


Signaling Methods

Unlike declarer play, defense is a cooperative undertaking between two partners, and some method of communication is necessary. This is done with various signaling agreements in the play of the cards. The attitude signal and the count signal are by far the most important, and they are used at all contracts — notrump or suit. Accurate defense requires a thorough understanding of these tools.

The Attitude Signal

The attitude signal is by far the most widely used signal. A high card (or high-low sequence) is encouraging — it asks partner to lead that suit again. A low card (or up-the-line sequence) is discouraging — it suggests that partner lead some other suit. **The attitude signal applies when partner leads a suit.**

4 ♠ by South

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

Lead: ♥K


On the ♥K lead East plays the seven and South plays the six, a clever ducking play. West can see the two through six of hearts so the seven is East's *lowest* card, hence East is discouraging a heart continuation, and West should not be fooled.

West should shift to the ♦8, dummy wins the king and East should play the four to encourage another diamond lead. West should read the ♦4 as encouraging since the two and three are missing.

Signals with Discards

The attitude signal also applies when *not following* to the suit led by partner or declarer. Discarding a high card is encouraging, typically showing at high honor in the suit discarded. Discarding a low card is discouraging, suggesting weakness in the suit discarded. Unfortunately, discard signals are widely misused. Many players feel they must discard a high card to ask partner to lead a particular suit, but in doing so they weaken their holding in that suit or give up a potential winning trick. Instead they should be discarding their low cards in the remaining suits. **Avoid discarding high cards to tell partner what to lead. Instead discard low from weak suits to tell partner what not to lead.**

3 NT by South

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


Lead: ♥5

South wins the first trick and leads a heart back to West's ace. East would like a club shift but cannot spare the ♣8 as a positive signal — this would burn the setting trick, a gross error. East should discard the ♠3, meaning "Don't lead a spade."

West now must stop and think. East does not want a spade lead, so the choice is between clubs and diamonds. Dummy's diamond holding makes a shift to that suit hopeless — even if East held the ♦A the defenders could win only two tricks — so he shifts to the ♣7 and dummy plays the king. East should duck and play the *eight* as an attitude signal. When West wins the ♦K, a second club sets the contract.

The concept of “negative discard signals” is also important when you lead a suit at notrump and discover there is no future in it. Just *throw it away* and partner should realize you want some other suit led. If you wanted your original suit returned, you would hold on to it. Hold on to what you like. Throw away what you don’t like.

3 NT by South

<p>♠A Q 9 8 ♥J 8 5 4 3 ♦2 ♣8 6 2</p>		<p>♠6 5 4 ♥9 7 ♦A J 9 7 4 ♣J 9 3</p>	<p>♠J 10 3 ♥10 6 2 ♦Q 10 5 ♣Q 10 7 5</p>
<p>♠K 7 2 ♥A K Q ♦K 8 6 3 ♣A K 4</p>			

Lead: ♥4

When East plays the ♥10 at trick one, it is obvious (to West) that South has the A-K-Q; hence it is futile to continue hearts and a spade shift is desirable. But *East* does not know this. West must tell him.

Declarer wins the ♦K and leads another diamond. West’s first discard should be a *heart* implying “I am no longer interested in hearts.” If West’s hearts were something like A-J-x-x-x, he logically would hold on to every one of them.

Assume declarer ducks the second diamond lead to East. The normal return by East would be a heart, his partner’s suit; but not when West throws that suit away. The choice is between spades and clubs. A club lead is unattractive from the queen with the jack in dummy, so East shifts to the ♠J — now it is curtains for declarer as the defenders run four spade tricks.

Note that if West discarded the ♠9 as a signal for a spade lead, he could no longer set the contract.