

# Standard Defensive Signals

Good defensive signalling is essential for any competent bridge partnership. After awhile, signals will become second nature.

--Kit Woolsey, Modern Defensive Signalling

In an earlier lesson, while contrasting the advantages that the declarer has over the defenders, we observed that declarer can see all of his resources at once and can plan his play by himself, without having to bring his partner in on it. The resources of the defenders, on the other hand, are not entirely known by either, and yet the two of them must somehow coordinate their combined resources if they hope to acquire a good result on the hand. One way they have to communicate with one another is by signalling. Each agrees to select the cards he plays in a manner that bears meaning to the other, just as in the bidding each selects bids that bear meanings.

Just as the meanings of their bids cannot be agreed upon secretly, but must be disclosed to the opponents, so too must the meanings of their signals be “public,” available to the declarer. But might not this undo the advantage they obtain if, whenever they signal to each other, they also tell all to declarer? It would not be right to answer this question by pointing out that many, many declarers will simply fail to pay attention. Let’s presume they do. The fact still remains that the defenders must coordinate their efforts, even at the risk of conveying information to the declarer as well. The importance of signalling is very well established. You can rest assured that experts signal one another, even though the declarer they are hoping to defeat is also an expert. As Kit Woolsey points out in his thoughtful little book Modern Defensive Signalling in Contract Bridge, signalling is essential to bridge competence.

Louis Watson, in The Play of the Hand at Bridge, reaches the concept of “signalling” from the topic of “discarding”:

**Many “family” bridge players think that discards are unimportant. If they cannot take a trick, they throw off any card that**

**seems useless at the moment, failing entirely to take Partner into consideration or to consider very carefully what the future of the hand may have in store. This is lamentably unimaginative and may prove costly more often than not. *Every play and every card* are of importance. Even with what looks like a hopeless hand, you must not resign yourself to the role of a “dummy.” Discards, like leads, should tell a story. It may be a sad story if you hold a blank hand, but the story must be told nevertheless. In this way, discards become signals.**

So we want to become story tellers with our cards as we play to the tricks in the hand. Now imagine if you will someone who starts to tell a story, and then stops and does something else, and then he tells some other part of the story, and then he ceases again. Not only will the story probably make little sense, but your listener will likely get irritated and stop listening to you. So stick with your story. As Watson says, *every play and every card* are of importance. **Select** each card. And as you do, think to yourself what meaning it is that you intend to convey.

But what use would there be of telling a story if nobody listened to it? Your partner must pay attention to your story. Your partner must watch the specific cards you are selecting, and partner must work out what they mean, within the context of your partnership agreements about signals.

Each partner must be telling his story, and each partner must be listening to the story being told by his partner. There is some extra effort required. I promise you that the extra effort has a payoff. The basic payoff will be in your score. You will win more tricks on defense, and this will be reflected in your matchpoints and in your masterpoints. But there is a payoff even beyond

this. Playing good, coordinated defense delivers an emotional experience of satisfaction, and sometimes even of triumph. Let's face it, we like that kind of emotional reward, even if it would be poor taste to overexpress it in front of the opponent we just defeated. If you and your partner can learn to achieve effective, coordinated defense regularly, you will also develop pride in your partnership and benefit from increased confidence. Did I mention that your opponents will fear you?

### The four basic types of signals

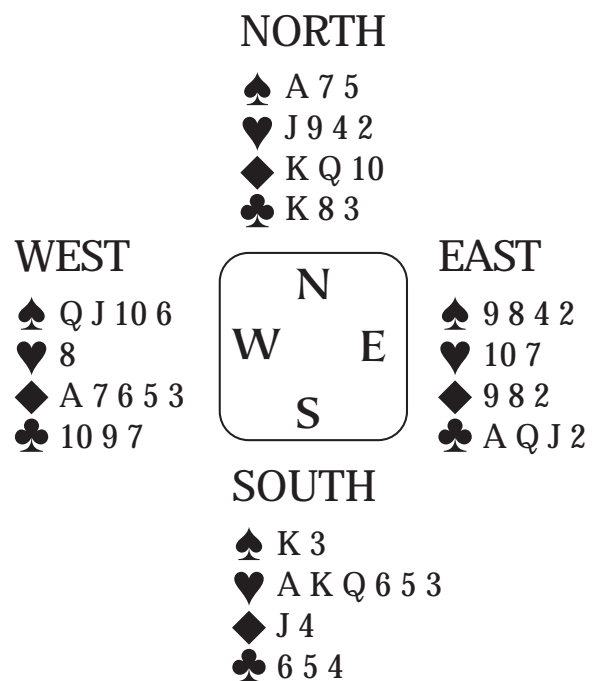
Just as there are more than one bidding system, so too are there variations in discarding agreements. This topic is still evolving in bridge literature, and as you play more bridge, you will encounter some different methods. We will be learning standard signalling methods. Even though experts are currently experimenting with methods that may confer extra advantages, a single error in their procedures will instantly undo the small advantages they may otherwise be attaining. Standard methods are very powerful and very capable. You can compete against anyone using standard methods. For convenience, we can say that there are four basic types of signals

- Attitude signals
- Count signals
- Discard signals
- Suit preference signals

### Attitude signals

Attitude signals apply to a suit your partner leads. Of course if partner has led a small card, you may be obliged to play third hand high, so that no signal can take place. But especially if partner has led an honor, the card you play to the trick expresses how you feel about the lead. Was it a good lead? Did you like it? Can you help win more tricks if partner continues his suit? Would you like partner to continue it? If this is your opinion, you encourage partner by playing the highest card in that suit that you can afford to play. If you didn't care for the lead, if you think partner has started out in the wrong direction, if you can't help win tricks with that suit, or if you

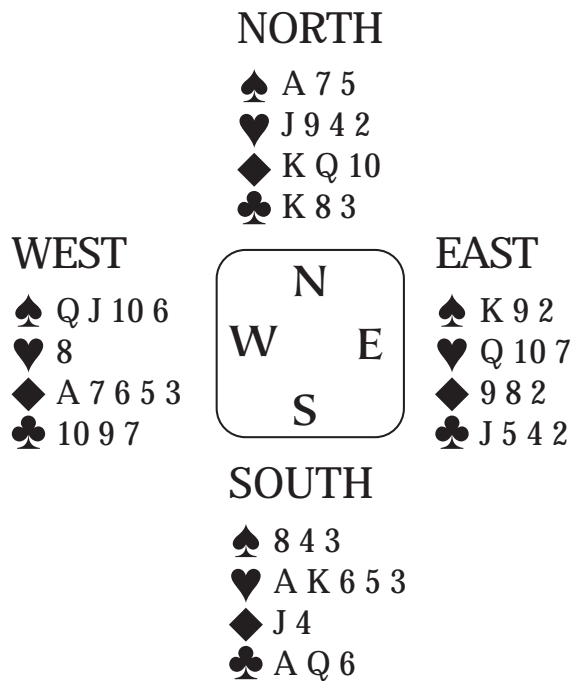
just don't want partner to continue, then show discouragement by playing your lowest card in that suit. Partner will observe your message and decide what next to do. Usually he will follow the direction you are giving, but not always. He may have reason to discontinue, even if you play high. If he does, then think carefully about his motive. On the other hand, he may continue, even if you play low to discourage him. But continuing when discouragement is shown should not be common. A discouraging signal often carries with it the implicit notion that something else *ought* to be done.



North-South reach 4 hearts with South declaring. West leads the Queen of spades. East certainly has no reason to encourage, and should not. The spade deuce would be his correct play. But the discouragement suggests that West should seek an alternative if he regains the lead. South will take the ace of spades on the lead and cash the ace and king of trump. Next he will lead the jack of diamonds. This will put West on lead. He remembers East's discouraging spade, and the only obvious thing to do is to lead the 10 of clubs, setting the contract. Do you think the switch to clubs was obvious? It was obvious after East played the two of spades. It was

not obvious without that signal, because West still had the option to continue spades. If he had continued spades, of course, South would be able to discard a losing club on a good diamond, making his four heart contract.

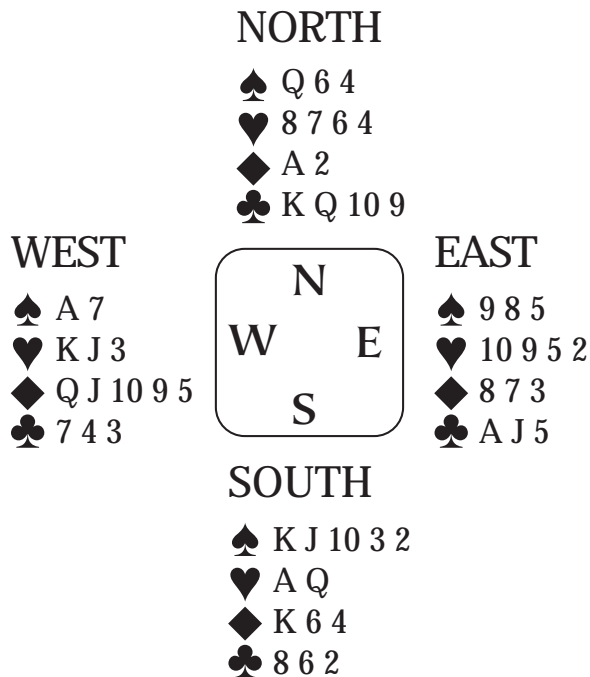
For a clear comparison, take a look at this modified version of the previous hand:



Notice that the West and North hands are unchanged from the previous hand. The contract is still four hearts, West still leads the queen of spades, South still calls for dummy's ace to win it. South stills cashes the ace and king of trump next, followed by the jack of diamonds, West taking the ace. So far, to West, everything looks exactly the same, with only one exception. The only exception is East's play to the first trick. This time, instead of the two, East played the nine of spades, encouraging. So when West takes the ace of diamonds, he continues spades, and this sets the contract. Notice that a switch to clubs would allow South to make four hearts.

Comparing the two hands, we see that nothing is obvious to West without a signal. But once a signal is given, the winning line is quite obvious in both cases. A simple signal can make all the difference.

The next two hands are not as alike as the previous two, but they illustrate the same lessons, albeit it in a more sophisticated fashion requiring a little more thought.

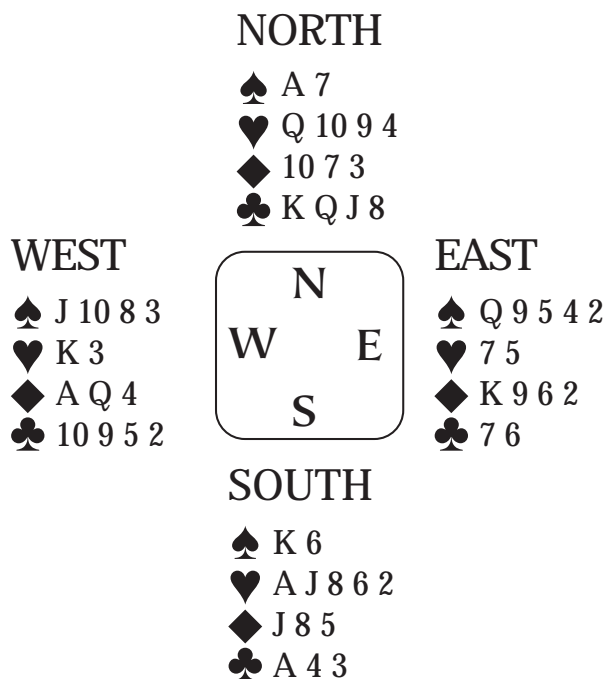


This time South has declared in four spades. West chooses the queen of diamonds, and North takes dummy's ace. South's normal signal would be a discouraging 3. But South must also consider what suit West will switch to if he gains the lead. Dummy's club suit must look forboding to West. Therefore West may decide to switch to hearts, where East has no help. In order to prevent West from switching to the wrong but more obvious suit, East must play the seven of diamonds, encouraging a diamond continuation, which would presumably turn out less harmful than the "obvious" switch to hearts.

Indeed, declarer will next start tending to his trump suit, surrendering the ace to West. Thinking that East likes diamonds, he continues. As a result, no harm befalls the defense. When North finishes pulling trump, he attacks clubs, whereupon East wins and switches to hearts. Now the defense will get their maximum of 4 tricks and prevail.

As it turns out, a discouraging signal tends to carry the weight of asking for a switch. Some partners agree that it *requires* a switch, but that message tends to be an overstatement. The general sense of a discouraging signal should be that no help is available, and that this line of defense doesn't look fruitful and could be dangerous. Partner may continue the suit if he feels it is still the best or the safest thing to do. Nonetheless, before continuing in the face of a discouraging signal, consider what switch it is that

partner may be wanting. You must do this since partner can always give you “false encouragement” to discourage a switch, just as East did in the forgoing hand.

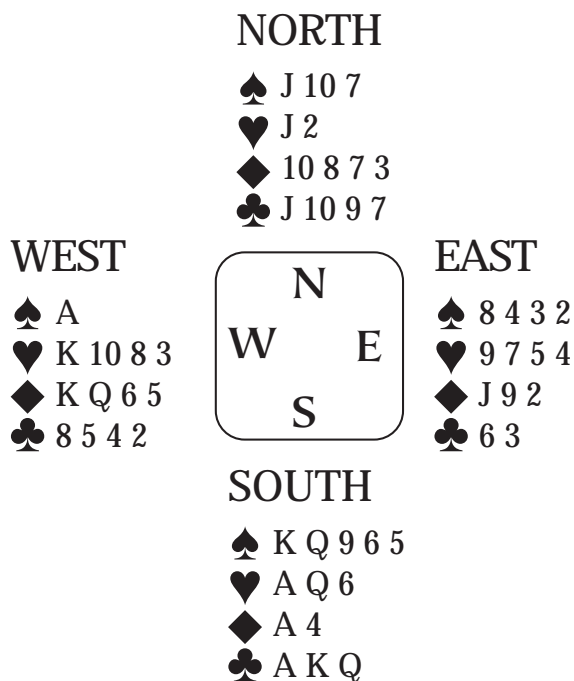


Against South’s four heart contract, West has selected the jack of spades for the opening lead. East sees no future in spades, so should he discourage or encourage? Well, if West gets in and, heeding your discouraging signal, wants to switch, what will he switch to, a club or a diamond? Probably a diamond. Can you stand it if he does? Yes, you can. If you and partner cannot create tricks in diamonds, then you have no chance on this hand. Since there is no hope in spades, and since the obvious switch must be made if you have any chance to set the contract, you discourage in spades so that partner will switch to diamonds.

Declarer wins the spade lead in dummy, you play the 2 of spades, declarer tries the trump finesse, losing to West. West should now cash the ace of diamonds! Do you remember the previous hand. You deliberately encouraged the lead in order to discourage the obvious switch. This time you must want the obvious switch, so partner, trusting you, cashes the ace from AQ. You show him the 9 of

diamonds, and your side cashes three diamond tricks for the set. You made your partner look like a genius! But what made him a genius was his trust in your signal.

Alas, signalling cannot always create a world of rainbows:



South has a mighty hand, but he can be set at 4 spades if East-West can find the right defense. To defeat the contract, West must lead the king of diamonds. When he wins the ace of spades, he needs to continue with a low diamond to East’s nine (or jack if South puts up the ten). East must then lead another diamond, forcing South to ruff. Now if South pulls trump, he will lose the king of hearts and another diamond. If, instead of pulling trump, he tries to cash three club tricks, he loses a ruff and the king of hearts. The defenders will have run a successful forcing defense.

The trouble is that East can keep the needed jack and nine of diamonds only if he plays the two of diamonds on the first trick, thereby discouraging a diamond continuation. The two of diamonds tells West that East does not have the jack of diamonds, so West, fearing the Bath coup, must switch. And when he does, South will make four spades.

But, you say, couldn't East signal with the 9 of diamonds on West's lead of the king? Here's what might happen. South wins the ace of diamonds and leads trump, losing to West's ace. West leads a small diamond to East's jack, winning. East continues a diamond, and South *pitches the queen of clubs*, surrendering to West's queen. Switching now will do West no good, so he continues another diamond, expecting ruff and overruff. But East doesn't want to squander any of his four trumps, so he pitches a club, and declarer pitches the king of clubs on the good 10 of diamonds. Now declarer leads a club to his ace and a trump to the jack of spades in dummy, continuing with good clubs. If East does not ruff, South pitches a heart, and then another if East fails to ruff again. But if East does ruff, then South overruffs, and leads a trump to dummy's 10, pulling East's last trump, and then dummy's clubs are good. How would South know to run such a line of play? When East jumps up with the ace of spades on the first lead of the spade, it suggests the ace may be singleton. From this, some Souths will be able to figure out this intricate line of play.

### The Count Signal

A count signal is used to tell partner whether you have an even number of cards in a suit or an odd number. This information may help partner to reconstruct how many cards each player holds in the various suits, or it may help partner determine how to play a particular suit. You typically give count signals when declarer is playing a side suit. To show an even number of cards in the side suit declarer is playing, you play high-low. So you show an odd number by playing low-high.

When declarer is playing the trump suit, you don't usually give count. Sometimes, however, it can be useful. Perhaps you have led a short suit, which declarer wins, followed by a round or two of trump. Now partner gets in. Should he try to give you a ruff, or are you out of trump? To show partner that you have three trump AND that you can ruff, play high-low in the trump suit. This is an unusual signal, and you may be able to remember it for that reason.

Usually you give count when you can. But

remember that declarer is watching these signals. Sometimes the count of a suit is more important to declarer than to partner. Watch for these times, and when you see them, either don't give the count signal or give an incorrect count signal.

Remember that attitude signals have priority over count signals. So you show attitude first when showing attitude is appropriate. Then after that you give count signals.

How important are count signals? On some occasions they are absolutely critical:

<b>NORTH</b>		
	♠ A 5	
	♥ 10 8 4	
	♦ K Q J 10 4	
	♣ 7 6 2	
<b>WEST</b>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; width: 100px; height: 100px; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">N</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">W      E</div> <div style="margin-top: 5px;">S</div> </div>	<b>EAST</b>
♠ K 10 6 2		♠ Q 9 7 4
♥ 7 6 3 2		♥ J 9 5
♦ A 8 2		♦ 9 3
♣ J 9		♣ Q 10 4 3
<b>SOUTH</b>		
	♠ J 8 3	
	♥ A K Q	
	♦ 7 6 5	
	♣ A K 8 5	

Against South's 3NT contract, West leads the two of spades. Declarer plays North's five, you win the queen and return the four. With four or more cards in partner's lead suit at notrump, play back your original 4th best. With only three in partner's suit, you would return your original middle card. These agreements allow partner to count the suit. Your return of the 4 shows partner that you have either four spades or two, and he can conclude that you have four since South will not have five. Your four of spades goes to North's ace.

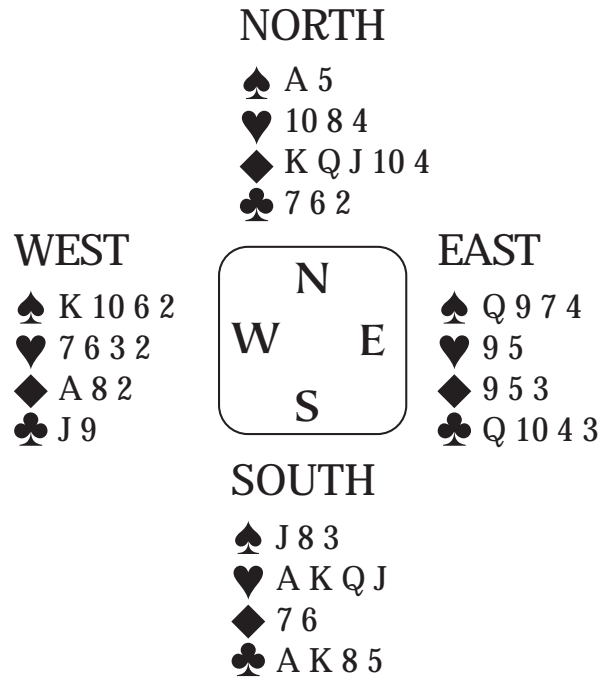
Declarer also knows that you and partner each have four spades. This information is a comfort to him because he knows your side will only be able to take a total of three spade tricks. Therefore he now

intends to knock out the ace of diamonds, giving your side three spades and a diamond. Declarer will then have all the tricks he needs. Won't he?

Declarer does have one problem. When he sets the diamonds up, he still needs to be able to reach them, and his only way is the diamond suit itself. There are no outside entries to dummy now that the ace of spades has been played.

The defenders can see this situation also. Declarer will not want you to hold up the ace, while the defenders will want to hold it up until declarer is out of diamonds. But how will West know how long to hold up? The answer is that East will give a count signal. When declarer wins the ace of spades he will immediately lead the king of diamonds. East will play the 9, starting a high-low signal that shows an even number of cards. West has no trouble knowing that East has two diamonds. Therefore South has three, and West must hold up his ace on both the king and the queen of diamonds. After this, South just lacks the means to come to nine tricks.

But, you may ask, was it really necessary to have a count signal on this hand? Couldn't West just "play it safe" and hold up on the ace for two rounds, without paying any attention to count? As it turns out, that would have worked on this hand, but what about on the hand in the next column:



Notice that the West hand and the North hand are exactly the same as in the previous hand. Again West leads the two of spades, again declarer plays low from dummy, again East wins the queen, and again East returns the four of spades. Again North wins the spade Ace followed by the king of diamonds. So far, everything is exactly the same as in the previous hand. So let's say we don't care about count signals. West lets declarer win the king of diamonds and the queen of diamonds, holding up by "playing it safe." But it wasn't safe. Declarer now ceases to play diamonds and instead cashes out his four heart tricks and his two club tricks, taking 9 total tricks.

But West should have set the contract. All he had to do is watch East's signal. When East played the three of diamonds on the king, West should have interpreted this as the beginning of a low-high, showing an odd number of diamonds, in this case, three. Therefore South can have only two diamonds. So West should hold up the ace when the king is played, but he should take the queen, depriving South of this trick. Without the queen of diamonds, South cannot find nine tricks on this hand.

Yes, the count is important. Without it, West just has to guess what the right thing to do is. But

when the count signal is given, West isn't guessing anymore. He knows exactly what the count is. He knows exactly what the right thing to do is. Now if East, for some reason, just wasn't paying attention, if he just wasn't giving count, if he just wasn't telling the story about his hand, then West would have no actual knowledge of how to play the correct defense.

## Discard Signals

So far our signals have been given in the suit that has been lead. When partner leads, we use a card in the suit led to show encouragement or discouragement. When declarer leads, we use cards in that suit to show our count. Discard signals occur when we have run out of the suit that is being played. Now we can discard any suit. Discard signals are attitude signals. If you discard a low card in a suit, it means you don't want that suit. If you do want partner to lead the suit you are discarding from, then play a high one.

Sometimes you only have to discard once. At other times you may have to be discarding on numerous tricks. Some players think they run out of stories to tell when they have to discard repeatedly. After all, how many times do you have to tell partner that you don't like clubs but you do like hearts?

But in fact there is always a story to tell. The first discard from a suit expresses attitude. As we've said, high you like it, low you don't. Subsequent discards in the same suit show *present count*. Present count means "how many cards do you have left in the suit after you have made your attitude signal"? For example, let's say you hold in hearts the 6 5 4 3 2. Spades are being played, so you discard the two of spades to signal that you do not want a spade lead. Now you have four cards left in the suit. The principle of "present count" means that you play high-low to show an even number of cards remaining. Best choice would be the 6 followed, if possible and necessary, the 5.

Just because you signal low does not mean you don't have an honor in that suit. In fact you may, but you don't want partner to lead the suit and "find" your card for declarer. Playing low when you have an honor often has the added advantage of persuading

declarer that you are not the defender who holds that card. Note, however, that you want to be pretty sure that the card you are trying to hide is not a card that is needed by the defense. Don't deny cards indiscriminately. You might have what your partner needs.

Here is an example of a discard signal:

<b>NORTH</b>		
♠ A 8		
♥ J 7 4		
♦ K J 7		
♣ J 8 5 4 2		
<b>WEST</b>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; width: 100px; height: 100px; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">N</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">W      E</div> <div style="margin-top: 5px;">S</div> </div>	<b>EAST</b>
♠ K Q 10 3		♠ 7 6 4 2
♥ 9 8 5		♥ 10 6 2
♦ Q 6 5		♦ A 9 4 2
♣ Q 7 6		♣ 10 9
<b>SOUTH</b>		
♠ J 9 5		
♥ A K Q 3		
♦ 10 8 3		
♣ A K 3		

South is playing 3NT. West leads the king of spades, South winning with dummy's ace, East playing the two, which denies the jack of spades. Declarer's easiest path to nine tricks appears to be clubs, so he plays ace of clubs, king of clubs, hoping to drop the queen doubleton, which doesn't happen. So he plays out his small club, rooting for West to have the queen of clubs because South's jack of spades can't be successfully attacked by West. West does in fact possess the queen of clubs. But when West plays to the trick, West sees East play the nine of diamonds. West loves this information because he needs East to lead a spade through South's jack. Sure enough, East wins the diamond ace and switches back to spades for a successful defense. Was the signal necessary? Absolutely. East has already denied the jack of spades with his opening signal, so West must not lead spades himself. Without East's 9 of diamonds,

West will have to guess which suit to shift to. Looking at dummy, the diamonds may look too threatening, and West will very likely guess wrong. If he does, South uses the clubs he established to make his contract. East must signal to lead diamonds.

Note the partnership coordination it takes to set this contract. West must lead the king of spades, which will be at least the KQ and is probably either KQJx or KQ10x. East, on the same trick, must signal low, denying the jack of spades. West must observe and understand East's signal. Subsequently, East must signal that he wants a diamond lead by discarding the 9 of diamonds. West must be watching it and interpreting it correctly. Further West must understand that he himself should not lead spades, and he should understand that East must want this lead in order to return a spade through declarer. East himself must understand that a spade through declarer is the proper line of defense, and that the reason he is signalling with his 9 of diamonds is to attain the lead for the purpose of leading a spade through South's jack. East will therefore also understand that South has the jack. If West had it, he will cash the queen and jack of spades, and the rest of his good spades, before switching to the diamond.

The description of the coordinated effort of the defenders sounds complicated, probably more complicated than it really is. Nonetheless it does point to the tough job that defending can be, and it helps to explain why competence at defending requires the use of these signals.

### Suit Preference Signals

With a suit preference signal we can direct partner to a specific suit that we would like him to lead. The classic case of a suit preference signal occurs when we are leading a suit that we know partner can ruff. We will lead to partner a card that will tell him what suit to lead next. Clearly partner cannot lead the suit he is ruffing. And neither do we presume that you could want a trump to be led next. That means you will be indicating one of the other two suits for your partner to lead back to you. Of those two suits, one is higher ranking than the other. If you want partner to return the higher ranking suit,

you lead a high card for him to ruff. If you want partner to return the lower ranking suit, you lead a low card for him to ruff. That is the basic suit preference signal. We saw an example of this type of signal in the previous lesson on leading short suits.

Also in last lesson we yet another type of suit preference signal. Let's reproduce it for this occasion:

**NORTH**

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

**WEST**

♠ A J 9 5 4  
♥ A 5  
♦ 9 7 6 3 2  
♣ 2

N  
W            E  
S

**EAST**

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

**SOUTH**

♠ Q 10 7 6  
♥ K 8 7 6  
♦ A  
♣ Q J 8 3

S	W	N	E
1 ♣	1 ♠	dbl	P
2 ♥	P	4 ♥	P
P	P		

West leads the two of clubs. East has heard South's opening bid, and he sees his own clubs and dummy's clubs. So East knows that the two of clubs is a singleton. What's more, he knows his partner would not risk the lead of a stiff in declarer's first bid suit unless West also had trump control, either A-x, or A-x-x, or K-x-x. What West needs is a way to reach East's hand. To tell West how to reach him, East employs a suit preference signal. The two possible suits to consider are spades and diamonds. Of these, spades is the higher ranking. So to show West that spades represent the best chance of getting to the East hand, East plays the 9 of clubs on the opening



round of clubs.. When East wins the ace of trump he leads a small spade to East's king and East returns a club for West to ruff. Then West cashes his ace of spades to set the contract.

From this hand we should draw a general conclusion:

**When partner is leading a singleton, and you can't win the lead, then the card you do play should be a suit preference signal.**

And the corollary rule is this:

**When leading a singleton, and when partner should know that it is a singleton, then if he cannot win it, interpret his card as a suit preference signal.**

And yet, even now we have not exhausted the circumstances when a suit preference signal should occur.

shift to clubs. West complies, and the contract is set before declarer can take a trick.

Here is a similar situation:

		<b>NORTH</b>		
		♠ J 7 6		
		♥ K Q 8		
		♦ 7 6 5		
		♣ 8 7 3 2		
<b>WEST</b>		<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="text-align: center;">N</p> <p style="text-align: center;">W      E</p> <p style="text-align: center;">S</p> </div>	<b>EAST</b>	
♠ Q			♠ 5 4	
♥ A 9 7 6 5 3			♥ J 10 2	
♦ K J 3			♦ A 10 9 2	
♣ Q 10 5			♣ J 9 6 4	
		<b>SOUTH</b>		
		♠ A K 10 9 8 3 2		
		♥ 4		
		♦ Q 8 4		
		♣ A K		

		<b>NORTH</b>		
		♠ A 10 7 5		
		♥ 8		
		♦ K 8 4 2		
		♣ K 8 4 2		
<b>WEST</b>		<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="text-align: center;">N</p> <p style="text-align: center;">W      E</p> <p style="text-align: center;">S</p> </div>	<b>EAST</b>	
♠ 8 4			♠ 9 2	
♥ A K 9 2			♥ 10 6 5 4 3	
♦ J 10 9 3			♦ 7 6 5	
♣ J 10 9			♣ A Q 3	
		<b>SOUTH</b>		
		♠ K Q J 6 3		
		♥ Q J 7		
		♦ A Q		
		♣ 7 6 5		

South is playing four spades and West leads the ace of hearts. North's singleton heart and his ample supply of trump means that the heart suit is irrelevant to the future of the defense. Therefore East's attitude is irrelevant, and so is East's count. That means that East can tell his story with a suit preference signal. East plays the three of hearts, not to discourage or show 5 hearts, but to tell West to

Against 4 spades, West leads the ace of hearts. Dummy's heart holding makes East's attitude about the suit perfectly clear, and for that reason, an attitude signal would be pointless. But this means that suit preference becomes relevant. Given the choice of a diamond switch or a club switch, East has a clear preference, and he will play the jack of hearts under West's ace. Now the the defense takes its 3 diamond winners.

Here then is another general case when a suit preference signal comes into effect:

**When it is impossible for the partner of the opening bidder to want a continuation of the suit led, the appropriate signal to give is a suit preference signal.**

Suit preference signals can arise in still more circumstances. But most of these require a strong familiarity with signalling so that small nuances can take on additional significance. The present lesson is not the place to discuss the sophistications of suit preference signals.