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This Week in Bridge

(476) Defensive Carding - Suit Preference Signals

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Levels: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

Although attitude and count are our primary and secondary signals, there is another vital form of signaling to partner – *Suit Preference* signals. A suit preference signal is usually used to tell partner what suit to shift to – a low card asks for the lower reasonable suit and a high card for the higher reasonable suit. Suit preference signals and opportunities to use them come up more often than we realize, so let's take a look at some useful suit preference situations.

Singleton in the Dummy – Suit Contract

The classic example of a suit preference signal occurs when partner leads an Ace against a suit contract and a singleton is in the dummy.

Example 1

Partner leads the ♠A vs. a 4♥ contract and dummy has a singleton ♠.

In this case, we have no future in the ♠ suit (declarer can just ruff the ♠ losers), so it does not make sense to give an attitude signal. With a singleton on the dummy, count does not seem like a useful piece of information to give partner either. More importantly, we know that partner's Ace is going to win trick 1 and they will have to decide what to do and what suit to shift to at trick 2. So it makes sense that we should try to help partner figure out what to do next. We do this with a suit preference signal. In this case, partner needs to decide which of the other two suits to attack - ♣ or ♦. We can tell partner which one we prefer with our suit preference signal – playing low for the lower suit ♣ and high for the higher suit ♦.

Note: With no preference or if we want partner to continue the suit they led anyways, we play a middle card – neither high nor low.



Solid Suit in Dummy – NT Contract

When we lead an Ace from AK and QJxx+ hits in dummy, we can see all the honors. In this situation, partner might like the suit if we are in a suit contract (wanting a ruff – play Ace, King, and a ruff), but in a notrump contract, it is clear that partner cannot like this suit, so an attitude signal makes no sense. Similarly, count is not useful in this situation, so we should be giving partner a suit preference signal. This is a slightly more complicated situation because there is no trump suit – leaving us with three suits to choose from. Usually we can rule out one of the three suits from either the auction or seeing a strong suit in the dummy. Thus, we can play high or low suit preference signals between the other two suits.

Note: In the complicated situation where we cannot rule out one of the suits and there are still three to choose from, we usually agree that playing a high card asks for the highest of the suits and playing a low card is one of the lower suits - but this is a good carding detail to discuss with partner.

Conclusion

Suit preference signals are a valuable addition to our tools for communicating with partner. In situations where attitude and count are not useful, then these signals can greatly help partner with difficult decisions. The number of places that you choose to use suit preference signals will be dependent upon your partnership defense style. As you play, keep an eye out for situations where suit preference signals would have been helpful and then work with your regular partners to integrate suit preference signals into your defensive methods!