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This Week in Bridge

(471) Defensive Carding – Attitude Signals

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Level: 2 of 10 (1 of 6)

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General

Defense is the hardest part of bridge. As declarer, we have some advantages over the defenders -- we can see all our side's cards and we have no partner to get in the way of what we are trying to accomplish. As a defender we must overcome these problems. To be successful on defense, we need to practice visualizing the cards in both partner and declarer's hand and we need to work together with our partner to try to take all our tricks. Working together with partner involves both forming agreements before we defend a hand and communicating with each other during the defense.

The way that we work with partner on defense is to understand that the cards we play, when we are not involved in winning a trick, can and should be used to communicate information to partner. Each card means something, so PAY ATTENTION! Our cards have different meanings in different situations. The types of signals are:

- Attitude -- Do we like a suit or not?
- Count – How many cards do we have in a suit?
- Suit Preference – Which suit we would like partner to play?

Here we look at Attitude Signals – how they work and when they apply.

When to Make an Attitude Signal

An attitude signal tells partner if we like a suit or not. This is the most common kind of signal that helps partner figure out what to do. We tend to make attitude signals in two common situations:

- When partner leads a suit, we tell partner if we like their lead or not.
- When we are out of the suit that is led, and we make a discard. Our first discard in each suit tells our partner if we like that suit or not.

When partner leads a suit, we usually give an attitude signal. If the card partner led is holding the trick, we tell them if we like the suit or not with an attitude signal. If partner's lead is being won by the second hand and we cannot win the trick, then we give an attitude signal and tell partner if we like their lead or not.



When we are not following suit then we discard in another suit. *A discard tells our partner about our attitude in that suit.* The first discard we make in each suit tells partner our attitude in that suit.

How to Make an Attitude Signal When Partner Leads

When it is our turn to play after partner has led a suit and we are not involved in trying to win the trick (our first priority is always to try to win the trick, this is an important thing to remember), then we should NOT just play a random small card. Our card means something and that is an *attitude* signal. Our attitude is how we feel about partner's lead – Do we like it or not?

Here is how we show our attitude (the discussion below assumes we are playing standard carding):

- If we like the suit that partner has led, we play a high card (start an *Echo* or *Peter*) – ***Encouraging.***
- If we do not like the suit that partner led, we play a low card – ***Discouraging.***

Notice that in both cases partner often does not know for sure our attitude when the first round of the suit is played. But our first card can still be useful to partner. On the first round of a suit partner will have to interpret our card to determine if it is low or high. Knowing that this is the case, we want to be sure to make as clear a signal as possible for partner. That means if we are trying to play a low card then we should play the lowest card we have. And if we are trying to play a high card then we should play the highest card we can afford (the highest of equals for sure). Partner should keep in mind that our first card may not always be clear. *Cards are relative, not absolute – sometimes a card we intend as low looks high, or one we intend as high looks low.*

If we are giving attitude from Q32, then we must play the 3 to encourage on the first round as it is the highest card we can afford. And if we are giving attitude from T98, we play the 8 on the first round to discourage as it is our lowest card. In both cases, our attitude may not become clear to partner until the second round of the suit when we play another card that will clarify our original signal. In these situations, we just do the best we can and hope that partner can work the situation out.

How to Make an Attitude Signal When Discarding

We also make attitude signals with our discards. Let's look at how we do so by using an example.

Let's say that the opponents are playing in a ♠ contract, and we are out of ♠. If we choose to discard a ♣ from the following holding:

♣ KQ982

Then we discard the ♣9 – a high card to tell partner that we like ♣.

If we have the following ♣ holding and choose to discard a ♣, then we discourage.

♣ 98432

Here we discard the ♣2 to tell partner that we do not like ♣.



Conclusion

There are many challenging aspects of good defense, but one of the most important is to have good agreements with partner. These agreements should be combined with good communication and hard work interpreting partner's signals to give us the ability to defend each hand well. Having good agreements about attitude signals is an important part of our defense. Once we have given partner an attitude signal in a suit, then they will have to do some work to make use of the information. Partner will have to determine our holding in the suit, based on what we have told them. Once partner has determined our likely holding in the suit, they can combine this information with other information that they have about the hand to decide how best to defend the rest of the hand. Defense is the hardest part of bridge and you and partner will make mistakes and sometimes get things wrong. But learning to signal and communicate with partner is a vital part of exchanging the information you need to defend your best.