

DEFENSIVE
SIGNALING
AT BRIDGE

DAVID BIRD



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D A V I D B I R D



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INTRODUCTION

There are two main ways of writing a book on defensive signaling. One is to present an encyclopedia of signaling methods, offering a range of options for each situation. The reader can then pick and choose from the splendid goods on the stall, creating his own signaling system. I have followed a different approach, recommending a single comprehensive system of signaling. When there is a worthwhile alternative, I mention this as an aside.

Suppose you ask a group of bridge players what is the purpose of a defensive signal. At least half of them will reply: 'It tells partner what to do.' This is not a good answer. It makes about as much sense as the dummy telling declarer what to do! How can a player know the best defense when he can see only half of the twenty-six cards owned by the partnership?

A defensive signal should say something about your own thirteen cards, to assist partner with his defense. For example, your partner leads a spade honor, and you have the opportunity to signal with a spot card in the suit. You will normally convey some message about your spade holding — either attitude (whether or not you would like a continuation) or count (whether you have an even or odd number of cards in the suit). Your partner must then decide how to defend, with one eye on his own thirteen cards. In military terms, think of your signal as a message from a reconnaissance patrol, not as an order to be followed.

Most of the chapters are followed by a quiz. The answer to each signaling problem is followed by its full 52-card diagram to demonstrate the effectiveness of the recommended signal. To make the book a bit different from others of the same genre, I have finished with a chapter that looks at the signaling methods of eight world-class pairs.

My warm thanks are due to Maureen Dennison, who very kindly checked the text for me and made some valuable suggestions.

David Bird

PART 1

RECOMMENDED
SIGNALING
METHODS





THE BASICS OF SIGNALING

An effective signaling system makes full use of three different types of defensive signal. Let's take a look at them.

An attitude signal tells partner whether you would like him to continue that suit at his next opportunity. You play a high spot card to encourage him to continue, perhaps because you hold a useful honor in the suit. A low card would discourage a continuation.

A count signal tells partner whether you hold an even or odd number of cards in the suit led. You play a high spot card when you hold an even number of cards, a low spot card with an odd number of cards.

A suit preference signal is entirely different. It says nothing about the suit in which the signal is given; it directs partner's attention to one of two other suits. For example, if spades are trumps and you signal with a high club, you show interest in the higher of the other two suits: hearts. A low club would show interest in the lower remaining suit: diamonds.

The most important decision to make, when deciding what system of signals to play, is when to use attitude signals and when to use count signals. The most popular method, and one of the best, is to use attitude signals when partner leads to a trick, and count signals when declarer leads to a trick. Suit preference signals are used less often, in special situations where the other types of signal would not be helpful.

THE ATTITUDE SIGNAL

When partner leads a low card to a trick, you will often have to play a high card in an attempt to win the trick or at least force a higher card from the next player. In that case you will have no opportunity to signal. The situation is different when partner leads a high honor. Look at this deal:

	♠ K 8 4					
	♥ K 6					
	♦ 8 7 3					
	♣ Q 10 9 7 4					
♠ 9 2	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ Q J 6	
N						
W E						
S						
♥ 10 9 4 3		♥ Q 8 7 5 2				
♦ A K 10 2		♦ J 9 4				
♣ J 8 3		♣ 6 2				
	♠ A 10 7 5 3					
	♥ A J					
	♦ Q 6 5					
	♣ A K 5					

West	North	East	South
pass	2♠	pass	1♠
all pass			4♠

West leads the ♦A, which is almost certainly from an ace-king combination. East can see that a continuation of the suit may set up declarer's ♦Q. He therefore follows with his lowest spot card, the ♦4, to say that (from the evidence he can see) he does not want a diamond continuation. West switches to the ♥10 and no damage has been done in the diamond suit. Declarer will draw two rounds of trumps and continue with three rounds of clubs, hoping to discard a diamond on the fourth round. Not today! East will ruff the third club and return a diamond for one down.

When East signals with the ♦4, he is not 'telling partner what to do'; he is merely giving the best advice he can when looking at his own cards. If West happens to hold the ♦AKQ he will doubtless continue diamonds anyway.

Suppose that East held ♦Q94 instead. He would then play an encouraging ♦9 on the first trick. West would continue with king and another diamond and the defenders would claim three tricks in the suit.

Similarly, East would play high from $\heartsuit 94$, again encouraging a diamond continuation. His intention on this occasion would be to ruff the third round.

THE COUNT SIGNAL

When declarer is playing a suit, it would be a waste of time to give an attitude signal. Why tell partner that you want the suit to be played (or not played) when declarer is already doing it! It therefore makes good sense to play count signals when declarer leads a suit and you do not have to attempt to win the trick.

If you are not familiar with this type of signal, you may wonder what use it can be. One general benefit is that it helps the defenders to ‘obtain a complete count’, in other words, to determine the shape of each player’s hand. Once this information has been gathered, defense becomes much easier. (We will look at some examples in a later chapter.)

There is one particular situation where a count signal carries a more direct benefit – when declarer has a long side suit in an otherwise entry-less dummy:

\spadesuit 10 9 8 4	\spadesuit 7 6 2	\spadesuit 5 3			
\heartsuit 9 3 2	\heartsuit 8 6 5	\heartsuit K Q J 4			
\diamondsuit J 10 5	\diamondsuit 7 3	\diamondsuit Q 9 6 2			
\clubsuit 7 6 2	\clubsuit K Q 10 9 4	\clubsuit A 8 3			
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	
N					
W E					
S					
	\spadesuit A K Q J				
	\heartsuit A 10 7				
	\diamondsuit A K 8 4				
	\clubsuit J 5				

West	North	East	South
pass	3NT	all pass	2NT

You are sitting East on this deal and partner leads the $\spadesuit 10$, South winning with the $\spadesuit J$. What is your plan for the defense when declarer leads the $\clubsuit J$?

It is obvious to hold up your ♣A on the first round, otherwise declarer will score four club tricks and make the contract easily. Declarer continues with the ♣5 to dummy's ♣K. What should you do now?

The correct answer is: 'I haven't the faintest idea what to do, unless we are playing count signals!'

On the present deal, declarer has only two clubs. If you hold up the ♣A for second time, he will thank you kindly and score nine tricks. Win the second round of clubs, switching to the ♥K, and he will go one down.

Suppose that South held three clubs, with a trick fewer in spades – a hand like this:

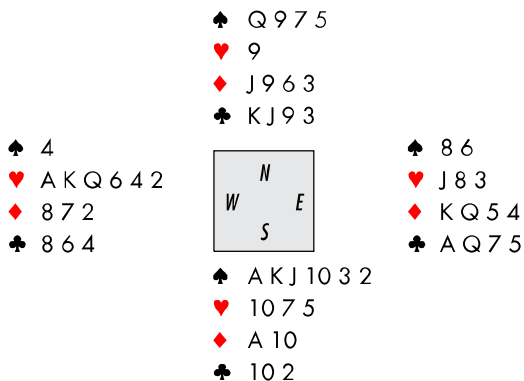
♠ A K J 4 ♥ A 10 ♦ A K 8 4 ♣ J 7 5

Now the winning defense would be to hold up the ♣A for a second time, restricting declarer to two club tricks. If you failed to do so, he would score four club tricks and end with an overtrick.

You need to know how many clubs declarer holds. He is not going to tell you, so your partner must signal his own count in the suit. When the cards lie as in the full diagram, West will play the ♣2 on the first round and the ♣6 on the next round. Low-high means an odd number of clubs. So, he has three clubs and declarer only has two. You must therefore take the ♣A on the second round. When South holds the alternative hand with three clubs, West would play high-low to show his doubleton club and you would then hold up the ♣A until the third round. This is one of the most essential techniques of accurate defense.

THE SUIT PREFERENCE SIGNAL

There are various situations where the value of an attitude or count signal would be very limited and the most useful signal is to suggest a switch to partner. In other words, you give a suit preference signal. One such occasion is when you can take no further tricks in the suit that has been led:



West	North	East	South
2♥	3♠	4♥	1♠
all pass			4♠

West leads the ♥A and the singleton heart is played from dummy. There is little point in East giving an attitude signal with regard to the heart suit, since a heart continuation would be ruffed in the dummy. Nor would a count signal help at all. Instead, East should give a suit preference signal. Here he would like a club switch through dummy's ♣K, because that might allow the defense to score two clubs and a diamond.

Since East wants a switch to the lower of the other two side suits, he plays his lowest heart (the ♥3) on the first trick. Partner duly switches to a club and East wins with the ♣Q. He plays the ♦K next, to clear a diamond trick, and declarer can pack his bags.

BUILDING A SIGNALING SYSTEM

To construct an effective signaling system, you must agree with your partner which type of signal is appropriate in any given situation. It is quite hopeless if one defender thinks he is giving an attitude signal but his partner reads it as suit preference! In the next few chapters we will be laying down some clear rules, aiming to avoid any such misunderstandings.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- An attitude signal tells partner whether you would welcome a continuation of the suit that has been led. A high card encourages a continuation; a low card discourages a continuation.
- A count signal tells partner whether you have an even or odd number of cards in the suit led. A high card shows an even number; a low card shows an odd number.
- A suit preference signal tells partner which of two other suits you would like him to play. A high card requests the higher suit; a low card requests the lower suit.
- A common agreement is to play attitude signals on partner's leads, count signals on declarer's leads.



ATTITUDE SIGNALS IN SUIT CONTRACTS

In this chapter we will look in detail at various situations in suit contracts where attitude signals work well. A subsequent chapter will deal with attitude signals in notrump contracts, where different considerations apply.

In these early chapters, we will assume that opening leads follow the style advocated in the Standard American Yellow Card (SAYC) system. From two or more touching honors, the top honor is led (the ace from A-K and the king from K-Q). From an interior sequence, the higher of touching cards is led (the jack from K-J-10, the ten from K-10-9). Otherwise, the defenders lead fourth best from a suit headed by at least one honor (for example, the three from K-10-8-3-2). From three low cards (9-6-2) the lowest card is led against a suit contract, the highest against a notrump contract. From four or more spot cards, the second best card is led (the seven from 9-7-4-2).

PARTNER LEADS LOW AND DUMMY WINS THE TRICK

Suppose partner leads a low card from a combination headed by one or more honors and the trick is won in the dummy. Partner may then need to know whether you hold an honor and you would welcome a continuation of the suit at a later stage. This is a common position:

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

West	North	East	South
pass	1♣	pass	1♠
all pass	2♠	pass	4♠

West gives his side a chance by finding the excellent lead of the ♥2. Dummy wins with the ♥A and East follows with the ♥8, an attitude signal to encourage a further play in this suit. (Note that he signals with the highest affordable card, to make the signal as clear as possible.) Declarer draws trumps and forces out the ♣A. Because of East's signal on the first trick, West continues with the ♥7 to East's ♥K. A diamond switch then puts the contract one down.

Suppose East had held:

♠ 2 ♥ J 8 6 4 3 ♦ K 10 3 ♣ 9 8 7 2

instead. He would have played a discouraging ♥3 at Trick 1. When West won with the ♣A, he would know that East did not hold the ♥K; he would therefore switch to the ♦6, hoping that East held the ♦K and the defenders could score three diamond tricks.

When dummy wins the trick with the ace or king, you are likely to encourage when you hold the king or queen. This is only a general guide, since your decision may be dictated by your holdings in other suits.

PARTNER LEADS THE ACE, KING OR QUEEN

When partner leads one of the three top honors, you will usually have the opportunity to give an attitude signal. (The exception is when he leads a

queen and you win with the ace, in case declarer holds a singleton king.) Usually you will encourage when you hold a useful honor in the suit and would welcome a continuation. Look at this deal:

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

West	North	East	South
	1♦	pass	1♠
pass	1NT	pass	2♣
pass	2♠	pass	4♠
all pass			

South uses a check-back 2♣ to locate the 5-3 spade fit. West leads the ♥K against the spade game and you must decide how to signal in the East seat.

Since you hold the ♥J and expect partner to hold the ♥KQ, you would welcome a heart continuation. You therefore play the ♥8, an encouraging attitude signal. Declarer may allow West's ♥K to win, hoping for a switch. Assisted by your clear signal, West will continue with the ♥4 to your ♥J and the contract is doomed. When declarer knocks out the ♦A, the defenders will score a heart and a club for one down.

Suppose that the cards lay differently and you held ♥873 in the East seat. You would then play a discouraging ♥3 on the first trick. If declarer then played low from a holding such as ♥AJ5, West would be warned not to play a second heart into declarer's tenace.

Finally, imagine that you held ♥82. How would you signal then? You should discourage with the ♥2. Otherwise declarer may duck from ♥AJx and partner is likely to continue the suit into the awaiting tenace.

The usual reason for encouraging partner's lead is that you have a favorable holding in the suit led. For example, partner leads an ace

(assumed to be from the ace-king) and you hold the queen of the suit or a doubleton. Sometimes, however, you encourage partner to cash his remaining honor because you will then have the setting tricks elsewhere. Take the East cards on this deal:

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

West	North	East	South
pass	3♥	pass	1♥
all pass			4♥

West leads the ♣A against the heart game. How should you signal in the East seat?

If you look only at your club holding, you will conclude that there is no reason to encourage a club continuation. You will discourage with the ♣3. What do you think West will do next? He may well switch to the ♠10, hoping that you have the ♠K over dummy's tenace and a spade trick can be set up before declarer establishes a discard on the ♣Q. Disaster! Declarer will win with the ♠K, draw one round of trumps with the ace and then play the ♠AQ to discard his remaining club. The game will be made.

You can see two certain trump tricks in your hand and should therefore encourage partner to continue clubs. He will play the ♣K, on which you will complete your high-low. When partner plays a third round of clubs, he will be surprised to see you follow suit. No matter! He will soon cheer up when you produce two trump tricks and the heart game is defeated.

So, remember that you often have to consider the deal as a whole before deciding whether to encourage partner's opening lead.

DO NOT ENCOURAGE WHEN A CONTINUATION IS DANGEROUS

Sometimes you have a useful honor in the suit that partner has led but a continuation may set up a winner in dummy. Look at the diamond suit here:

	♠ A Q 5					
	♥ J 7					
	♦ J 7 6 2					
	♣ A 9 3 2					
♠ 6 4 ♥ 9 6 4 3 ♦ A K 9 4 ♣ K 8 4	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ 8 3 ♥ K Q 10 5 ♦ Q 8 3 ♣ Q 10 7 5	
N						
W E						
S						
	♠ K J 10 9 7 2					
	♥ A 8 2					
	♦ 10 5					
	♣ J 6					

West	North	East	South
pass	1♣	pass	1♠
all pass	2♠	pass	4♠

West, your partner, leads the ♦A against South's 4♠. Suppose you encourage with the ♦8 and West continues with the ♦K. The contract will then be made. Even if West switches elsewhere at Trick 3, declarer will ruff a third round of diamonds subsequently. This will drop your ♦Q and dummy's ♦J will be established for a club discard.

Partner is quite likely to hold four diamonds and when the dummy holds ♦jxxx you should encourage only when you hold a doubleton. On the present deal you will discourage with the ♦3. Suppose West then switches to a trump, won in the dummy, and declarer leads a second round of diamonds towards his hand. You will rise with the ♦Q, to prevent this card succumbing to a ruff on the next round, and the contract will be defeated.