

### Count Defense Signal (March 1, 2021)

Last week, we looked at the attitude signal (see February 22, 2021 notes). Another extremely important type of defensive signal is the **COUNT SIGNAL**.

When declarer (or dummy) leads a suit, the attitude signal becomes relatively useless. If declarer is voluntarily attacking a suit, it is hardly likely that a defender also wants to attack it.

General Rule:

When declarer leads a plain suit (any suit except trump), a defender will echo (play high-low) to indicate that he holds an even number of cards in that suit. And, he will play his lowest card first to indicate that he holds an odd number of cards in the suit. Let's look at the example below.

North  
853  
65  
863  
KQJ105

West  
1097  
K10873  
Q2  
932

East  
642  
J9  
KJ754  
A76

Bidding: S W N E  
2N P 3N P  
All Pass

South  
AKQJ  
AQ42  
A109  
84

Contract: 3NT

Opening Lead: 7 of hearts

Play of the Hand:

East plays the jack of hearts, which declarer wins with the queen. At trick 2, he leads the 4 of clubs. The final result of this hand is going to depend on when East plays his ace of clubs.

If East wins the first round of clubs and returns the 9 of hearts, declarer will score two heart tricks, four spades, four clubs and one diamond for a total of eleven tricks.

If East holds up his ace twice and wins the third round, the declarer makes only two club tricks, four spades, two hearts and one diamond for a total of nine tricks—making his contract.

But, if East takes his ace on the second round, the declarer can make only one club trick for a total of eight tricks—down one.

NOTE: East does best to take his ace on the same trick that the declarer plays his last club. Certainly the declarer is NOT going to tell the defenders how many clubs he has!

Enter the purpose of the Count Signal. When South leads the first club, West **MUST** indicate whether he has an odd number or even number of clubs. He should play the two to indicate an odd number. Once East knows his partner holds an odd number of clubs, he has no trouble figuring out that South holds only two clubs. Thus, he holds up his ace of clubs exactly once and the rest is history. The contract is set!

**Without the count signal by West, East would have had to guess when to take the ace of clubs.**

Let's look at another example:

	North	
	654	
	KQJ2	
	Q62	
	1082	
West		East
J3		102
6543		A109
10853		KJ94
KJ5		Q976
	South	
	AKQ987	
	87	
	A7	
	A43	

Contract: 4 spades by South

Opening Lead: 3 of diamonds

Play of the Hand:

West leads the 3 of diamonds which is covered by the queen, king and won by South's ace.

Declarer draws trumps and then leads the heart seven to the king. Note that there are no outside entries to the dummy. Again, West **MUST** give count so that East will know when to take his ace of hearts.

Holding an even number of hearts, West should play the SIX (his highest) on the first heart lead. Now East knows that her partner has an even number. Don't fool around by playing the five. Play the highest one you can afford to play when giving count to your partner.

East figures that South originally held a doubleton heart. Accordingly, she ducks the first heart lead and wins her ace on the second heart lead. The end result is that declarer is cut off from the dummy and is able to score only one trick in the heart suit. East/West has set the contract!

See how valuable the count signal is in defending either a notrump or a suit contract, especially where the dummy has no outside entries.

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Should you always give count?

Normally, when declarer plays a suit, the defenders should usually give count.

Although the count signal can be most helpful to the defenders in counting the declarer's hand, the signal acts as a two-edged sword. Just as with the Rule of Eleven, the declarer gets an easy count on the defenders' hands as well. For example, playing against opponents who always give exact count, the declarer is often able to figure out how to play a suit.

North  
Q1054

West  
J963

East  
82

South  
AK7

South plays off his AK of spades and notices that East and West are both high-lowing each other to show an even number of spades. When South leads his seven, he knows he can safely finesse the ten in the dummy.

Good players know when to give the count signal and when not to do so. In the above example, West can see the four spades in the dummy, he should “false card”. Here, it is not important for East to “know” how many cards West holds in the spade suit.

SUMMARY: You should give a true count signal only when you judge that your partner will find it helpful.

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The following hand comes from Edwin Kantar's Defensive Bridge Play.

Both sides are vulnerable

Dealer: South

North  
74  
Q32  
65  
AQJ842

Bidding:	S	W	N	E
	1D	P	2C	P
	3N	P	P	P

West  
J1096  
108  
J987  
973

East  
Q85  
K9764  
Q102  
K6

Opening lead: Jack of spades

South  
AK32  
AJ5  
AK43  
105

Play of the Hand:

When West leads the jack of spades, East signals with the eight. Declarer wins with the king. At trick two, the declarer leads the 10 of clubs, West gives count by playing the 3 of clubs, which indicates an odd number of clubs. The two is played from the dummy.

You are East. Do you have the nerves of steel to play low!!! You know your partner has an odd number of clubs. Play the six. Don't sit there and think. Just play the six. Declarer will repeat the club finesse immediately. Now you take your king and return the queen of spades. Now the declarer cannot make the contract.

You may argue that South will play the ace of clubs the second time; but, the majority of declarers will finesse.

NO GUTS, NO GLORY!

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## Card Combinations

You are missing the king and the jack. How do you play the following hands to maximize the number of tricks you can take?

Hand 1. AQ105

432

Finesse the 10 first and then the queen.

Hand 2. AQ965

432

Finesse the 9 and then the queen.

Hand 3. A1065

Q432

Cash the ace; then lead toward the queen.

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Chuck Bricken sent in the following combinations. You are in a 3NT contract. West leads a small spade. The following are your holdings in the suit. How do you play each to maximize the number of tricks you can take in the suit?

Hand 1. Kx

Jxx

This combination is like the Qx/Jxx or the Jxx/Qx holdings. DUCK the first trick in order to guarantee one trick in the suit.

Hand 2. Jx

Kxx

Play the jack now. If West has led from the AQ and you can keep East out of the lead, you will have a double stop in the suit. Note: Be careful to try to take all finesses into West's hand—the safe hand. The jack will be useless unless you play it now.

Hand 3. Qx

Kxx

Same principle as in Hand 2. Play the queen hoping West has led from the AJ. If it holds, you need to be careful to take all finesses into the West hand. West cannot attack the led suit without giving you the king. Note: the play of the accompanying small card will hardly be successful. Even if East holds the ace, he should not put it on the small card; but, wait to capture the king. Thus, holding you to one trick in the suit.

Hand 4. Kxx

Qxx

Play low. If East plays the ace then both your king and queen are good. If he doesn't then your queen takes the trick and your king will be good for a second trick if West has led from the ace.

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And, now I have a surprise for you! A Pop Quiz

	Dummy			
	754			
	K63			
	KQJ10		Bidding:	S W N E
	1042			1C P 1D P
YOU		EAST		2N P 3N P
1098632		?		P P
7				
7652				
Q7				
	South			
	?			

Against 3NT you lead the spade 10 and partner plays the queen. Declarer wins the ace and leads a diamond at trick two. Which diamond do you play?



Answer: Play the seven, the highest card you can spare to tell your partner that you have an even number of cards in the suit.

The above hand and several of the examples in this document were taken from Dorothy Hayden Truscott's book on Bid Better, Play Better, How to Think at the Bridge Table.

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Next Week: Focus will be on the Suit Preference Signal.