

ATTITUDE SIGNALS ON DEFENSE

By Maritha Pottenger

Most people nowadays signal attitude when their partner is leading a suit. This is true both on opening lead and in the middle of the hand.

With standard attitude, a high card means “I like this suit. Please lead it again.” A low card means: “I don’t want you to continue this suit. Please try something else.” When signaling with a spot card, play the highest spot card you can afford. If you have two equals, play the higher of two equals (e.g., with Q982, signal encouragement with 9),

When partner leads an honor, a high card is used **ONLY** to signal an “**equal honor.**” Thus, **if partner leads the Ace** (promising the King), you signal high with the queen and low with anything else. Do **NOT** signal high, even with the queen, if you desperately want a shift to another suit. Do **NOT** signal high, even with the queen, if partner continuing the suit would set up a trick in dummy (e.g., partner has AK3; dummy has J1092 and you have Q843. Play the 3.) If you drop the queen under your partner’s Ace (partner has promised King by leading Ace), you absolutely guarantee the Jack. Many times, partner will want you to take the second trick in that suit so you can lead through Declarer’s honors in another suit. With a doubleton queen (and no jack), just play low. When you cannot stand any shift, signal high: false encouragement.

You also signal high (then low) when you have a doubleton and trump in a suit contract. If, for example, you are defending 4S and dummy comes down with ♠QJxx ♥Qxx ♦AKxx ♣xx and you have ♠xxx ♥84 ♦xxxx ♣Qxxx, and your partner leads the ♥A (promising King), play your ♥8 and then your ♥4 (promising a doubleton since the queen is visible in dummy). Partner will play a third heart for you to ruff. (The size of partner’s heart should be suit preference regarding the suit in which you might be able to get back to him.)

If partner leads the **King** (promising the Queen), you signal high when holding the JACK or the ACE (both “equal honors” to the King/Queen), and you signal low with anything else. (If you desperately want a shift, signal low even with the equal honor.) If it is clear from dummy (or will be from Declarer’s play) that you cannot have an equal honor, you can play high from a doubleton. For example, partner leads King (promising Queen) and AJxx shows up in dummy. You cannot have equal honor, so a high card would suggest a doubleton. Or, Jack shows up in dummy and Declarer plays low (clearly planning to take Ace in his/her hand), signal high with a doubleton. If, however, the Ace is in dummy and Declarer plays low, you must signal **LOW**. Declarer could be ducking from Jxx(x) hoping partner will continue the suit for an extra trick. If dummy has small cards, signal low with a doubleton. If partner leads King and you have the doubleton Ace, overtake and return the suit. You can ruff the third round in a suit contract. Do not overtake if you have a natural trump trick anyway. Do **NOT** play the jack if you have jack doubleton; you could be setting up the 10 in dummy or Declarer’s hand. If you drop the Jack on partner’s King, you promise the 10 as well or a singleton jack.

If partner leads the **Queen**, promising the Jack, you signal high if you have either the King **OR** the 10. Either one in your hand means that it is safe for your partner to continue that suit. When partner leads Queen and you have a doubleton, do **NOT** play high-low (giving count) unless all three honors (Ace, King 10) are visible in dummy or will be evident when Declarer plays to that trick (K10 in dummy and Declarer plays low, obviously planning to take the Ace). If partner leads the queen (obviously queen doubleton or singleton) in a suit which you have bid against a NT contract, it is often best to signal encouragement when you have something like AJ10xx(x) and knock out Declarer’s stopper right away (while partner still has one card to get back to you).

If partner leads the **Jack**, signal high with the equal honor (the queen). Signal high for a doubleton only if all three higher honors are visible (or will be after play to this trick). If partner leads the jack and the queen is in dummy while you hold Ace or King, signal high to encourage. If partner leads Jack and AQx is in dummy, signal high with a doubleton if Declarer plays queen (you cannot have king). Signal low with a doubleton if Declarer plays Ace. (If you signal high, partner will think that you have the King.)

Just because you have an equal honor does NOT mean that you should signal high automatically. You must think about the hand as a whole. If you want the suit continued, signal high with an equal honor. If you want partner to try a different suit, signal LOW (even though you have the equal honor). For example, dummy comes down with ♠KQxx ♥J10xx ♦x ♣AKxx and the contract is 4♠. Partner leads the Ace of hearts (promising King). You have ♠xx ♥Q92 ♦Axxx ♣QJ10x. The proper card to play is the ♥2! If you signal with the ♥9, partner is likely to play a second heart and then a third heart and Declarer will ruff your queen of hearts and get a free discard on the Jack of hearts in dummy. You want partner to lead a club (or even a diamond) before trying to cash another heart.

When leading a suit in which you do NOT have an honor, play a HIGH spot card to indicate no honor and no interest in having the suit returned. When leading a suit in which you DO have an honor, play a low spot card (promising an honor). From Q972, lead the 2. From 972, lead the 9.

It is important when defending to constantly COUNT TRICKS—the tricks your side is likely to take and the tricks Declarer is likely to take. Sometimes, for example, the hand gets to the point where it is obvious Declarer is about to discard everything on a side suit and you must cash your tricks quickly. If you hold ♦Axxx and ♣xxx and dummy has xx and xx in the minors with a heart suit set up on which to discard losers, cash the ♦A. If partner signals high, continue with a diamond (partner should have King of diamonds). If partner signals low, try a club and hope partner has Ace or even AQxx.

Remember that attitude is simply “I like it” or “I don’t like it.” **You canNOT signal attitude and suit preference at the same time.** If partner leads a suit and you play low, low just says “I don’t like it.” It does NOT say: “Shift to a club.” Partner should look at dummy and shift to the suit that looks like it most needs to be led through. Common sense!