

Suit Preference Signals

This is the second article in the signaling series. Be warned: you'll have to read it more than once and study it to absorb the concepts. Last time I discussed *attitude* and *count* signals. This article takes signaling to the next step and discusses *suit preference* signals.

I hope you're already using *some* sort of signaling methods on defense. If you're not there yet, forget this article. Go back and read the first article in this series or read a book on basic signaling like "Modern Defensive Signaling in Contract Bridge" by Kit Woolsey or "Eddie Kantar teaches basic Defense". However, if you're already using a signaling system you're comfortable with, this article can help you refine it and further improve your defensive results.

There are numerous signaling systems: Standard, upside-down, odd-even, Lavinthal and others. All these systems communicate *attitude* and *count* to your partner. I recommend starting out with "standard" signaling and after you're comfortable with that, converting to upside-down. But that's just my opinion. ANY signaling system is better than NO signaling system. ALL signaling systems have their limitations and there are times when they're not up to the job. In the early 1930's, an excellent player named Hy Lavinthal came up with an additional signaling refinement that moved the art farther towards science. Hy conceived of *suit preference* and wrote a couple of articles about it in 1947. Some people play Lavinthal discards instead of standard discards, but this article discusses how you can integrate suit preference into standard signaling methods.

Regardless of the signaling system you use, the rules are as follows:

- 1) The *first* signal you give for a particular suit is *attitude* - whether you LIKE or DISLIKE a suit.
- 2) Once *attitude* is known, the *second* signal you give in a particular suit is *count*.
- 3) Once *attitude* and *count* are known (*OR* are irrelevant), the next card you play in a suit (if you have a choice of cards) is *suit preference*.

There are many different situations where suit preference is applicable. The rule to remember is that suit preference is in effect *ONLY* when the other signals are no longer of any use. So, how does suit preference work?

The most common suit preference situation is when partner makes an opening lead of an Ace against a suit contract and there's a singleton of that suit in dummy. In this case, it's clear your side has no immediate chance to win more tricks in the suit because the next lead will be trumped in dummy. Your *attitude* is known (don't lead it again right now) and *count* doesn't matter so *suit preference now applies*. Eliminating the suit led and trump, if you play a HIGH card on this trick, you're asking partner to lead the HIGHER of the two remaining suits. If you play a LOW card on this trick, you're asking partner to lead the LOWER of the two remaining suits. If you play a MIDDLE card, you're telling partner either you don't care, you don't know, you want partner to continue the suit led or you want partner to lead a trump. A middle card tells partner to "do what he thinks is right". Note that the book method applies this rule *ONLY* if there's a SINGLETON in dummy. However, some partnerships extend the standard method to include whenever dummy holds the king and is winning the next trick regardless. This extended agreement would be in effect for example if partner leads the Ace and dummy comes down with the Kx(xxx). Using the extended method, since dummy will win the next trick, partner's card is suit preference. Discuss this with partner. **Example:**

Partner leads the ♦A (from Ace/King) at trick one against a spade contract. Dummy hits with:

♠AJ43 ♥Q75 ♦4 ♣KJ832

You hold:

♠854 ♥AKJ2 ♦10632 ♣765

Well, it's pretty clear you don't want another diamond. A trump lead isn't going to be too helpful for your side either. What you want is for partner to shift to a heart through dummy's ♥Q75. So, how do we "tell" partner to lead a heart? By playing the ♦10 (our highest diamond) we request that partner shift and now lead the HIGHER of

the two remaining suits, (between hearts and clubs - eliminating diamonds, the suit led and spades, the trump suit). If our hearts and clubs were reversed, we'd want a club lead and we'd play the ♦2 requesting partner shift to the LOWER of the two remaining suits. If we held nothing of value in clubs **OR** hearts (**OR**, something of value in **both**), we'd play the ♦6, a MIDDLE card signaling NO preference. Partner will normally abandon diamonds and lead the suit we requested – UNLESS he knows better. Signals are NOT demands, just suggestions.

The second classic suit preference play is when you're leading a suit you believe your partner is going to ruff. The suit preference rules again apply. What you want partner to do is ruff the card you lead, then lead something back that you can win so you can give him another ruff. You "tell" partner what suit to return by the size of the card you lead for him to ruff. Let's say spades are trump and you believe your partner is out of hearts. We eliminate two suits – Trump (spades) and the suit we expect partner to ruff (hearts). That leaves two suits remaining – diamonds and clubs. If your entry is in DIAMONDS, lead a HIGH heart (for the HIGH suit, diamonds) for partner to ruff. If your entry is in CLUBS, lead a LOW heart (for the LOW suit, clubs) for partner to ruff. If you have NO entry, or don't care, or want partner to lead trump, lead a MIDDLE card telling partner to use his judgment and "do the right thing". It's important to note that even if you can't ruff the card partner led, if he thought you *might* ruff, the card he led is still suit preference. This will help your defense later in the hand. **Example:**

You open a spade and they end up in 4 hearts. Your partner leads the ♠8. You hold:

♠A109742 ♥Q52 ♦AK ♣94

Dummy holds:

♠J53 ♥K783 ♦QJ72 ♣A5

You hope that the ♠8 is a singleton. So, you win your ♠A and now what? Well, if partner's card IS a singleton, you have this contract beat. Lead your ♠10 (a HIGH card to ask for the HIGHER suit – diamonds). Partner hopefully will ruff the ♠10 and *must* return a diamond! Your ♠10 demands a diamond return. Win the ♦K (the lowest card that will do the job) and return the ♠9 to ask for another diamond. Partner will ruff your second spade and return yet another diamond which beats the contract two tricks.

Sometimes however you don't have the luxury of several cards to choose from. You might have only two cards remaining in the suit, which limits your ability to signal. In this instance, you have 3 possibilities (HIGH suit, LOW suit and don't care) to compress onto only 2 cards. The rule now becomes that the HIGH card definitely asks for the HIGH suit, but the LOW card is somewhat ambiguous. You *may* want the LOW suit back or may not care. However, you definitely do not want the HIGH suit. For all this to work, partner has to watch the spot cards like a hawk. Even then, sometimes a suit preference signal is unclear and partner may have to make an educated guess as to whether the card you played is HIGH, MIDDLE or LOW.

Once you've integrated the above two basic suit preference situations into your play, you can start using more advanced suit preference signals. Again, the "rule" states that once partner knows your ATTITUDE (no matter how it's determined) and partner knows your COUNT (no matter how it's determined), the next card played in that suit is SUIT PREFERENCE. The following situation happened to me recently. In a competitive auction, my partner overcalled in hearts and I supported hearts. They ended up in 4♠'s. Partner led the ♥A. Dummy hit with 4 heart cards. Doing the math, I knew partner had 5 heart cards if he made a normal overcall. Partner knew I had 3 hearts for my supporting bid. Looking at 4 heart cards on dummy, it's clear to both my partner and me that declarer has at most one heart. I knew that as soon as declarer follows to this trick, my partner will 1) Know my attitude (a heart continuation will be ruffed), 2) Know my count (three cards for my support during the bidding) and 3) Will know my exact heart holding (his five cards, dummy's four, declarer's one and by derivation, my three). I had a choice of 3 cards I could play to this trick and since partner knows my exact holding, this should now be suit preference. I had the ♣A and wanted a switch to clubs, so I played the ♥2. If I'd had no suit preference, I'd have played my middle heart. Sadly, partner and I weren't on the same wavelength and he didn't recognize my signal as intended. Even the best of us sometimes mis-read signals.

Another case where you might use suit preference is when you open a weak 2 bid. You're on lead and you lead A from A/K in your suit. Declarer ruffs the first round and starts pulling trump. Once you're out of trump, you can help your partner by discarding in your weak two suit. Partner KNOWS your attitude (declarer ruffed, you hate the suit) and KNOWS your count (you bid a standard weak two showing 6 cards in the suit). You have FIVE cards left you can choose from to discard. The HIGHEST card says you LOVE the HIGHER suit. The LOWEST card

says you LOVE the lower suit. The MIDDLE card says “I don’t care” and the other two show slight preference for either the HIGHER or LOWER suit. With that many cards, you can actually indicate gradations of black to gray to white.

Suit preference is somewhat murky against NoTrump. Without a trump suit, partner may have to make an educated guess as to which two suits to eliminate.

When I’m playing with my favorite partners, it’s amazing how many times subtle suit preference situations arise. It becomes a case of complete partnership trust – “*I* know that *you* know attitude and count, and *you* know that *I* know attitude and count, so this card MUST be suit preference.”

The rest of this article describes other suit preference signaling methods. I don’t recommend them. But you should familiarize yourself with them because as declarer, you’ll encounter defenders who use them against you and you need to be able to “read” their signals to each other. If you don’t understand their signaling, ask. These methods are non-standard and must be indicated on the convention card in the “Carding” section and the opponents told about it if asked.

Odd-Even discards: An ODD card indicates they LIKE the suit (ODD rhymes with GOOD), whereas an EVEN card says they DON’T like the suit. The RANK of an EVEN card has suit preference overtones for the remaining two suits. ODD-EVEN applies ONLY to the FIRST discard (this is an ACBL rule).

Lavinthal discards: They do NOT like the suit discarded. The trump suit (or the suit declarer is trying to establish in NoTrump) is also eliminated. The RANK of the card discarded indicates to partner whether they like the HIGHER or LOWER of the two remaining suits. Some partnerships play Lavinthal against ALL contracts, some play it only against NoTrump.

Trump Suit Preference: The theory here is that declarer “owns” the trump suit and both defenders just have little cards. Declarer is simply going to pull all your trump, then go about the rest of the hand. Playing “Trump Suit Preference”, the ORDER they follow suit with their little trumps gives partner a clue as to where their values *outside* the trump suit lie. Playing HIGH to the first trump trick and LOW to the subsequent trump trick indicates values in a HIGHER suit. LOW to the first trump trick then HIGH tends to show values in a LOWER suit but may show no interest anywhere.

So, why don’t I like these methods? There are no NEUTRAL discards. You MUST tell partner SOMETHING. Sometimes you have nothing to offer on defense and partner is on his own. Also, I’ve found that many people who use these methods tend to use them as a crutch instead of thinking about the hand. Their approach becomes “Partner, just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” You cannot play good bridge that way.