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So far, I have considered two common types of signal: the attitude signal, and the count signal. Let's now move on to the third most common category, the suit preference signal. In this article, I shall discuss the basic idea and uses of suit preference signals. Further applications of this type of signal will be discussed separately.

What are suit preference signals?

In contrast to attitude and count signals, suit preference signals are used to give information about suits other than the one in which the signal is given. The basic idea is that there is an assumption that the suit in which the signal is given is one which the defenders will not be pursuing, hence creating the need to give information about which suit should be played instead.

When do they apply?

The most common situation in which suit preference signals occur involves the case where a defender is playing a suit which he expects his partner to trump (see *Example A*). In such cases, it will often be necessary to inform partner which suit to return in order to be given a second opportunity to score a ruff.

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Suit Preference Signals

Example A

♠	K Q J 7 5
♥	A J 8 4
♦	J 4
♣	J 4

♠	2
♥	10 7 3
♦	Q 9 7 5
♣	Q 9 7 5 3

North opens 1♣. South responds 2♥.

North raises to 3♥ and South bids 4♥. West leads the two of spades, dummy plays the jack, East wins with the ace of spades and returns a spade which West trumps. What should West play at trick three?

Without any form of signalling, West's decision would be a complete guess. However, if East could anticipate West ruffing the second round of spades, he would have the perfect chance to inform West which suit he would prefer him to return to receive a second ruff.

In a scenario such as this, East should assume that West's lead of dummy's first bid suit is a singleton. Thus, when he wins with the ace of spades, he will likely have the choice of returning a relatively low or a relatively high spade. The significance of the card that he chooses works in the

following way: given that West will be expected to trump the second spade, he will be unable to return a spade. It is also assumed that his partner will not wish him to return a trump. Therefore, when making a suit preference signal, East can either ask for diamonds (the higher ranking of the remaining suits) or clubs (the lower ranking of the remaining suits). The 'standard' way to do this is for a low spade to ask for the lower ranking suit, and a high spade to ask for the higher ranking suit.

Are suit preference signals only useful against trump contracts?

Since suit preference signals are an effective means of communicating where a defender's side suit entry lies, the principles can also be extended to no-trump contracts. The key is to identify when they will be more useful than either of the other two types of signals we have discussed. Consider the following situation (*Example B*):

Example B

♠	10 7 3
♥	K J 4
♦	A Q J 9 4
♣	Q 6

♠	K 2
♥	9 7 6 5
♦	K 5 3
♣	10 8 5 3

South opens 1NT (12-14), and North raises to 3NT. West leads the five of spades.

Declarer plays low from the dummy at trick one. East plays the king of spades which wins the trick, then returns the two of spades. West wins with the ace of spades

and returns a third spade. Declarer follows with the jack of spades at trick two, then wins with the queen of spades at trick three. He leads the ten of diamonds at trick four, and plays low from the dummy. East can win the king of diamonds, but then has to decide which suit to play in the hope that his partner can regain the lead to cash his last two spade winners. How should he decide which suit to try?

Again, this situation represents a complete guess without the use of signals. The third round of spades is the point at which West is free to signal. There is no need to give an attitude signal (he is 'known' to have led from a long suit), or a count signal (it is unlikely to matter to East whether West started with four or five spades). It would, however, be very useful to know the suit in which West holds an entry to his remaining spades in the event that East is the first defender to gain the lead. Thus, West can apply the principle of the suit preference signal. The only difference is that in a trump contract there are only two suits to choose between, while no-trump contracts can theoretically involve three suits. In *Example B*, however, East can assume that West will not wish to signal for a diamond return (dummy's strong suit). West can thus play a low spade at trick three to show a preference for clubs (the lower ranking suit), or a high spade to show an interest in hearts (the higher ranking suit).

How does one determine which type of signal will be most useful?

We will return to further applications of the suit preference signal but, in essence, they are most useful in situations where a defender wishes to communicate information relating to the suit in which an entry is held. The need to find this entry varies depending on the type of contract being defended. Against trump contracts, it is useful to show where an entry lies to enable additional ruffs to be delivered, while defending against no-trump contracts it can be necessary to signal the suit in which an entry lies to enable a defender to cash the winners which he has just generated.

It should be noted that these are specific situations which require a particular signal and occur in cases where neither attitude nor count signals would need to take priority. In order for a partnership to develop effective agreements, it is crucial to be clear which type of signal takes priority in any given situation. □