

Basic Defensive Strategies IV

1. Signalling Count
2. Revisiting an advanced attitude situation

By Neil Kimelman

Count is the 2nd most used signal – telling partner how many cards you have in a given suit. The most common usage is when declarer is leading a suit, either from dummy or their hand.

There are also two primary ways to show count, standard or upside down. Playing standard, a higher spot in the suit led shows an even number of cards in a suit, while the opposite is true playing upside down. For technical reasons, most partnerships use upside down, and I will use this method throughout this series of articles.

As a review, when playing 3rd and 5th, a small count card usually shows 2 or 4 cards in the suit declarer led. Whereas with 3 you played the highest spot you can afford.

Why is count important?

I recommend giving partner honest count. Declarer plays a card to dummy's ace. Show your count. Yes it helps declarer a bit, but in the long run, will help partner more.

Sometimes declarer is forced to adopt a line that is not 100%. Maybe it is not pulling trump. Maybe it's taking a chance early. Maybe it is forcing you to guess what their 13th card is. Count helps in both of these situations. If partner has the high diamond, and one smaller diamond is still out, a count early in the suit will let partner know, 100%, whether they need to keep this card, or not.

If you don't communicate count, then you are guessing on defence. Better to know what you are doing.

When is count applicable?

It applies when you lead at trick one, and any time when declarer leads a suit, and you play low. It does not apply:

1. When a defender must play 2nd or 3rd hand high, to build tricks.
2. A good convention to use, is that at the five level or higher, an opening lead of an **ace** asks for **attitude**, and the **king** asks for **count**.

When you lead on defence after trick one

As a good general rule, it is better to play attitude than count, when you lead after trick one.

Advance Count Rules

1. Count at trick one when partner leads against a notrump contract.

The rule here is simple – if you cannot beat the card declarer plays from dummy, the spot card you play is a count card.

Example 1: Against 3NT, Playing 3rd and 5th best, partner leads the ♥J.

Dummy

♥K3

You

♥7653

Declarer plays the king from dummy. Play the ♥3, showing either two or four hearts. If you were playing standard carding, you would play ♥7. (Not the ♥6, as you want to make your count signal as easy as possible for partner to interpret correctly.)

2. Count with a doubleton.

This can be a confusing issue for some players. Partner leads a high card against a suit contract, and you have two cards in that suit, do you encourage? The answer is, it depends. 😊

Against notrump, as we just saw, your card is a count card, not attitude, so it is not an issue. Against a suit contract, you usually encourage with a doubleton.

Example 2: Against 3♥, partner leads the ♦K (A from AK). Dummy has ♦987 and you have ♦62. Play the ♦2, hoping you can get a ruff. The **exceptions** to encouraging when you have a doubleton against a suit contract:

1. When you have no trumps!
2. When ruffing is with a natural trump trick.
3. When you clearly have a preference for an obvious switch.
4. When you don't want a ruff.

1. Current count.

Quite often our 1st signal is attitude, or maybe we have played 3rd hand high. Now we are discarding from this suit. Does it matter what spot card we play?

Yes, it can. Most experts play that the first discard, from a suit you have already played to once, is a current count situation. What this means is easy – you just discard as if you are giving count.

Example 3: Let's say partner lead a small heart against a spade contract. Dummy has two small and you hold ♥Q852. 3rd hand high, so you play the ♥Q. Now declarer pulls three rounds of trumps, and you hold two, so must find a discard. If you discard a heart, it is current count. So, playing upside down count, play the ♥8, to show a current three card holding. Playing 3rd and 5th best, you lead the ♥5.

What about suit preference on your first discard?

Many partnerships play suit preference, on their first discard. That is ok, and if you like it, keep playing it! Most expert partnerships, however, feel that count is a more valuable information, as which suit to switch to is usually evident.

Advanced attitude signal – the Smith Echo

The Smith echo is actually a Convention. This signal is usually made at trick two, only when defending against a notrump contract. Essentially you signal attitude to the suit partner led.

Example 4: Let's say you decide to lead a heart against 3NT, (1NT-3NT) from an original holding of ♥AJ752. Playing 3rd and 5th best, you lead the ♥2.

You

♠AJ

♥AJ752

♦982

♣J64

Dummy

♠K85

♥K3

♦QJ10654

♣75

Declarer wins ♥K in dummy, and leads the ♠5, and plays the ♠Q from their hand. Plan your defence?

A lot of players probably will look up in the air and probably win their spade ace and cash the heart ace, or maybe not.

Playing these basic defensive signals, with a reliable partner, and all of a sudden all of that guessing goes away!

Example 4a: Partner plays the ♥9 at trick one. When declarer leads the ♠5 to the ♠Q, partner plays the ♠2. Plan your defence.

Solution to 1a: Lead the ♥5! Partner has shown the three hearts by their nine at trick one, and likes a heart continuation. This would normally showing an original holding of ♥Q9x. Maybe the full deal is:

	♠ AJ ♥ AJ752 ♦ 982 ♣ J64	
♠ Q1093 ♥ 1084 ♦ AK7 ♣ AQ9	<div style="background-color: black; color: white; padding: 10px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> N W E S </div>	♠ K85 ♥ K3 ♦ QJ10654 ♣ 75
	♠ 7642 ♥ Q96 ♦ 3 ♣ K10832	

Example 4b: Let's say you decide to lead a heart against 3NT, (1NT-3NT) from an original holding of ♥AJ752. Playing 3rd and 5th best, you lead the ♥2.

You

♠AJ
 ♥AJ752
 ♦982
 ♣J64

Dummy

♠K85


♥K3

♦QJ10654

♣75

Partner plays the ♥2 at trick one. When declarer leads the ♠5 to the ♠Q, partner plays the ♠2. Plan your defence.

Solution to 1b: Lead the ♥A! Partner has shown 2 or 4 hearts at trick one, and encouraging a heart continuation when they play the ♠2. The only holding that makes sense is partner hearts are ♥xxx4. Maybe the full deal is:

	♠ AJ	
	♥ AJ752	
	♦ 982	
	♣ J64	
♠ Q1093		♠ K85
♥ Q9		♥ K3
♦ AK7		♦ QJ10654
♣ AQ109		♣ 75
	♠ 7642	
	♥ 10864	
	♦ 3	
	♣ K832	

**For sharp eyed readers, South has to play the 8 or 10 on the second round of hearts, or the suit will block.*

Example 4c:

You

♠AJ8

♥AJ752

♦98

♣J64

Dummy

♠K5

♥K8


♦QJ10654

♣753

Partner plays the ♥10 at trick one. When declarer leads the ♠5 to the ♠Q, partner plays the ♠7. Plan your defence.

Solution to 4c): Lead the ♣J. Partner has shown the three hearts by their ten at trick one, and does not want a heart continuation. The only chance is that partner has the ♣A, and can lead a heart through declarer's ♥Q, before declarer runs nine tricks. Maybe the full deal is:

	♠ AJ	
	♥ AJ752	
	♦ 982	
	♣ J64	
♠ Q1093		♠ K85
♥ Q63		♥ K8
♦ AK7		♦ QJ10654
♣ KQ9		♣ 753



♠ 742

♥ 1094

♦ 32

♣ A10863

June 1st Article:

I am going to take a short break from defence to talk about another important issue:

**Duplicate Bridge Ethics:
Rights and Responsibilities**