

Signals in Defence

Why bother?

“If only you had led me a heart, partner....” or “You could have given me a ruff in clubs...”. How often have you heard those words, or something very like them, drift across the bridge room during play?

Well, of course, it would be nice if partners were always gifted with the power of second sight, but they never are. The ones who seem to be are almost certainly using signals. This probably gains them on average at least one defensive trick per game defended. That is a lot to gain, especially in duplicate bridge.

How? Read on for some of the better ways. Be aware of the danger that *some of these methods cannot be used together with others*, or you will shoot yourself in the foot! No system can be perfect and occasionally you will want to give partner a signal for a lead but have the ‘wrong’ cards to do so. Also remember that your opponents are entitled to know what signalling systems you use! At duplicate, any signalling system must be declared on your convention card, or in any case explained if asked. Remember that it is unethical to draw attention to a suit (or any discard) by playing the card in a slow deliberate manner or by asking to see the trick again when you already know what everyone played!

If you are already using different systems, have a look at the discards proposed here and compare with your own system.

1. Encouraging/discouraging signals

When a potential winner (say A or K) is led by partner, and you want it continued either because of your strength or shortage in that suit, play the highest card you can spare. Partner now understands that you want the suit continued. If you play a low card that is below the seven, partner understands that continuation would not be a good idea so far as you are concerned

e.g. partner leads the K[♠] and you hold [♠]A95 then play the 9

e.g. partner leads Q[♣] and you hold [♣]J964 then play the 4

A high card is usually a card of between 7-10, and a low card between 2-6.

What happens if you have no high card to encourage partner?

Then again you play the highest you can spare and hope partner gets the

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message! For example: partner leads A[♣] and you hold Q53. Encourage by playing the 5 (instead of the 3) and partner may work out that you hold a useful card, and continue the suit. The 3 played first discourages.

Playing high-low to signal a doubleton

Holding *no* honour card (A,K,Q), you can indicate a doubleton by playing first the higher card then the lower card. Only do this if you expect to make a winning ruff, or ‘kill’ by ruffing a card that declarer could use for a discard, or against a NT contract to give partner a vital card count in the suit. If it is obvious that declarer would be able to over-ruff you it may be better to discourage partner, so that his second honour is not used to set up cards in that suit, for the benefit of declarer.

2. Showing by your discard, the suit you would prefer partner to lead

•Remember, it's *only the first discard that really counts*

Natural discards

The simplest discard system of all is to discard a high card in a suit you want led. This must be the first discard you make because if you are forced to make a number of discards you tend to throw away small cards whenever possible.

Discarding a low card as your first discard, suggests that you have no interest in that suit. One major problem with natural discards is that discarding a high card may weaken your side's holding in that suit.

Example: The contract is 3NT and in [♠]@ you hold K1063. To signal for a [♠]@ lead you would throw the 10[♠]. Note however, if the 10[♠] is likely to be a vital card in defence, throw the 6 and later the 3 maybe.

Discarding a suit that you do not want led by partner to indicate which one you do!

This is the discard system used by the majority of club players because it often gives a choice of two suits to indicate the suit you want led. The choice of suit you decide to throw away, is determined by which one you can most spare. A low card can often better be spared than a high one. There are very many discard systems played, especially by club players, all of which have merits as well as some disadvantages, but we will confine ourselves in this Guide to the two most frequently used in the UK namely ‘revolving’ and ‘McKenney.’

Revolving discards

Having decided which suit you do want partner to lead, throw away a LOW card from the suit above or a HIGH card from the suit below. A high @ suggests a | lead as the suits 'revolve'. Suppose @s are trumps and you have to discard on them, and you want a ~ to be led by partner later, then either a high | or a low ` will convey that message.

McKenney discards

This discard system is based on suit rank. Ignoring trumps and the suit you are throwing away, a LOW card indicates the lower ranked of the remaining suits and a HIGH card the higher ranked suit. Again suppose @s are trumps, then a low | indicates ~s and a high | would indicate a desire for a ` lead.

Combining natural with system discards

Some club players play odd-even McKenney, where *any* odd card asks for that suit to be led and an even card asks for a lead in another suit. A high even card asks for the higher ranked suit, and a low even card the lower ranked suit. Suppose @s are trumps, then the 3| discarded would ask for a | lead, the 4| discarded would suggest a ~ lead, and 8| calls for a ` lead!

Showing you have no interest in any suit

Whichever system you use, you frequently find that none of your remaining cards are likely to be of value to partner if he leads that suit. So, discard such that it appears to show partner an interest in a suit known to be strong for declarer (usually a solid suit on dummy). Partner may then wish to cash any winners (rather than look for your values) before declarer can discard his losers.

3. Watchpoints

- Other players may not play the same as is described here - ask them
- Signal as clearly as possible, but without any stress or any change of tempo of play. Partner may overlook or fail to understand your signals, but if so that's just too bad!
- You may have to keep long cards in a suit and so not be able to use them for indicating a lead
Sometimes you only hold high cards and want to signal for a lower ranked suit - play the lowest you have, and hope partner notices that your next discard is a higher card.

For further reading try The Bridge Plus "Really Easy Signals/discards" pamphlets sold by Mr Bridge at £3.80

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