

Discards and Signals etc in Defence - The Basics

I have been asked to cover the basics of defensive signals and play. Now there are all sorts of agreements so I'll just cover the very basics of the commonest approach here.

Leading

Top from all honour sequences. So A from AK, K from KQ etc.

Low card promises an honour. So 3 from Q73 etc.

Do not underlead an ace in a suit contract.

The lead of an ace generally promises the king.

Suppose that you hold QJ10 in a suit. If you wish to lead this suit, then it's the Q. If somebody else leads the suit then play the 10. So top of a sequence when leading but bottom when following suit.

Encouraging (or discouraging) partner.

HELD

Let's start with the attitude signal. When partner leads a suit it is often beneficial to let him know if you like the suit (and want him to continue) or if you don't like it. The most common approach is to play a **H**ighish card to **E**ncourage and a **L**ow card to **D**iscourage, so HELD. For example, if you hold Q92 in a suit and partner leads the ace then play the 9 as you want him to continue. If you hold J92 then play the 2 to discourage.

Now many players play upside down attitude (i.e. low to encourage). This is something that you and your partner need to discuss.

Discarding – Suit preference.

Lavinthal (aka McKenney)

When you are defending and cannot follow suit, then you have to discard something. It is often best to convey some sort of information to your partner with this discard and there are various schemes. One of the best and most commonly used is Lavinthal, also known as McKenney. The most important point is that you **DO NOT** discard in a suit that you like, but discard from one of the other suits. There are two remaining suits and the size of your discard indicates which of these remaining two suits you like, a high/middle card indicates the higher ranking and a low card the lower ranking.

For example, you are discarding on ♥'s and would like partner to lead a ♦. Discard either a low club (so asks for the lowest ranking of ♠'s and ♦'s) or discard a high ♠ (so asks for the highest ranking of ♣'s and ♦'s). Note that you always have a choice of two suits to discard from and can usually make the signal clear. When you are defending it is important to take special note of partner's *first* discard – that will tell you which suit he likes.

I have witnessed countless occurrences of people throwing away a trick in defence (especially in NT contracts) by discarding in a suit to indicate that they like that suit – that system really sucks. Don't discard from a suit you like, play McKenney.

- ♠ A1063 Lavinthal Suit preference is also used in other situations. Suppose that you
 - ♥ 74 are on lead defending a ♥ contract. You lead the ♦A and get an encouraging
 - ♦ AK83 ♦9 from partner. So you continue with the ♦K and he plays the ♦2. So he
 - ♣ 873 encouraged. Suppose that you know from the bidding that partner is probably
- ruffing the next ♦; which ♦ do you lead? The answer is the ♦8. This is Lavinthal and asks partner to lead back a ♠ (the ♦3 would ask for a ♣).

Giving Count

Sometimes it is very important for partner to know how many cards you have in a suit (and thus how many declarer has).

Suppose you are defending a 3NT contract and see ♦KQJ1098 on the table but no outside entry. Declarer plays a low card from hand (so partner has the ace) and you hold ♦72, which card do you play? The answer is that it is really important to give count in this kind of situation so that partner knows how long to hold up his ace. You should play the ♦7 – highest from an even number of cards. If you held ♦742 you must play the ♦2 to show an odd number.

It is good practice to always give count when declarer is playing a suit. This helps partner to get a picture of who has what. Of course this may help declarer, and more advanced players know when to lie about their suit lengths - when the information is more important to declarer than to partner.

A word about Upside Down Attitude

There are a number of different signalling techniques, but there are three distinct types that are **independent**. It appears that one of our top players got confused when his partner wanted to play ‘upside down signals’ – (what his partner meant was upside down attitude signals).

- (a) Telling partner about your holding in a suit when he leads it (some give attitude, some give count).
- (b) Telling partner about your holding in a suit when declarer leads it (give count if it's going to help partner and not help declarer.).
- (c) Discard Signals. When you discard (say on a suit declarer is leading). Then your first discard should tell partner what suit you like and don't like – I recommend Lavinthal (McKenny) as the ‘club standard’.

These 3 are largely independent of each other and a very large number of players in this club prefer ‘upside down attitude’ – i.e. low to encourage for (a) above. Indeed, I also prefer this scheme as it makes more sense than throwing a high card from a suit that you like. It is common in Europe but not in America. Some players also play upside down count but I don't advise this and see no point.

Anyway, if someone wants to play upside down attitude for (1) that that does not affect discards – he still plays count at (b) and Lavinthal at (c) in the normal way and this is very common in this club.

And note that if you do decide to play upside down attitude and say partner leads ♦A against a ♠ contract, then holding ♦Q72 you play the two to encourage; holding ♦72 you still play the ♦2 to encourage (you want a ruff). Some people get confused here – this is not count, but attitude, and so in this situation you play low from a doubleton. Of course if you do find this confusing then you can also play upside down count!