

Signaling on Defense

There are 3 signal types: Attitude, Count and Suit-Preference. I have listed them in priority order.

Each has a standard meaning but each can also have an alternative interpretation; the most common alternative is **upside-down** which is just as it says: opposite of standard. These days upside-down carding is very popular. A simple example: high-low. This is probably the first method of signaling neophyte bridge players are exposed to. We learn that when we hold a doubleton we can convey that information to our partner by first playing the higher card and the lower card the next time we play that suit. We learn that playing high-low is like jumping up and down saying: *lead it again, I can trump it... We can get another trick*. Turn that **upside-down** by playing the lower card first followed by the higher card you are saying *lead it again, I can trump it... We can get another trick*.

This is all true, but it's only a third of the story. Another third is that playing high-low shows you are holding an even number of cards in that suit. So you would also play high-low if you had four or six cards in the suit. It is up to partner to look at the board and his own hand in order to decide if your hi-lo means 2 or 4 or 6. The last third is: playing low-high is a signal indicating that you hold an odd number of cards in that suit. It should be obvious that playing **upside-down Count** hi-lo means the opposite: *I'm holding an odd number of cards in this suit*.

That is relatively easy! Except isn't **Count** the second priority in signaling? True, it is but note that showing count takes two tricks. How many cards does it take to show **Attitude**? One is correct. Standard Carding says that playing a high card the first time a suit is led means *I like this suit*. Let's see how it all works.

Your partner is on-lead (opening) against a 5♦ contract. He leads ♣A (from ♣AKx??). You hold ♣Q93. When the Dummy comes down you see

♠Q54	and you hold	♠8752
♥AK85		♥JT97
♦A53		♦64
♣864		♣Q93

What card do you play if you are playing standard? If you are playing upside-down?

Standard: you play the ♣9 because you know partner has ♣A K and your ♣Q is also good. The ♣9 is an encouraging card. Remember high is an encouraging. When he plays the ♣K you play ♣3 (hi-lo). You have given an Attitude signal, first, and then an improper Count that doesn't matter.

The hi-lo indicated an even Count of 2 (you had three) but Partner is going to be just as happy to see the ♣Q as he would be seeing you win the trick by Trumping.

U-D: you play the ♣3 followed by the ♣9 for all the same reasons the standard carder played the '♣9 ♣3' combination.

In either case, if a partnership did not pay attention to carding after playing, the ♣A partner might not play the ♣K, reserving it, in hopes of capturing the ♣Q and if he did indeed cash it, he might very well switch to a ♥ or ♠ neither of which, by turning control over to Declarer, helps your side. The ♣Q is the setting trick.

Before we go further let us look at why people think upside-down might be a better system. Looking at the ♣ suit above the 9 might be considered a pretty reliable 'positive' Attitude signal but what if the holding had been ♣Q53? Now the high signal is the 5. How clear a signal is the 5? It all depends on what other cards your partner and declarer hold. You intended the 5 to be a 'high' signal but it can easily be misinterpreted. Using upside-down the 3 is hard to misinterpret, there is only one lower card. What are the chances that you hold both 3 and 2 i.e. you hold ♣Q32 and that the 3 is actually a negative signal? The conclusion generally is, in addition to preserving high

cards, using a low card as an encouraging signal is easier to read.

Can I only signal when following suit?

No, signals can be sent even when you can't follow suit. It is possible even to send both Attitude (with first discard) and Count (with second discard). Again, an example, of signaling with a discard:

You are defending against a 3NT contract and your partners opening lead is the ♥Q. If you know how to "read the lead" you are certain your partner holds either ♥AQJx(x) or ♥QJT_x. Playing Standard carding you play the ♥2 (discouraging) and the Declarer wins the trick with the A. The Declarer attacks ♠'s playing the ♠K, then the ♠Q, and when he plays the ♠J what do you play?

♠KQJT9	you hold	♠64
♥96		♥872
♦K3		♦AQJ2
♣Q43		♣8752

You obviously want someone to play ♦'s, the only suit where you can surely win some tricks and because of the tenace one you don't want to lead yourself. You can't count on the declarer to lead them and you have no other way to get into the lead. Partner has to get you into the lead. So you need to use this discard opportunity (on the ♠J) to signal Partner to lead a ♦ if he gets into the lead. Playing the ♦2 would discourage a ♦ lead and using the ♦Q to encourage throws away a trick. The only suit left is ♣'s; if you played 7♥ you would just be giving a reinforcing (lo-hi) discouraging signal. Partner already knows you don't like ♥'s. The only suit left is ♣'s. You certainly don't want to encourage ♣'s but if you show a discouraging ♣ signal Partner can/should read it as encouraging the remaining suit ♦. You had showed out in ♠'s a discouraging signal for ♥'s and also discouraged ♣. This screams for a ♦ lead from Partner (or Declarer) to your ♦AQ tenace.

Many folks seem to get confused about signaling especially when it is spoken about in terms of high-low, good-bad, want-don't want. It helps me to keep everything in term of encourage-discourage. This allows me to one day play with a partner who plays standard discards and the next day to switch to playing upside-down.

Carding	Encourage		Discourage	
	Attitude	Even Count	Attitude	Odd Count
Standard	Hi	Hi-Lo	Lo	Lo-Hi
Upside-Down	Lo	Lo-Hi	Hi	Hi-Lo

This table contains every thing we've already said, but what comes out of displaying it this way is the subtle fact that **Encourage** and **Even Count** signals share the same starting signal as does **Discourage** and **Odd Count** regardless of the system. This notion takes on more significance in the next case.

Special Signal to a NoTrump Lead

You are defending against 3NT and partners opening lead is the ♥7. When the Dummy comes down you see

♠AK876	and you hold	♠JT9
♥Q43		♥J652
♦A3		♦8752
♣93		♣84

When the Declarer plays the ♥Q from the Dummy – you can not win the trick! Which card do you play and why? You play the ♥6 because either the ♥5 or ♥2 might be interpreted to be discouraging. You say so what, I'm not inclined to encourage anything with this hand and if partner continues my potential winning ♥J could be 'toast'. Partners ♥7 if 4th best, which it certainly seems to be, says he has better ♥'s than I have. Hmmmm. The reason for playing ♥6 can be found in our table – better still in the E's. The ♥6 an even number is showing an Even count. Here's the whole of it:

- When Partner makes an opening lead against a no-trump contract; and
- Dummy covers partner's lead with a higher card; and
- Third hand does not have a higher card than dummy he should show Count.

When playing Standard carding: Hi → Even and that is as high as can be played without wasting an Honor, the J in this case.

A Lonely Third – Suit Preference

Did you notice in the example on 'signaling when discarding' we showed suit preference? Recall that suit preference is the third priority. It takes third place for several reasons, the 1st is that it can be done in other ways (as we've seen); more importantly Attitude and Count are generally more productive. So suit preference comes out to be an opportunity based adventure. When Attitude and Count signals don't make sense the door opens for suit preference. The concept behind the mechanics of suit preference is pretty simple: A high card calls for a higher suit; a low card asks for a lower suit. Again an example. You lost the contract in a competitive bidding marathon something like:

	P	O1	You	O2	
	1♥	P	2♥	2♠	
–		3♥	4♠	P	P
			P		

Partner leads the ♥K, and when the Dummy is exposed this is what you see

♠AT852	and you hold	♠64
♥T4		♥852
♦KJT		♦AQ2
♣Q93		♣J7652

You can't be sure the lead was from AK... or from KQ... but after you play the ♥2 (discouraging) Partner wins the trick and he follows up with ♥A. Since the Dummy will be out of ♥'s after this trick and could trump a ♥ continuation Partner is likely change suits. If she does you desperately want her to lead a ♦. How can you tell her to lead a ♦? You have to follow suit (♥) and you can play either the 8 or the 5. Playing the ♥8 tells Partner to lead the higher (non-Trump) suit and the ♥5 is telling her to lead a ♦. It makes no sense to give an Attitude signal to partner's ♥A; neither does it make sense to give Count that was already done in the bidding. Your play can only be suit preference; a low card asks for a low suit, in this case ♣'s; a high card asks for the higher suit. Seldom would a defender ask for a lead in Trump so a high card is asking for a ♦.

Suit preference can be shown when leading a suit. When partner is ruffing a suit the denomination of the lead makes no difference unless you use it to good purpose; a signal, for example. Consider this situation. You open the bidding in ♠'s but your LHO becomes the declarer in another suit. Your Partner, as he should leads your suit, specifically ♠T. You win with the ♠K and return the ♠A

on which Partner plays the ♠2. It appears partner started life with a doubleton ♠ (did you miss the hi-lo) and is poised to trump if you lead another ♠. Which do you lead. Here is another opportunity to signal. A low card suggests a low suit and a high card, a higher suit; if, of course, you are playing standard carding.