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This Week in Bridge

(474) Defensive Carding – Upside-Down Count & Attitude

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Level: 9 of 10 (5 of 6)

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

Standard carding is a reasonable approach to communicating with partner. But standard carding has some downsides (both in count and attitude signaling). Upside-down carding (both count and attitude – called UDCA) was created to overcome some of these problems and to give our side the ability to make clearer signals and generally communicate better with partner. Here we look at these advantages to UDCA and we examine in more detail for of our more advanced carding agreements. These advanced agreements are important to discuss with partner even if we are playing standard carding.

Upside-Down Count and Attitude

Upside-Down Count and Attitude (UDCA) is exactly what it sounds like, making both our count and attitude signals “Upside-Down”.

Upside-down means the opposite of standard carding.

- *Upside-Down Attitude* means that we use low cards to encourage and high cards to discourage in a suit – the opposite of standard carding.
- *Upside-Down Count* means that we use low cards (playing “up the line”) to show an even number of cards in a suit and high cards (echoes) to show an odd number of cards in a suit – again, the opposite of standard carding.

The more useful of these two agreements is upside-down attitude (some players play upside-down attitude but stick with standard count). Upside-down attitude allows us to encourage with low cards in the suits we like – letting us save the high cards that we might need to take future tricks. Additionally, our low cards are generally clearer than our high cards (a 2 is clearly low, while a 7 may be high or low) and we want partner to be certain about the suits we like. Upside-down count has some advantages including complicating the card reading for the declarer and to make some issues with upside-down attitude work more smoothly -- like not having to play high from honor doubleton to give accurate count.



That is a basic explanation of UDCA, but there are other things to discuss about upside-down count that require us to have some additional complex agreements. We need to have more discussion with partner on several new topics. Before we play this set of agreements, we should be sure that we understand these issues and that we and partner are on the same page about them. If we do not, then confusion can easily arise in complex and difficult situations at the table:

- Remainder Count (vs. Original Count)
- Return Count (and Delayed Return Count)
- Shift Count

Remainder Count

When the opponents lead a suit, we tend to give count (unless we need to win the trick or giving count might cost a trick). Playing upside-down count, that means playing high from an odd number of cards (1, 3, 5...) and low from an even number of cards (2, 4, 6...). This is our agreement when a suit has not yet been played or we have not discarded from a suit. If we are giving count from a suit where we have previously played a card, then this is a slightly different situation where we have different agreements about giving count when the opponents lead a suit – called *Remainder Count*. Some situations where we give remainder count are:

- We have previously discarded from a suit.
- Partner has previously led a suit.
- We have previously led a suit.
- Opponents have previously led a suit and we had to play a card to try to win the trick.

Standard Remainder Count

Most partnerships that play UDCA for their “normal” count situations use standard remainder count. This is, if they are giving count in a suit after they have previously played a card in that suit they do so in a standard fashion (high from an even number of cards, low from an odd number of cards).

Example 1

AT9732

If we discard from this suit, playing the 2 (upside-down, saying that we like the suit), then later when the suit is led and we need to give count we play the 3 (low, showing standard remainder count from AT973).

Note: Some partnerships do choose to play upside-down remainder count, but this approach is far less common than the standard remainder count approach. Be sure to discuss situation agreement with partner.



Original Count vs. Remainder Count

Some partnerships try not to play remainder count and just try to signal the count of their original holding. Players can get into trouble by thinking that this concept of remainder count is the same as signaling original count. We sometimes hear players say “Aren’t I just telling you my original count – upside down? Before I played low from a 6-card suit, now I’m playing low to show I started with a 6-card suit.” This is dangerous! Standard remainder count and upside-down original count do have us signaling similarly in the example above (low from the original even number of cards vs. low from an odd number of remaining cards), and while this is true when we have made one discard, it is not true if we have made two discards.

Example 2

AT9732

If we discard the 2 and later discard the 3 from this suit, then we give standard remainder count by playing the Ten. If we played upside-down original account, we play the 7. These carding methods are not equivalent, be sure to discuss these with partner – playing standard remainder count!

Return Count

Imagine that partner’s opening lead is a ♠ and our holding is ♠A92. We win the opening lead with our ♠A and now plan to return the suit. What do we play from ♠92 that we now have remaining? In this situation, we return the ♠9, because we have a doubleton remaining. When we are returning a suit (giving return count) we do so in the “standard” way. This is true if we are playing standard count or upside-down count. One of the reasons that it is important to play standard return count is that if we have a holding like T2 and lead low from that holding, with the 2, then we will be left with just the Ten remaining and this could block the suit.

Example 3

874
K9653 AT2
QJ

We see how returning the Ten unblocks the suit; this is an important reason to play standard return count (top of a doubleton) and not upside-down return count (low from a doubleton), blocking the suit.

Example 4

Let’s look at how we make return count.

- A874 Win the Ace and return the 4 – low from 874, 3 cards remaining.
- AJ74 Win the Ace and return the 4 – low from J74, 3 cards remaining.

When we have 4 cards as our original holding, then after we have played to trick 1, we have 3 cards remaining. We return low in this suit, giving partner standard return count. This low card is a “count” return (showing either 3 or 1 remaining) not an attitude card, showing an honor. As we can see from the examples above, we return the same card when we have 874 and J74 remaining.



Example 5

T3
KJ62 A874
 Q95

Return count, playing the 4, is helpful here. When West wins the Jack at trick 2, they can see that opener started with only Qxx (3 cards) and they can now “run” their suit – immediately cashing 4 tricks.

Exceptions to Return Count

There are times where our holding in the suit requires us to return a card other than the traditional standard count card. This is traditionally the case when we have 3 cards remaining and the top two make a sequence.

Example 6

Let’s look at what we return from some holdings where we need to lie about our return count:

- **AQJx** Win the Ace and return the Queen.
- **AJT_x** Win the Ace and return the Jack.
- **KJT_x** Win the King and return the Jack.
- **K98_x** Win the King and return the 9.

There are several reasons why we return the high cards in these situations. One is to ensure that declarer does not win the trick cheaply (see example below).

In the first case in example 6, if declarer started with KTx, we need to play back the Queen, not low. If we lead back low, the declarer will win the Ten at trick 2.

Another reason that we may choose to return a high card when our remaining holding is 3 cards (violating our return count agreements) is to unblock the suit.

Example 7

85
K7643 AJ92
 QT

If we win the Ace at trick 1 and return the 2 (playing the normal card for return count) then we will block the suit. We will be forced to win the 3rd and 4th round of the suit in our hand (the short side) and we will not be able to take all five of our side’s tricks right off the top.



Later Return Count – Delayed

These agreements and concepts are basically unchanged even if we return partner's suit at a time other than trick 2 (when we gain the lead later in the hand).

Example 8

85
Q7643 KJ92
AT

At trick 1 our King loses to declarer's Ace. If we gain the lead later in the hand, we normally return the 2 (giving standard count), but here we must violate these agreements in order to unblock the suit.

Note: All of these agreements can be used in any suit that we "return", not just the one that partner led.

Shift Count

The most common situation where we give count to partner is when one of the opponents lead the suit (either from the declarer's hand or dummy). Giving count only applies if we are not involved in trying to win the trick. But there are other times when count may be important to communicate to partner. One of these situations is when we are leading a suit where our attitude is clearly known. This type of count is called *Shift Count* and we give it in a standard fashion (even if we play UDCA).

Example 9

Dummy holds KQJT.

If partner discards the 2, playing upside down, this lets us know they have the Ace. Then when we lead the suit partner already knows that we do not hold an honor in the suit (that we do not "like it"). In this situation, we communicate to partner how many cards we hold in the suit (our count). We do this by leading the top of a doubleton (or any even number of cards) and low from a 3-card holding (an odd number of cards). This is count in the standard way – "*Standard Shift Count*".

This shift count is important to partner because they may want to make a holdup play and win their Ace at the appropriate time.

Example 10

KQJT
963 A852
74

If East discards the 2, letting us know they have the Ace, and West leads a low card (the 3), then East can work out to duck the first round of the suit and win the second round – cutting off declarer's communication from the dummy (North).



Attitude Takes Precedence

Though count (shift count) can be available tool in certain situations, remember that it only applies where attitude is clearly known (or irrelevant).

Example 11

QJT9

A762

If we see QJT9 in the dummy and partner discards the 2, showing an honor card in this suit, then when we shift to this suit our attitude is not clear – partner does not know who has the other missing honor (the King in this example). When we lead this suit our shift is not “shift count”, it is an attitude-oriented shift: from 873 we lead the 8 (top of nothing) and from K73 we lead the 3 (low from attitude).

Conclusion

As you can tell from the length of this lesson, when you start to play upside-down count and attitude it opens an entirely different set of discussions that lead to some complexities. Upside-down attitude is the easier of the two and I often recommend that partnerships give upside-down attitude a try first. Playing upside-down attitude and standard count has some of its own complexities, but as long as you and partner are giving and expecting the same signals you will be fine. Once you are comfortable with this then adopt the more complicated upside-down count and make sure you discuss all of the issues like remainder count, return count, and shift count. This requires some word, but overall will be a long-term improvement on your game.