

Count signals are best

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR). Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

ONE of the most important techniques in the game is for defenders to be able to count declarer's hand. When you, as a defender, have a complete count of the deal (in other words you know the hand patterns of both declarer and partner), defence becomes that much easier. To that end, often the most important early information you can have is partner's length in the suit in which you have made the opening lead.

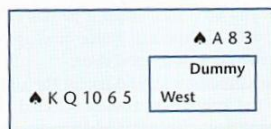
Now, 'standard' encourage/discourage methods have the third player following with a low card as discouragement and a high card as encouragement. 'Standard' length showing count have a peter (high-low) as showing an even number of cards, and following upwards (low-high) as showing an odd number. That is what I shall assume here in this article.

Suppose that you hold a side suit headed by the A-K-Q against a trump contract. Naturally, you lead off your top cards and see what happens. Suppose dummy displays three small cards in the suit. Now, what should your partner play from holdings of two small, three small and four small cards? If the answer is that you would always play your lowest card – to discourage a continuation – then the opening leader doesn't know how many of this suit are cashable either now or later in the hand. This is the trap that encourage/discourage proponents fall into: they think that you want to know if partner can help in the suit whereas, in fact, all you want to know is how many rounds of the suit will stand up. Now, most players will peter with two cards (perhaps hoping for a ruff) but cannot distinguish between three and four card holdings.

Try another example. You lead the queen from ♠ A-Q-J-9-x against 3NT bid after an uninformative auction and dummy puts down two small spades. Declarer wins

with the king of spades and partner follows small. Does partner have two small cards (in which case you need to get him on lead), or three small cards (in which case the suit is yours to run)? If your primary method is encourage/discourage, then partner will always play a discouraging card whenever he doesn't hold the king of spades. Of course, that isn't the information you require on this deal – it is whether declarer still has the guarded ten of spades or not. True, there are some ambiguous positions – it may be hard to tell whether a peter is from two or four cards in some rare cases – but equally there are many situations where all is clear with the play of the first card.

Here are a couple of common distributions where length is more important than strength (if you see what I mean):



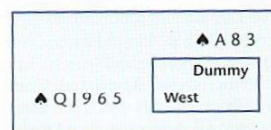
Defending against a no-trump contract, you naturally lead the spade king. Now, if partner is going to play his lowest card whenever he doesn't hold the jack you don't know what to do if you are left on lead. Does declarer have ♠ J-x-x, where you must switch? Or does he have ♠ J-x, where you must continue with the queen? It's a nightmare. With length signals, it is likely that you can sort out the ambiguities: if partner follows with the spade two, then you can continue with the queen. If partner's two was a singleton, well, *c'est la vie* – at least there was little point in switching so that partner would lead a spade back...

Here are other similar positions. This one is against no-trumps:



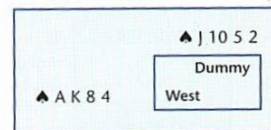
Paul Bowyer

THE DEBATE



You lead the queen which is won by declarer's king. If you now get on lead, is it safe to continue the suit? If partner has three cards, then yes; if a doubleton then no (declarer may have ♠ K-10-x). How can you tell?

Here is an example from a suit contract:



Here you lead the ace (or king, according to taste) and that goes small, small, queen. Now, if playing attitude signals, partner has had to play a discouraging card as he does not have the spade queen. But can you cash a second round of this suit? Who knows? Playing count signals there are many occasions that make it quite clear what you can or cannot do at trick two.

Note, in passing, that there may be some ambiguities here even with length signals. Suppose partner follows with the spade six and declarer with the spade queen. Now declarer might hold ♠ Q-3 and partner ♠ 9-7-6. Alternatively, partner might hold ♠ 9-7-6-3 with declarer holding the singleton queen. To clear up some of these uncertainties, it is important to agree with partner what to play with four small cards. Many experts choose the second highest from four small (so would play the seven from ♠ 9-7-6-3). This doesn't clear up all the ambiguous positions, but it will clarify most – and that is all you can ask for. □



Julian Pottage

Attitude signals are best

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at elena@ebu.co.uk

WHY do I like to play the primary method of signals on partner's lead as attitude? Firstly, let me say that I am far from alone in this. Most US experts prefer attitude signals to count signals on partner's lead. Let me also clarify what I mean by an attitude signal. Using standard (rather than reverse) attitude, a high card encourages and says, 'In my opinion, it might be a good idea for you to lead this suit again.' A low card discourages and says, 'In my opinion, it might be better for you not to lead this suit again.' You will note that a signal is just that – a sign or indicator, and not a command. Without seeing partner's hand, it would be very rare that you could say definitively, 'You must continue the suit,' or 'You must switch.'

The idea behind an attitude signal is that whether partner likes, or can help you with, the suit is the most important thing you need to know. Let us imagine a few examples.

Suppose you lead the four of spades from K-10-7-4-3 and dummy, with ♠ Q-6, wins. You soon regain the lead and must decide whether to continue the suit. Give partner 9-8-2 and a switch is likely to be in order but, facing J-8-2, it is likely to be a good idea to continue the suit. Playing count signals partner would play the two on the first trick on both layouts and you would be none the wiser. By contrast, by playing attitude, partner plays a discouraging two with 9-8-2 and an encouraging eight with J-8-2.

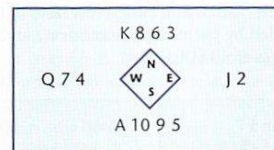
The position is similar if you cash the ace from A-K-J-7 and see 10-6-3 in dummy, though now your decision comes on the second trick. If, under your ace, partner plays a discouraging two (from 9-8-2) or an encouraging eight (from Q-8-2), you know what to do (switch and continue respectively). If partner plays the two to show you an odd number, you have to guess.

Attitude signals are also useful when you lead, or attempt to lead, partner's suit. Suppose you lead the seven from 7-2 and dummy, with K-Q-6, wins. Partner might well want to duck the ace to maintain communications. With attitude signals, you can easily differentiate J-10-9-4 and A-J-10-9-3. With the former, partner will normally play the four to discourage (on some deals partner would want you to play the suit again and so drop the jack), while with the latter partner follows with the jack. Again, a count signal of the three would leave you on a guess what to do when you regain the lead.

Those who primarily play count signals are aware of some of the issues I have raised and seek to remedy them with further agreements. Some people play 'ace for attitude, king for count' leads, which would enable you to tell the difference between Q-x-x and x-x-x after the ace lead. You will note that they achieve this by means of an attitude signal! In any event, the ace for attitude, king for count method has its disadvantages. When you lead the king from king-queen, you may not want a count signal and you may want partner to know immediately whether you have the ace with the king.

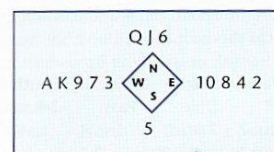
Another thing those who favour count signals like to do is to play *Smith Peters*. When declarer first leads a suit, you do not signal length; instead, you signal whether you like the suit led at trick one. If this is not an admission that attitude is important, what is? Again, *Smith Peters* have their problems. For one thing, you lose the option to signal count on the first suit declarer plays. This could be costly if you need to know whether to hold up an ace, for instance. A *Smith Peter* can also cost a trick.

Recently, an international player allowed declarer to run four tricks in this suit:



by playing the jack on the first round because he 'had to' tell his partner that he liked the suit originally led.

You might have noticed that I do not advocate attitude signals in all situations. I said I like attitude as the *main* method, not as an *exclusive* method. Some people say that they tell their partners what they need to know. To my mind, this is confusing. If you are to use your secondary method (count), there needs to be a clear-cut rule about it – otherwise confusion abounds. You need to ask yourself the question: 'If we were not playing any signals at all, would partner be able to deduce my liking for the suit from the play to the trick?' If the answer is 'no', then it is an attitude situation. If the answer is 'yes', then obviously an attitude signal is pointless. The whole idea of a signal is to tell partner something not already known. For example:



When partner leads the ace (promising the king) and dummy is faced, it is clear that you cannot contribute anything in terms of high cards. In this situation, whether your primary method is attitude or count, you signal count. Partner will want to know whether a second round will stand up. □