

SIGNALS IN SUIT CONTRACT DEFENSE

Many signals used in notrump defense are also applicable to suit contract defense. See section 1-6, Signals in Notrump Defense. Section 1-2, Third Hand Play Against Suit Contracts, includes some of the signaling appropriate to third hand play.

The Odds in Signaling

A familiar situation has the opening leader with AK-fifth, dummy with Q-fifth, and partner holds either a singleton or a doubleton. The odds are these: If partner plays the lowest card, then it has to be a singleton, of course, and if he plays the middle card, it's 50-50. If he plays the highest of the three cards out, however, it is two-to-one that it's a singleton. This is a restricted-choice situation. If declarer has a singleton, he must play it, but if he has the two lower cards he will play either at random, so it's two-to-one that he has a doubleton.

Another familiar situation has the queen being led from KQx or KQ10 and partner must signal whether he has the jack. The general rule is "pay off to the less-likely cases."

Let's start with the leader West holding KQ109 with A86 in dummy, with missing spot cards of 75432, and declarer has denied four cards in the suit. After the queen lead is ducked, West wants to know who has the jack.

The playable cards for East are 75432. The 7 and the 5 are obviously encouraging, the 2 obviously discouraging. The 4 could be from J43, J42, or 754, so it's two to one that East has the jack. The 3 could be from J32, 753, 743, or 543, making it three to one that East lacks the jack. If you pay off to the less likely cases, going wrong on just two of them, you will be ahead most of the time.

If West's hearts are weaker, say KQ9x, first of all East will never play the 10 because declarer could have J9x, and he will always play the jack from J10. The only "bad" cases are when East has J32 or 1054 (754 is impossible because declarer would win the trick holding J10). That being so, the odds work out the same as in the previous case, even though West has only four playable spot cards instead of five. Assume that the three highest cards are encouraging, the two lowest discouraging.

Now suppose declarer is known to have four or five cards in the suit, and East therefore two or three, with only four possible spot cards to play, let's say 5432. The 5 is plainly encouraging, while the 2 is usually discouraging but could be from J2, which is only one possibility out of five. The second-highest 4 is three-to-one encouraging, and the second-lowest 3 is three-to-two discouraging. Therefore you continue if either of the two highest is played, but switch if either of the two lowest is played.

Next try it with six playable spot cards, as when the leader has KQ10 and the dummy A86, leaving playable spot cards of 975432. If declarer has denied four cards in the suit, it's impossible for East's signal to be ambiguous, even with J432 or 9754. As soon as declarer plays a card he gives the show away, making one of those holdings impossible.

If declarer is known to have four or five cards in the suit, and East therefore two or three, East could play encouraging from J97, J95, J95, J93, J92, J75, J74, J73, J72, J54, J53, J52, J43, J42, J32, and discouraging

from 97, 95, 94, 93, 92, 75, 74 73, 72, 54, 53, 52, 43, 42, 32, 975, 954, 953, 952, 875, 874, 873, 874, 873, 872, 754, 753, 752, 543, 532, or 432.

Ignoring doubleton jacks for the moment, the 9 is always encouraging, the 7 encouraging 4 to 1, the 5 is even-seven, and lower cards are more likely discouraging than encouraging.

The doubleton jack can be J9, J7, J5, J4, J3, or J2, which means that the 5 is no longer even-seven, and therefore can be considered encouraging. The other doubletons do not change the odds enough to be significant.

Conclusion: When there are six playable cards and declarer could have four or more cards in the suit, consider the three highest as encouraging, the three lowest as discouraging.

When declarer is known to have exactly four cards, East having three, the 9 and 7 are always encouraging, the 5 is three-to-one encouraging, and the lower cards figure to be discouraging. That makes for the same rule, figure the top three cards to be encouraging, the bottom three to be discouraging.

I have not considered a lead from KQx with Axx in dummy when declarer may have four or five cards, but the odds are probably about the same as with KQ10.

A General Rule

It seems we have found a general rule that works in all these cases: Divide the playable cards as evenly as possible, but put a middle one in the top half. A card played from the top half figures to be encouraging, one from the bottom half discouraging.

Signaling in the Trump Suit

The general rule is to high-low with three trumps, play up with two or four. If you are anxious that partner not try to give you a ruff (e.g., when ruffing would cost a trump trick), don't high-low.

A more advanced trump signaling device is a combination of Smith echo (see the notrump defense signaling chapter) and suit preference. It goes like this:

In general, playing the highest trump on the first round indicates that you liked partner's lead (or your own lead) and wish that suit to be continued. Playing the lowest indicates a dislike of that suit.

When it is obvious whether or not you liked the opening lead, given the cards played to the first trick and the cards remaining in dummy, then trumps are used to indicate suit preference for the other two suits. If you have no preference, or prefer the lower suit, play the lower of two trumps first. This ambiguous play only indicates no interest in the higher suit, while playing the top card first unambiguously shows preference for the higher suit. With three trumps, play the middle trump first to show neutrality between the other two suits. Playing the highest next indicates a leaning toward the higher suit, while playing the lowest indicates either a preference for the lower suit or continued neutrality.

Other subtleties may be introduced by noting that there are 12 ways to play three trumps and 24 ways to play four trumps. Assigning meanings to each is "left as an exercise for the reader."

Falsecarding takes preference over any signaling. For instance, holding 102 over dummy's KJ93 of trumps, you may want to falsecard with the 10 when declarer plays the ace. Such a falsecard has no signaling significance. The same applies to cards that must be played for tactical reasons (e.g., splitting a sequence to ensure a trick).

Periscope Signals

For a discussion periscope signals, see section 1-6, Signals in Notrump Defense. Here is an example in suit play:

	S- KJ2	
	H- Q74	
	D- K6	
	C- A8763	
S- AQ743		S-9865
H- 8		H- ---
D- AQ109		D- 7532
C- J105		C- KQ942
	S-10	
	H- AKJ106532	
	D- J84	
	C- ---	

South	West	North	East
--	1♠	Dbl(?)	4♠
6♥	Pass	Pass	Pass

West leads the ♦A, and East should play the ♦7 to show an even number of spades. Then West knows that the ♠A won't get ruffed. Playing the diamond deuce as suit preference doesn't work very well!

Alarm Clock Signals

Alarm clock signals, abnormal plays to wake partner up to the fact that he should do something abnormal, were discussed in section 1-6, Signals in Notrump Defense. Such signals can be used in the defense of suit contracts as well. Example:

	J32	
A654		KQ
	10876	

With South declarer and East on lead during the play of a suit contract, the way for East-West to take three fast tricks in the suit shown (assuming West has no immediate side entry) is for East to lead the queen, then the king. This abnormal play should alert West that he should overtake the king (an abnormal action) and give East a ruff.

Another example is leading ace, then king, from a suit you have bid, which might say, "Trump this if you can...I have a side void!" Another common play with a void is the non-standard underlead from a known six-card or longer suit, hoping to find partner with a fast entry in the suit. The size of the card led is suit-preference, signaling where the void lies. If you underlead AKQ1082 by leading the deuce, partner should

know what to do when his jack unexpectedly holds the trick! The idea is that you do something unusual when you want partner to do something unusual.

The All-Gone Signal

When declarer is ruffing out your known long suit as part of elimination play, play your highest card in the suit to say "That's all!" (i.e., declarer has no more cards to ruff out). That will let partner know when the elimination is total, and that another round of the suit will give declarer a sluff-ruff.

Discarding from a Sequence

When discarding a card that is part of a three-or-more-card sequence, including an interior sequence, use the same rules as when discarding from such holdings against a notrump contract. See section 1-6, Signals in Notrump Defense.

Discarding From the Suit Led You Have Led

-- After leading from top of three or five small, discard the highest card you can spare, preferably the top card (present count).

-- After leading from top of four small, discard the lowest card (present count).

-- After leading from a sequence, show present count. Lead queen from KQ1093, discard 10 next (four cards left). Without the 9, discard the 3 (three cards left).

After Following Suit from the Bottom of a Sequence

After following suit from the bottom of a sequence, play the top of the sequence if you can spare it. After following with the 9 from QJ109, throw the queen when discarding from the suit.

After Giving an Attitude Signal

Continue the signal on the next round of the suit, whether high-low or low-high.

After Giving a Count Signal

It is often necessary to clarify a count signal on the second round of the suit. In general we use the "present count" method:

(1) Having shown an even number of cards (playing the highest that can be spared), with an original four cards play the lowest card next (high-low). From 9862 play the 9 and then the 2. Playing the 9 and then the 8 would show a doubleton.

(2) Having shown an odd number of cards (lowest played first), with an original three play the higher of the two on the next round. After playing the 2 from 962, play the 9. With an original five play the "present count" principle isn't used, because playing high might be taken as showing an original three, so play the original fourth-best next. After playing the 2 from 98742, play the 4 on the next round. This should usually be easy for partner to read.

(3) With an original holding of six or more cards, subtract four from the total and use the above methods.