



# Adventures in Bridge

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## *This Week in Bridge*

### **(472) Defensive Carding – Count Signals**

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Level: 4 of 10 (1 of 6)

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#### **General**

When we defend a hand, we try to take as many tricks as possible and hope that we can defeat the opponents' contract. To give ourselves the best chance of this happening, we need to communicate lots of information with partner. Our attitude in a suit is usually the first thing that we focus on communicate to our partner. But there is another important piece of information: our count – how many cards we hold in a suit. Communicating our count in a suit helps partner visualize the layout of the suit (and the entire hand) and can aid them in making a large number of different defensive decisions. Let's see how we show partner our count in a suit and when it applies.

*Note: For this discussion we are assuming an agreement of "Standard Count". We can discuss alternative carding agreements another time, but it is important for you to know Standard Carding, as even if you do not play it, some opponents will.*

#### **When to Make a Count Signal**

*The primary time we give a count signal is when the declarer leads a suit, and it is our turn to play. We do so when the declarer is leading from their hand or from the dummy. Giving a count signal means that we play a card trying to communicate to partner the number of cards we have in the suit (more on how this works below). In this situation, count is more useful information than attitude because this is a suit that the declarer is playing on and thus, we are not likely to like this suit. We give a count signal in a variety of different situations - when we are playing as second hand or if we are playing last to the trick (4<sup>th</sup> hand to play). Of course, one important thing to remember is that we do not give count if we need to try to win the trick – "Play Bridge First! Do not give up a trick trying to signal count!"*



We can use count when our side leads a suit as well. 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), then we should NOT just play a random small card. Our card means something, and our primary agreement is to signal attitude. But if we cannot beat the card played by 2<sup>nd</sup> hand (dummy or declarer) then sometimes it is clear that we do not like the suit. In this case, we switch to our secondary signal, giving count. A common partnership agreement is to play that if the 2<sup>nd</sup> hand is winning the trick with the Ace or the King then there is still a reasonable chance that we like the suit and we give attitude. But if the 2<sup>nd</sup> hand is winning the suit with the Queen or lower, then our failure to beat 2<sup>nd</sup> hand's card makes our attitude known. In this case, we switch to giving count.

### How to Make a Count Signal When Declarer Leads

Our *count* is the number of cards we have in that suit. Unfortunately, we cannot tell partner the exact number of cards that we have in a suit – that is too complicated. But what we can do is try to let partner know our *parity* in the suit, if we have an even or odd number of cards, and hope partner can make use of that information.

This is how we give count (in Standard Carding):

- If we have an *odd* number of cards in a suit, we play them up the line – we start with our lowest card the first time declarer plays the suit and the next time the suit is led we play a higher card. Partner will see that we played them “in order” or “up the line” and know that we have an odd number of cards in the suit – most commonly 3 or 5 cards.
- If we have an *even* number of cards in a suit, we play “high-low.” That is, we start by playing the highest card we can afford (without giving up a trick) and on the second round of the suit we play a lower card. Partner will see that we played high-low (also called an *Echo* or *Peter*) and know that we have an even number of cards in the suit – most commonly 2 or 4 cards.

Notice that in both cases partner often does not know for sure our count 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 need 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, 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 low card looks high or a high card can look low.*

For example, if we are giving count from QT9, then we must play the 9 on the first round as our lowest card. If we are giving count from 5432, we play the 5 on the first round as our highest card. In both cases our count may not become clear to partner until the second round of the suit – where we will play another card that will clarify our original signal.



Once we have given partner our count in a suit, they will have to do some work to make use of the information. Partner knows our parity but needs to determine whether we have 1/3/5/7 cards OR 2/4/6/8 cards in the suit. Partner will make this determination by using other information available on the hand and will usually be able to figure it out relatively quickly. Once partner has determined how many cards we have in the suit, they will also need to figure out how to make use of that information to help our side defend better. This information will not always be useful to partner early in the hand, but as they acquire more information about our hand and declarer's hand it will help them solve problems.

*Note: We don't give a count signal that may cost a trick. If we have Qx in a suit, we do not play the Queen on the first round – that will likely cost a trick. Count signals are always given with the clearest card we can afford to play without giving up a trick.*

### **How to Make a Count Signal When Partner Leads**

When partner leads a suit, we generally make an attitude signal. This is especially true when their card is winning the trick. But if their lead (opening or a play in the bidding of the hand) is being won by the second hand, sometimes we give an attitude signal and sometimes we give a count signal. If the second hand is winning the trick with the Ace or King, we give attitude; if they are winning with Queen or lower, we give count. The way we give count is the same as when the opponents lead a suit. Here, we play low to show an odd number of cards in a suit and we play high to show an even number of cards in a suit.

### **Conclusion**

Though attitude signals are by far the most important signals that we give to partner, count signals are also a key part of good defense. You and partner should both focus on paying attention to each card you – working to communicate information about your hand and interpret the information that partner is giving you about their hand. Make sure the you pay attention to partner's signals - knowing when signals are count and when they are attitude is the most important part of avoiding disastrous mixups!