work as a team.

Your partnership must be

- **Making** the right signals
- **Noticing** the signals partner is giving you.

Here's something to emphasise the need to take care, and not just play cards without thinking.

I've already hinted that if you are making the opening lead, a side suit doubleton is not often a great choice. But if you do want to lead from a doubleton – say partner has bid the suit – then lead the higher card first.

Say you hold ♥8 5 and are on lead against a spade contract, partner having bid hearts. You lead ♥8. Say partner wins ♥A and returns ♥K. You play ♥5. Partner sees you played high then low (a "peter") and works out you started with only two hearts. She leads back a 3rd heart, which you can ruff.

If you'd wrongly started with ♥5, not thinking past "Partner bid hearts, I must lead a heart", you would have to play ♥8 on the second trick. Partner "knows" you have a 3rd heart and won't be ruffing, so will switch to another suit. **Don't be careless!!**

The same argument applies if partner is on lead.

If she leads ♥A, you will place her with ♥K. If you want her to play ♥K at trick 2, and a 3rd heart at trick 3 for you to ruff, then encourage, and start a peter, with the ♥8 on trick 1.

Partner will continue with the ♥K, on which you play your ♥5.

Job done – the communications have worked. Partner knows to play a 3rd heart.

Note that if you hold ♥Q 8 5, and dummy has 3 cards, you will still peter with ♥8 then ♥5.

You would like partner to continue with a 3rd heart, hoping your Q will win – that declarer also has more than 2 hearts, so can't ruff.

What if you have ♥8 5, and dummy only has 2 hearts? If you want partner to continue to play on hearts anyway, because you can overruff dummy, then play high-low (a peter). If you can't over-ruff dummy, then don't peter.

As always, there's a lot to take in, and good signalling in defence is a key factor in determining how good your results will be.

You will probably need to come back to this lesson a few times, and re-read, and keep practicing.

