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This Week in Bridge

(473) Defensive Carding – Discards

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Level: 3 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

When a suit is led (either by partner or the declarer) that we no longer hold any cards in, then we cannot follow suit and we are forced to play a card in another suit. This is called a *Discard*. These discards are valuable, and we should NOT just play “the closest card to our thumb”. We must learn to discard carefully and wisely. When discarding, our priority is to follow *the Hippocratic oath of defense* – “Do no harm!” This means we must only discard cards that we can afford to release – we should not discard anything that could win a trick.

When we are discarding, we also want to use these cards to communicate information about our hand to partner. The standard agreement is to use discards as *attitude* signals. That is, we play a high card to encourage in a suit and a low card to discourage in a suit (in standard carding).

The First Discard and Clarifications

The first discard is the most important because it is the one that partner is most likely to be paying attention to, unfortunately. The first discard is what we have chosen to tell partner about at our first opportunity, because it is often unknown when we will get a chance to make another discard.

Just as with any attitude signal while following suit, the first discard may not be easy to interpret – sometimes a card that is intended to be high (encouraging in standard carding) does not look high and sometimes a card that is intended to be discouraging does not look low. The way that we overcome this problem is by making a second discard in the same suit. We can use the second card to clarify the first card by helping partner understand it relative to our first card.

Example 1

If we are making an encouraging signal from A432, we play the 4 first, but partner might not be able to read this as a “high card”. On our next discard we play the 2, clarifying that the 4 was a high card. Partner will then know that the 4 was intended as an encouraging.



More than Just the First Discard – The First Discard in Each Suit

The first discard gives (or tries to give) our attitude in the suit in which we are discarding. But it is more than just our first discard that gives this information about our attitude to partner. Each time that we discard in a new suit we have an opportunity to provide partner with some information about how we feel about that suit. So, we don't just make an attitude signal in one suit, we make it each time that we discard in a new suit. This is important to keep in mind. We must not get lazy and randomly discard. Remember, partner is watching, so we try to help them defend the hand by showing where we have values.

Advanced Inferences – Order Matters

Now that we know that we need to discard carefully in each suit (because partner will be looking for an attitude signal with each new suit we play), we should think about the order of our discards. For example, if partner is paying attention, they might notice that our first discard was encouraging in ♣ and our second discard was discouraging in ♦. They might ask themselves (and they should), why didn't we discourage in ♦ first and encourage in ♣ second instead? Why did partner play the cards in the order they played them?

This is an excellent question and one with a simple answer. By choosing the order in which we play our cards we let partner know *how much we like a suit*. If we really like a suit, we will try to start by encouraging that suit as soon as we possibly can, with our first discard. But if we only like a suit a little bit, then we will not be in such a hurry to encourage in that suit. We can start by discouraging in another suit and encouraging in our suit with a later discard. We can apply this general idea in many ways, but many partnerships have a specific agreement that they only encourage with their first discard if they have an Ace or King in a suit. If they have a Queen in a suit, then they start by discouraging in another suit and then encouraging in this suit later. We do not have to have such a specific agreement with our partner, but the important thing is to keep in mind that the order that we play our cards in matters – so we don't waste opportunities to communicate effectively with partner.

Additional Discards in the Same Suit

After we make a count or attitude signal with our first play to a suit, we will need to know what the meaning is of the card we play to the second round of the suit. Generally, when we play to the second round of the suit, we clarify our first play (making it so that partner can clearly read the size of the card that we played first) and in doing so we give *Remainder Count*. That is, we give count (in the standard way) from the cards that we have remaining in our hand.



In situations where remainder count would not be useful to partner, we may want to use our plays of these subsequent cards (second round of suit or later) as other signals that might be helpful to partner. The most common and useful agreement is to use these extra cards as *suit preference signals* – smaller cards for lower-ranking suits and larger cards for higher-ranking suits.

Alternative Agreements

Some players play different agreements for their discards – different from standard carding or standard signals. If we play Upside-Down Count and Attitude as our carding, we usually play Upside-Down Attitude for our first discard (and all our subsequent discards). But there are other conventional discarding systems as well. These are special discards that players use for their first discards only.

Note: For most players that play these special first discards, all their subsequent discards are attitude discards.

Lavinthal Discards

This is a *negative discarding system*. When playing Lavinthal First Discards, the first discard is always in a suit that we do not like. The size of the card does not matter for attitude. Instead, the size of the card is used as suit preference between the other suits.

Example 2

If declarer leads a ♣ and we discard a ♦, then we do not like ♦ and we want to tell partner whether we like ♥ or ♠. We use a low ♦ to say we like ♥ (the lower suit) and a high ♦ to say we like ♠ (the higher suit.)

Note: One of the problems with Lavinthal discards is that we always must pick a suit that we want to encourage in. Thus, we lose the ability to give context (order of discards) as we do in standard or upside-down carding.

Odd-Even Discards

Odd-Even (also called *Italian*) Discards use some of the same ideas as Lavinthal Discards but are a bit more sophisticated. With Odd-Even First Discards we use odd cards to encourage in a suit (if we discard an odd card in a suit, we like that suit) and we use even cards like Lavinthal (if we discard in even card we do not like that suit and we are giving suit preference for the other suits – low even card for low suit, high even card for high suit.) This carding system is quite popular in Europe.

Note: One of the problems with Odd-Even discards is that we are not always dealt the correct cards with which to signal; sometimes all our cards are odd in the suit we don't like, for example, and this can lead to not being able to make a useful signal.



Conclusion

As you can see, discarding is not a simple subject. It is something that we should pay attention to, carefully choosing our own cards and paying attention to partner's cards. Most players pay attention to their partner's first discard, but we need to make sure to do more than that – each discard is important. We need to observe each discard that partner makes, and we need to put some thought into analyzing the order in which they choose to discard. We also need to be careful about the cards we play on all our discards because we expect partner to be watching. If we do this, we will learn to communicate better with partner.

One thing to remember is that when making a signal we always must “play bridge first.” That means that we cannot give up a trick trying to make a signal. We always play the clearest card that *we can afford*. There is a natural balance between trying to make things as clear as possible for partner and not giving up a trick. This is a part of discarding that takes some experience to judge best.

It is important for every bridge player to learn to play a natural carding system (standard or upside-down) before adopting special agreements about our first discard. These special discards can serve as a crutch and prevent us from progressing into the details of card reading (interpreting partner's cards) and subtle communication with partner. We need to learn to card effectively and clearly with each of our signals and practice is the best way to get better at this difficult part of the game!