

MARK HORTON

BETTER SIGNALLING NOW



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Introduction

This book is a revision of *Step by Step Signalling*. In this new version I have incorporated several ideas and suggestions from Tim Bourke and Sandra Landy.

Its aim is to describe to the reader the principles behind successful signalling in defence, using fairly standard general methods.

In chess, a player who learns a long opening variation by rote without understanding the underlying ideas will soon be found out. The same principle applies in bridge where it is particularly important to understand the basic ideas involved before adopting a particular method.

As real life is more interesting than make believe, a large proportion of the deals in this book were actually played in major championships. Sometimes the carding methods of the players have been changed to those which are standard to the book – but as you will see I am more concerned with principles and understanding than method.

Having said that I recommend one or two specific treatments that many of the leading players have adopted to try and improve their defence and, at the end of the book, I describe a number of alternative and additional methods that the reader may wish to embrace.

Mark Horton
London

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Laying Foundations

It was at the battle of Copenhagen that Nelson, on being instructed to disengage the enemy, put his telescope to his blind eye and said, 'I see no signal.'

Now, while most bridge players possess excellent eyesight, it's remarkable how often they ask partner, 'Didn't you see my signal?'

Why do things go wrong in defense? Perhaps the most common reason is that players get confused about which signal they are supposed to be giving or trying to give.

In simple terms there are three basic signals which you may wish to give:

- 1 Count, where you tell partner how many cards you have in a suit.
- 2 Attitude, where you tell partner if you like their lead.
- 3 Suit-Preference, where you try and tell partner which suit to switch to.

Before considering all three areas in some depth, we need to lay out some ground rules about leads.

This book is not intended to be a treatise on opening leads, but it is a book about defense and every defense starts off with an opening lead. Accordingly, it is not that sensible to get embroiled in a discussion on how best to signal to help the defense without at least knowing what our leading style is. Personally, I have nothing against third and fifth highest leads and I can even stomach the occasional session of attitude leads; however for the purposes of this book it makes sense to adopt the most popular leading style, covered by just about the best known defensive adage: 'Fourth best of your longest and strongest'.

While our basic leading method is going to be fourth best from good suits, in recent years most tournament players have modified the 'fourth best' rule so that they lead the second highest card from bad suits, normally defined as a suit without an honor card. So, from Q-7-5-3 we would lead the three but from 8-7-5-3, our choice would be the seven.

In a similar vein we will choose to lead the middle card from three small cards rather than the old-fashioned top of nothing, so from 8-7-5 lead the seven and not the eight. Certainly, it is true to say that partner might have some difficulty in distinguishing whether our lead of the seven is from 8-7-5 or from 8-7-5-3 but, in order to help him later in the play, with three small cards we will lead the middle card intending to play the highest card on the second round. This is a conventional arrangement commonly known as MUD – which sensibly stands for middle, up, down. To make the distinction between three and four small cards totally clear, with four small cards lead the second highest card and follow with the lowest, so that partner only has to decide whether you started with two cards or four.

While all this may have been breaking new ground for the social bridge player, it may not strike the typical duplicate player as being very *avant garde*. That impression will not be altered by the statement that with two notable exceptions we will also adopt standard honor leads, so that most of the time we will lead the top of an honor sequence. However, the exceptions are much more up-market.

In the early days of bridge, players fell into two camps: (a) those who led ace from ace-king and (b) those who led king from ace-king. Whichever camp you belonged to, it was a fairly standard corollary that, if you led these cards out in the opposite way to your partnership agreement, then you were showing a doubleton.

Furthermore dependent on your style, until recently regardless of whether you would choose to lead the ace or king your partner would have to signal in the agreed partnership style. Traditionally, a high card from partner would encourage a continuation while a low card would suggest no real interest in that suit, though some partnerships preferred to play count signals so that a high card normally showed an even number of cards while a low card suggested an odd number. You could choose which type of signal you gave but you couldn't do both.

If you are still doing something like this read on, because a whole world is about to be opened up for you. Take a look at this deal which comes from the Ladies Championship at the 1978 World Pairs Olympiad.

	♠ 5	
	♥ Q 4	
	♦ K Q J 8 7 5 2	
	♣ A J 4	
♠ A K 10 4 3 2	N W E S	♠ J 9 7 6
♥ 7 2		♥ K 10 8 6 5
♦ 10 4		♦ —
♣ 10 9 6		♣ K 8 5 3
	♠ Q 8	
	♥ A J 9 3	
	♦ A 9 6 3	
	♣ Q 7 2	

It may be hard to believe but at a number of tables North/South came to rest in 3NT, and, even harder to believe, quite a few of them made it. How did this happen?

West led the ace of spades and East played an encouraging nine. Then, West had a problem because East would also play the nine of spades from Q-9-x. In both cases the defense could take the first six tricks but, if East had Q-9-x, West had to continue with a low spade while on the actual layout it was right to continue with the other top spade. Working on the assumption that South was more likely to have three spades than two, quite a few West players 'guessed' wrong.

Of course, where the ace of spades was asking for count, West had no problem, for her partner's nine (unless a singleton) could only be from four cards or a doubleton. On the other hand, if East had held the jack, nine and six of spades then the play of the six would have told West that the queen of spades would not be dropping. Mind you, if East's spade holding had been Q-9-6, then all the count signallers would have been able to do was congratulate South on an outrageous bid.

On balance, it seems that this was a situation where the count information was more beneficial than attitude, but inevitably there are occasions when the opposite would be the case.

Now wouldn't it be nice if West could choose the type of signal she wanted partner to give! Well, there is a surprisingly simple way of doing this. Using a mnemonic to help us remember, we can play A(ace) for Attitude and K(king) for Count.

It then becomes a question of deciding which piece of information you need to get from partner.

Here one would probably come down on the side of a count signal and so lead the king.

I hope you are convinced that it's a good idea to adopt this leading method.

If I have succeeded in making you think, so much the better and perhaps it has occurred to you to ask what happens if you are leading from a suit headed by the king-queen, as opposed to the ace-king? How can you get an attitude signal? The answer is to lead the queen. As long as partner remembers this can be from king-queen as well as queen-jack you should have no problems.

Now let us take a look at a few specific examples of each type of signal:

	♠ J 8 5							
	♥ A 10 9 6							
	♦ A K Q							
	♣ 10 7 3							
♠ A K 7	<table style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> </table>		N		W	S	E	♠ Q 10 3
	N							
W	S	E						
♥ 5 4		♥ K 2						
♦ 10 9 7 6 5		♦ J 8 3 2						
♣ 9 6 2		♣ J 8 5 4						
	♠ 9 6 4 2							
	♥ Q J 8 7 3							
	♦ 4							
	♣ A K Q							

After a simple bidding sequence: 1♥ – 3NT – 4♥ you have to find an opening lead.

It was the late, great Barry Crane who said: 'When God deals you the ace-king of a suit, you don't have a lead problem.' Clearly you are going to start with a top spade.

How do you decide which signal to ask for?

As a general rule when you have length in a suit there will be more chance of partner being short and hence able to ruff. On the other hand, if you are short you may well be facing length in partner's hand. Here it must be correct to find out if partner likes spades so the ace is the correct card, as it is asking for attitude.

With his holding East can afford to play the ten ensuring the defenders take their spade tricks after which the king of trumps will defeat the contract.

Of course, East's actual holding could have been Q-3-2. He would then have to play the three and hope West noticed that the two was missing.

Now let us look at the situation where a count signal is required:

♠ 9 8 2
 ♥ A K 8 5 3
 ♦ 6
 ♣ J 8 5 3

You have to make the opening lead after this bidding sequence:

North	South
1♦	1♠
2♠	3♣
3♦	4NT
5♦	5♠
pass	

I hope you agree that you need to know how many hearts partner has and so the correct opening lead is the king of hearts.

Dummy comes down, and this is what you can see:

	♠ A Q J 10									
	♥ J 2									
	♦ K J 9 3 2									
	♣ 7 6									
♠ 9 8 2	<table> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S	
		N								
W			E							
		S								
♥ A K 8 5 3										
♦ 6										
♣ J 8 5 3										

Partner plays the four of hearts and declarer follows with the ten. What do you try next?

A study of the spots tells you that partner must have either one, three or five hearts. Clearly the latter is a big favorite since (a) South didn't bid hearts and (b) he would be unlikely to use Blackwood with three losing hearts in his hand. You cannot take any more heart tricks and it's fairly obvious to switch to a diamond (especially so if you consider that the most likely reason for your opponents to stop at the five level after using Blackwood is that they are missing two aces). This enables you to get a ruff for the full deal turns out to be:

	♠ A Q J 10				
	♥ J 2				
	♦ K J 9 3 2				
	♣ 7 6				
♠ 9 8 2	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ 6 4
N					
W E					
S					
♥ A K 8 5 3		♥ Q 9 7 6 4			
♦ 6		♦ A 10 5			
♣ J 8 5 3		♣ 10 4 2			
	♠ K 7 5 3				
	♥ 10				
	♦ Q 8 7 4				
	♣ A K Q 9				

You may think this is pretty obvious but, when this hand came up in the Round Robin of the 1981 World Championship, Five Spades was let through on two of the three occasions it was bid.

Let's make one thing clear, every defensive signal is merely an aid for the defenders – it is not a substitute for clear thinking. You cannot afford to play as if you are in a straight jacket – they are for mental patients not bridge players!

If you have read other books about signalling you may have noticed that some authors are keen on count signals, whilst other prefer attitude. Of course both methods are playable but neither will be good enough on their own.

Here is a hand which has been used to illustrate the dangers of relying on count signals alone.

	♠ 6 5 2				
	♥ A Q 10 4				
	♦ A J 4				
	♣ Q 5 3				
♠ K Q 10	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ 9 8 7 3
N					
W E					
S					
♥ 7 2		♥ 8 5 3			
♦ 10 8 6 2		♦ K 7			
♣ 7 6 4 2		♣ A J 10 9			
	♠ A J 4				
	♥ K J 9 6				
	♦ Q 9 5 3				
	♣ K 8				

Against South's Four Heart contract West leads the king of spades and receives a count signal of the eight of spades from East. As you can see it would be fatal for West to continue with a spade. Of course you would have had no problem because, on your opening lead of the queen of

spades, partner's three of spades would have shown his lack of interest in the suit.

To summarise: I recommend that a lead of either the ace or queen should ask partner to give an attitude signal while a lead of a king asks for count. Before going on to examine the main types of signal in rather more detail, try the following lead quiz to make sure you understand the principles we have been talking about. No cheating though!

Opening Lead Quiz

In all the following hands you are West, what would you lead?

1	♠ A K 7 4 ♥ 5 2 ♦ J 10 5 ♣ 8 6 4 2	West — pass	North — 6♥	East — all pass	South 2♥
2	♠ A 7 2 ♥ A Q J 9 3 ♦ 6 5 2 ♣ 7 4	West — pass	North — 3NT	East — all pass	South 1NT
3	♠ J 7 3 ♥ K J 7 6 4 ♦ 5 2 ♣ A 8 6	West — pass	North — 3NT	East — all pass	South 1NT
4	♠ K J 4 ♥ 9 7 5 4 ♦ Q 6 2 ♣ Q 6 5	West — pass	North — 3NT	East — all pass	South 1NT
5	♠ 4 ♥ A K 5 ♦ K J 10 9 7 3 ♣ Q J 4	West — 1♦ pass all pass	North — 2♥ 3♥	East — pass pass	South 1♣ 3♣ 3NT
6	♠ K Q 8 3 ♥ 4 ♦ K 10 9 5 2 ♣ 8 4 2	West — pass pass	North — 2♣ 4♥	East — pass all pass	South 1♥ 2♥

Solutions to Opening Lead Quiz

1 ♠K

You are hoping to be able to cash two spade tricks. By getting a count signal from partner you should be able to judge whether to cash the ace of spades or switch to another suit.

2 ♥A

Since you have a sure entry in the shape of the ace of spades you can afford to have a look at dummy. If it contains just two hearts including the king you will be able to continue with a low heart at trick two. A good precaution against declarer turning up with four hearts headed by the ten when making the standard lead of the queen would give declarer two heart stoppers.

3 ♥6

Fourth highest of your longest and strongest. With a good suit and a side entry this is the ideal time to attack.

4 ♥7

Second highest from a poor suit. Notice that if partner gets the lead early and if he knows that you have a poor suit he might switch to something more profitable

5 ♦K

One of the exceptions that proves the rule. This is not the time to cash a high heart as you hope to use those as the entries to establish and cash your diamonds. It is clearly right to try and establish the diamonds, so lead one of those but choose the king just in case dummy has the singleton queen.

6 ♠Q

A good example of our recommended honor lead style. You are hoping the setting tricks will come from diamonds and spades, so lead the queen of spades to ask partner if he likes the suit.

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DO BETTER ON DEFENSE!

Defense is the hardest aspect of bridge, in part because the defenders have less information to work with than the declarer does. That's why it is so important for them to communicate, and why a solid understanding of basic signalling methods is critical.

The first edition of this book was published many years ago, under the title *Step by Step Signalling*. It was reissued in 2002 in a new version, *Better Signalling Now*, incorporating suggestions from Tim Bourke and former world champion Sandra Landy, and reached an even wider audience. In its newest edition, the author has added a discussion of some of the signalling methods popular among today's experts, and discusses how much of an improvement, if any, they offer over standard methods. As before, practical examples abound, and every chapter includes hands from the world's finest players.



MARK HORTON (UK), an internationally-known bridge player and journalist, is editor of BRIDGE magazine in the UK. His most recent book was *The Rabbi's Rules*.