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This Week in Bridge

(477) Defensive Carding -- More Suit Preference

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Level: 8, 10 of 10 (4,6 of 6)

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General

Most partnerships prioritize attitude signals when partner leads a suit (or in other situations). When attitude is known or irrelevant, many partnerships then use count signals as their second priority. This leaves suit preference signals as the third and least common signal. A suit preference signal is the act of using a low card to suggest holding a useful card (or suggesting partner play) a lower-ranking suit and a high card to suggest holding a useful card (or suggesting partner play) a higher-ranking suit. Some partnerships choose to make use of suit preference signals in a variety of different situations. Here we look at more options where agreeing to use suit preference signals can be helpful.

Trump Suit Preference

One of the first places (and most useful) that partnerships agree to use more suit preference signals is in the trump suit. Giving count in the trump suit usually helps the declarer more than it helps partner, so using our spot cards to give suit preference is more useful. Here is how it works:

Example 1

Imagine you hold ♠72 against a ♠ contract. When declarer draws trump and we are not involved in trying to win the trick (which is our first priority), we can give suit preference with our spot cards instead of giving count. We generally rule out two suits: the trump suit and the suit led by our side, and give a suit preference signal between the other two suits. For the above holding, imagine we are defending 4♠ and we have led a ♥. From ♠72, we play the ♠7 if we like ♦ (a high card to suggest that we like the higher-ranking suit) or the ♠2 if we like ♣ (a low card to suggest that we like a lower-ranking suit).

Note: If we have no preference (we like neither of the suits) then we play our cards "up the line" (in the normal way).



Suit Preference at Trick 2, When Attitude is Known

When we lead a suit and our card holds the trick, we must decide what to do at trick 2. When attitude is known and count is irrelevant (for instance, we know partner has length and cannot ruff), we fall back on using suit preference signals. The first time we learn about these is when we lead an outside Ace (not the trump Ace) vs. a suit contract and dummy has a singleton in this suit. In this case, we play a low card to ask partner to play the lower side suit and a high card to ask for the higher side suit.

We can do something similar in a notrump contract when there is no future in the suit.

Example 2

QJ95
AKT2 84
763

In this case, on the lead of the Ace (or King), both players know that there is no future in this suit. In a notrump contract it is also known that count is not relevant, so we use a suit preference signal instead. This is a slightly different situation in that there are three “other” suits, not just two suits to choose from. We reduce these to two suits by using the auction, looking at dummy’s holding, or simply using logic to eliminate one of the three suits. We then use a suit preference signal (high for the higher suit, low for the lower suit) to direct partner to which suit we want them to play.

Suit Preference Instead of Smith Echo

Some partnerships choose to extend their use of suit preference signals to other situations. When defending notrump contracts, many partnerships use Smith Echo at trick 2 (instead of a count signal) to help partner better defend the hand. A modern use of suit preference signals is to use a suit preference signal at trick 2 instead of Smith Echo.

Example 3

♠ AQJ7
♥ 83
♦ KQJ
♣ T762

Imagine partner leads a low ♥ against a 3NT contract, this is the dummy, and we play the ♥J which is won by the declarer’s ♥K. Declarer then takes a ♠ finesse at trick 2 and we win our ♠K. There are now three “other” suits – ♥, ♦, and ♣. We eliminate the ♦ suit based on dummy’s strong holding. So our options are to return a ♥ (which we want to do if partner has ATx+ remaining), or shift to a ♣. Partner lets us know what to do by using a suit preference signal: playing a high ♠ to ask for ♥, the higher suit, or a low ♠ to ask for ♣, the lower suit.



Suit Preference Instead of Count Signals

There are some partnerships that find suit preference extremely useful, even addictive. The most extreme of these partnerships choose to use suit preference signals as often as possible. One option is to use a suit preference signal in places where we would traditionally give a count signal – when declarer leads a suit. The idea is to let partner know where our honors are located early in the hand, instead of letting partner know the shape of our hand. This requires some judgment, because knowing which honor to tell partner about first can become an important part of defending properly. There are some hands where this is an extremely useful method and other hands where we would strongly prefer to be playing count signals.

Conclusion

Suit Preference signals are a powerful tool. Experienced partnerships are always looking for more places to make use of these types of signals. Many partnerships experiment with using them in different and innovative ways, often replacing traditional signals like count or Smith Echo. You should not try to adopt all of these (or even most of them) but keep an open mind about where using a suit preference signal may allow you to improve your defense. Work with your regular partner to adopt some of these useful signals and see what happens for you!