

Basic Defensive Strategies V

Suit preference

The least common signal, for most, is the suit preference. It tells partner what suit you wish them to lead, at their next opportunity. An unnecessary high card shows interest in the higher ranking suit, whereas a low card shows interest in the lowest ranking suit.

This is a **powerful defensive tool**, but is often used incorrectly, when count or attitude signal is applicable. So here is suit preference – when it normally applies, and when it doesn't.

However it is important to emphasize that the key takeaway is to have an agreement with partner, whatever you decide.

Here some situations, where you want to know if suit preference applies.

When you set up a suit against a notrump contract.

The spot card tells partner where your entry is located.

Example 1:

West North East South

1NT Pass 3NT All Pass

As north you lead a heart against 3NT, holding ♠A3 ♥K10752 ♦843 ♣876.

Dummy

♠984

♥J64

♦AQJ95

♣Q10

Partner wins the ace and returns a heart. You win the king. You know that a 3rd heart will set up the suit. Which card you return, will tell partner in which suit your entry is located. Because on this deal it is in spades, the highest ranking suit, you return ♥7, your highest spot card. If the ace was in diamonds, and not spade, you would return the ♥5. And if in clubs, the ♥2.

When dummy wins the trick and you have an honour sequence

Partner leads the three, and dummy wins the ace, and you hold QJ1094 in that suit, you show your sequence by playing the highest card, here the queen, the card you would have led on opening lead. It **is not** a suit preference situation, nor is it encouraging or discouraging, it is just informative.

Partner leads a high honour in the suit you bid.

Assuming partner did not support you, there are two signals you want to send to partner:

1. Whether you want partner to continue the suit, and
2. If the lead is a singleton, which suit do you want partner to lead.

Example 1: You are South.

West	North	East	South
			2♥
2♠	Pass	4♠	All Pass

Partner lead the ♥A. Dummy has

♠AJ85

♥983

♦K84

♣K84

1a) You hold ♠2 ♥KQ7652 ♦A43 ♣876. Play the ♥7. This tells partner that you have a possible side entry in the higher of the two unbid suits. So if they only had one heart, they will switch to diamonds, and your side will take the first four tricks. If they don't declarer will make their game. Declarer's hand:

♠KQ109743

♥J104

♦Q

♣AQ

1b) You hold ♠762 ♥QJ7652 ♦J1076 ♣-. Play the ♥5. This tells partner that you have a possible side entry in the higher of the two unbid suits. So if they only had one heart, they will switch to clubs, and your side will take the first four tricks. If they don't declarer will make their game.

Declarer's hand:

♠KQ1094

♥J104

♦-

♣AQJ105

In order to be successful here, you need to watch the spots in the heart suit.

Order of discards. The first discard is usually attitude. If you and partner play Lavinthal, that is fine. Lavinthal states that your 1st discard shows no interest in the suit you discard from, and the relative size of the card you play indicates in which of the two remaining suits you do have interest.

After that you can still use the relative size of the discard to indicate suit preference.

Double edged Sword. Just remember, the information you are telling partner, is also available to declarer. If you think partner does not need to know, don't make an informative signal that can be used to declarer's advantage.

Suit Preference in the Trump Suit

Often we have 2 or 3 small in the trump suit, and declarer pulls trump. Most players play their spot cards up the line. But this situation can be used as a powerful suit preference situation. Playing an unnecessary high spot shows interest in a higher ranking suit (usually partner can figure it out). While a low card either shows no preference, or likes a lower ranking suit. If you have three you can signal for any of the three non-trump suits.

The Joy of Defence

Here is a fascinating hand from an online game. It incorporates the trump suit preference signal, in an overall deal. It demonstrated the beauty and fulfillment from a partnership

defending as one, making it as hard on declarer as possible. See how you make out, incorporating what I have covered over this series:

Example 2: You are South, holding ♠A53 ♥752 ♦AKQJ82 ♣7. Both vul, IMPs. The bidding goes:

West North East South

Pass Pass 4♠ All Pass

You make the reasonable choice of defending against 4♠, instead of bidding a speculative 5♦. Your problems don't get any easier! Although a singleton club lead might work, you chose to lead the ♦A. This dummy appears.

♠K

♥K10843

♦986

♣K932

On the first trick partner plays the ♦5, and declarer the ♦3. You are playing upside down count and attitude?

What do you do now?

One of the strongest defensive holding, if not the strongest, is holding the **trump ace**. This expands your horizon as to defensive choices, as you know you will get in again. Here you know partner either has a singleton ♦5, or ♦542. Why? Because with a doubleton small, they would signal encouragement, playing low.

So there is no rush to play another diamond holding the trump ace, but from the bidding and play, you suspect declarer has the stiff, not partner. So you shift to your singleton club, which declarer wins with the ace, after partner plays the jack. Now declarer leads a small trump. Do you win the ace?

Most players would, without giving it any thought. I mean, what is better that winning a king with an ace?! Right?

(Wrong!!* There is no rush to win the spade ace. You want to see what declarer plays from dummy, as you will learn more about declarer's hand. This principle of attacking declarer's communication is also a well-known strategy, but too advanced to include here.

**With only two spades, going up with the ace on the first round of trump would be correct.)*

The actual South went up with the ♠A, and partner plays the ♠10! Either partner has a stiff (unlikely), or is indicating a preference for a heart shift, and at the same time denying a stiff diamond (Right? Otherwise they would just play up the line in trumps). Now what?

This seems easy, you are hoping partner has the heart ace which is indicated by their signal, and you want to get a club ruff. So what do you return?

The correct answer is the ♥2. Partner has asked for a heart. A count card is the most helpful signal in this situation, (Had partner not asked for a heart the attitude ♥7 would be right card, if you decided to play a heart.)

But partner asked for a heart! So give them a count. If you return the ♥7, as was done at the table, you give partner a dilemma. Partner's hand: ♠1042 ♥AQJ9 ♦542 ♣J65. They win the heart queen, and ???

If the following is the full deal:

North

♠1042

♥AQJ9

♦542

♣J65

West

♠K

♥K10843

♦986

♣K932

East

♠QJ98764

♥62

♦3

♣AQ10

South

♠A53

♥752

♦AKQJ82

♣7

You need to cash a 2nd heart. However on the actual deal partner would probably go wrong and play a diamond. Not playing declarer for their actual holding, ♠QJ9876 ♥6 ♦3 ♣AQ1084.