

# Signalling

Signalling is the essential (legal!) means of communication between the defenders. It takes five forms:

- a) by bidding
- b) by opening lead
- c) by following suit
- d) by discarding
- e) by subsequent leads

## Signalling by bidding

First then, we should examine the importance of bidding. When you are obviously going to be the defending side, there are four reasons why you bid:

- 1) to wrest the contract
- 2) to prepare the way for a possible sacrifice
- 3) to make life difficult for the opposition
- 4) to signal to partner your shape/holding

Perhaps this fourth reason is the most important. You should be signalling to partner where your values lie, and your shape. Whilst not a demand for partner to lead that suit, when you bid a suit, particularly as an overcall, you are fully expecting partner to lead that suit if he has the chance. If your partner leads another suit, he had better have a good reason!

So if the bidding starts on your left -

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♣	Pass	1♦	?

You hold either of these two hands

Hand A	Hand B
♠ Q 5 3	♠ A Q 5
♥ A Q 9 8 6	♥ Q 9 7 3 2
♦ 5 3 2	♦ 5 3 2
♣ 6 2	♣ 6 2

In both cases, you expect to end up defending – maybe against no trumps, maybe against Spades or a minor suit – who can say.

Hand A is worthy of a 1♥ overcall. You do not expect to buy the contract, but you want to take the pressure off your partner. By bidding, you suggest a Heart lead will be a good idea. Hand B, same point count, but not a sound 1♥ overcall. Yes, it might turn out ok, but do you really want a Heart lead? So by bidding on Hand A, you signal for a Heart lead, by not bidding on Hand B you leave the opening lead up to him – he may guess right or not. Most importantly, you have not misled him.

There are other cases by bidding that you can signal to partner a lead, not by bidding a suit but by a lead directing double. Suppose the bidding has been (starting on your left)

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♥	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♦	Pass	2♠	?

You hold

Hand C  
♠ A K 5 3  
♥ Q 9 7 3 2  
♦ 5 3 2  
♣ 2

RHO's 2♠ was alerted by LHO as "Fourth Suit Forcing" – not showing a genuine suit but asking for a guard for no trump purposes. So you should make a 'free' double – it is a lead directing double – it tells partner you have a spade suit of sorts, but more importantly it tells partner that is safe to lead a Spade whatever the final contract. Note that you should have a slight taste of blood in the air here. It looks like that the opposition do not have a fit, and although they have the balance of points they might already have over bid – partner could well have a decent holding in the minors and you can look after the majors.

Lead directing doubles are a very common way of legally signalling to partner for a safe (and sometimes a devastating) lead. However, one has to be careful – never make a lead directing double if it gives the opponents the chance of playing in the doubled contract – doubled overtricks are very expensive! There are other types of lead directing doubles – (Lightner for example) but they are for more advanced situations.

One final point needs to be made regarding signalling by bidding– and it is perhaps the most difficult to grasp initially for beginners. That of course is the negative inference when you do not make an over call or lead directing double. There is always an implicit signal to your partner about what you do not have – obvious but when you do not make a lead-directing bid, you really are asking partner to use his/her best judgement (which he/she always shows of course).

Let us now move on to the second method of signalling for the defence. That is of course:

### Signalling by the opening lead.

The most informative signal available to the defence – after all it occurs on every hand - the opening lead.

If you lead an honour in an unbid suit, you are probably showing partner you have a sequence – the most elementary signal – and you are telling partner that you have a further two cards in that suit. Your partner can thereof get a partial count of that suit – and perhaps if he listened to the opposition bidding a full count?

If you lead 4<sup>th</sup> highest against a no trump contract – yet another blatant signal –showing partner your best suit and giving him a count of the suit as well.

One further example, if partner has bid a suit say Hearts, if you lead a high card (10 or better) then you are almost certainly showing a doubleton in that suit, if you lead a small card you are showing an odd number of cards probably.

Finally the negative inferences - if you lead a trump against a suit contract you are really telling partner that a) You do not want to lead away from you other suits b) You suggest to partner that it is a good idea to draw dummy's trumps.

However, of course you are all experts by now on opening leads! So on to the next signalling opportunity.

### Signalling by following suit.

When partner makes his opening lead (remember that was also a signal!), you have the next opportunity to signal back. Use it!

If you like the lead tell your partner, if you do not, tell your partner. However, smiling, grimacing or miming "tut tut" is not permitted! The standard way of encouraging partner to continue the suit (if his opening lead holds the trick) is the play a high card, that is the 7 or greater, in the suit. To discourage him one normally plays a low card. Of course, sometimes you just not have the right card to signal. Maybe partner has lead the ♥A against a Spade contract. You have a singleton ♥2 – and would love him to continue Hearts but he will take the play of that 2 as discouraging. But if you had say a doubleton ♥9 2, then you can make a clear signal by playing the ♥9 when he plays the ♥A – he hopefully will continue with the ♥K on which you follow with ♥2, playing high low is a sure sign you an even number (2 in this case) cards in a suit. Then partner will play a third round that you can trump.

Playing high low is the commonest signal to partner when following suit – it is also known as a "Peter" – a name derived because the way you play them shows that you have run out of cards in that suit, i.e. they have petered out.

A simple example, the defence elect to play in Spades. Partner starts proceedings with that ♥A, dummy goes down and you can see

Lead ♥A

You	Dummy
♠ J 9 7 2	♠ Q 10 5 3
♥ 10 2	♥ 8 5 3
♦ 9 8 7	♦ K Q J 5
♣ 10 6 4 3	♣ K 2

Your play of the ♥10 under partner's ♥A should be automatic, he continues with the ♥K, and you complete your 'peter' with the ♥2. Partner now leads the ♥4, which you ruff with the ♠2. First three tricks to the good guys. What do you play next? Well if you and your partner are signalling correctly it should be easy – but I will come back to this later (if you cannot wait you should play a small club). So that was an encouraging 'peter', how about when you do not want a continuation?

Assume a Spade contract again and partner leads the ubiquitous ♥A.

Lead ♥A

You	Dummy
♠ J 9 2	♠ Q 10 5 3
♥ 10 9 4 2	♥ Q J 5 3
♦ 9 8 7	♦ K Q J 5
♣ A Q 10 6	♣ K 2

Here you definitely do not want partner to carry on with his Heart suit. If he does, say with the ♥K, there is a high probability that declare will trump it and dummy's hearts (QJ) will be worth two tricks. Therefore, we discourage the continuation by signalling with the ♥2. Partner will then decide to switch to another suit, hopefully Clubs (your ♥2 could be deemed as asking for a club switch).

Is that all we can do when we want to signal to partner? Well no, we can do quite a lot more. We can actually tell partner what we would like him to lead. Let us keep with our Spade contract and partner's opening lead of the ♥A.

Lead ♥A

Dummy

♠ Q 10 5 3

♥ 5

♦ K J 9 2

♣ K J 9 2

You

♠ J 9 2

♥ 10 9 4 2

♦ A Q 10 6

♣ 5 4 3

Our partner knows that it is unlikely to be a success leading another Heart. A trump switch by him is equally unpromising. Therefore, he is going to switch to leading a minor suit. If he has to guess, then half the time all will be well and he leads a Diamond, but he might just as well lead a Club, which is unlikely to be of any use. Thus, we have to give him a signal to say which minor suit to lead. The easiest suit preference signalling technique in this situation is called by some Lavinthal; and others prefer the easier to pronounce McKenny. I believe Hy Lavinthal deserves the greater credit but in England, it is better known as a McKenny signal. Whatever the signal is the same. If we want partner to switch to a lower-ranking suit (Clubs in our example above) then we play a low card on partner's A. If we want him to switch to the higher-ranking suit (Diamonds in our example) then we play an unnecessarily high card. Therefore, above – we know partner is not going to play another Heart so we play the ♥10, an unnecessarily high card, (which would normally be encouraging for a Heart continuation). Partner is awake, realises that we cannot possibly want a Heart continuation, and will switch to the higher-ranking suit, i.e. Diamonds. Of course if we exchange our Diamonds and Clubs then we want a Club switch – so in this case we would play the ♥2 – obviously a discouraging card and as unnecessarily low card as can be – so we ask for a switch to the lower ranking suit.

This technique of playing an unnecessarily high card to ask for a switch to a higher-ranking suit, and a low card to ask for a switch to a lower ranking suit will be common to subsequent signalling techniques – so if you are not totally happy, re-read until you are.

Having mastered the idea of signalling when we follow suit, how about when we discard?

## Signalling by discarding.

Let us have a no trump contract this time. The bidding has been

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1NT	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♠	Pass	3NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

This time partner starts with the ♥A, K, and Q

Lead ♥A, K, Q

Dummy

♠ A Q

♥ J 10 9 8

♦ K 10 9 8

♣ K 10 9

You

♠ 9 4 3 2

♥ 5 4

♦ 7 6 5  
♣ A Q 6 3

What do we know? We have 6 points, partner has shown 9 points. Dummy has 13 points, so Declarer for his opening bid has all the remaining 12 points. **So partner is not going to take any more tricks.** Declarer has four Spades to the K J (he responded 2♠ to dummy's Stayman). He also has three diamonds at least to A Q J. So left to his own devices he can take Spade tricks, 4 Diamonds and 1 Heart. Therefore, the only way we can defeat the contract is to persuade our partner to lead a Club. He is on a blind guess. Or is he? His only hope to defeat the contract is to find you with a minor suit A Q (he has to assume you have 6 points). Of course, we follow to the first ♥A and ♥K, and we have to discard on the ♥Q. On the third Heart, you discard a low Spade – the ♠2. This is a Lavinthal (or if you prefer a McKenny) suit preference signal. By discarding a low Spade, you are asking for the lowest ranking of the other suits (Clubs). You could of course discard your lowest Diamond, which would also ask for a Club. However the play of the ♦5, whilst not a high card is not so obviously your lowest Diamond, whereas ♠2 is definitely your lowest. So partner leads a Club and you take your two tricks to defeat the contract.

Let us change the hand slightly, swapping the Diamond and Club holding

Lead ♥A, K, Q

Dummy

♠ A Q  
♥ J 10 9 8  
♦ K 10 9  
♣ K 10 9 8

You

♠ 9 4 3 2  
♥ 5 4  
♦ A Q 6 3  
♣ 7 6 3

This time when partner plays the ♥Q we discard the ♠9. This being a high spade asks for a switch to the higher ranking of the other two suits, i.e. a Diamond.

You have of course spotted that effectively we are using the same method of signalling when we follow suit as when we discard – that is the attractiveness of the Lavinthal / McKenny suit preference system. A low card asks for the lower ranking suit, a high card asks for the higher ranking etc.

However at this point we ought to introduce some etiquette. If you play against experienced players, and make a discard, your partner should be prepared to explain the meaning of a discard. (Note you will not be asked what your discard means – the question can only be posed to your partner). The question should be posed to your partner as “What do you understand by your partner's discard of the ♠9?” for example. However, your partner might also be asked less formally with a quizzical “Discards?”

It must be stressed that your partner must always answer truthfully – but he should not give more information than is legally required. The answer should be of the format: “If I consider the Spade discard to be a high Spade, then my partner is asking for a Diamond; if I consider it to be a low Spade then my partner is asking for a Club.” He should not say that his partner is asking for a specific suit; that specification is based upon his valuation of the card discarded made of course by knowledge of his own holding in Spades. The reason is that the generic answer gives nothing away about his holding in Spades. In the case of the ♠9, it is pretty obvious that is a high Spade – but suppose the discard was a ♠4. Now if partner has the ♠3 2, then it is obvious to him that it is a low Spade. However if he holds ♠7 6 5 he could well deduce that the ♠4 is your highest. By specifically saying which suit is being asked for he is giving unnecessary information to declarer (about his Spade holding) and illegal information to you as well (he is inferring to you his Spade holding). Of course, if the question originally was just the terse “Discards?” then he has every right to answer an equally terse response of “Lavinthal/Mckenny”.

Do you always have to discard to show the required lead to partner? Usually, yes, but there is one very important exception. Suppose you are discarding on one of declarer's suits, i.e. partner is not on lead. If you think that your partner is likely to get the lead, then it is best to signal with your discards. However if you are sure partner is not going to get on lead, then it is often best to discard “deceptively”. Your partner is not going to get on lead, so he will never lead the wrong suit. However, declarer may well place you with a different holding than you have and take a finesse in a different direction than if you had been “honest”. Note this is not cheating in any sense; you are just making the best of your opportunities to deceive declarer as to your holding.

So on to the last example of signalling.

### Signalling by subsequent leads.

Let us return to an earlier example. The defence elect to play in Spades. Partner starts proceedings with that ♥A, dummy goes down and you can see

	Lead ♥A	
		Dummy
		♠ Q 10 5 3
		♥ 8 5 3
		♦ K Q J 5
		♣ K 2
You		
♠ J 9 7 2		
♥ 10 2		
♦ 9 8 7		
♣ 10 6 4 3		

Your play of the ♥10 under partner's ♥A should be automatic, he continues with the ♥K, and you complete your 'peter' with the ♥2. Partner now leads the ♥4, which you ruff with the ♠2. First three tricks to the good guys. Assume that Declarer has followed with small Hearts to all three hearts. When we posed the question earlier, we said that you should exit with a Club because partner has signalled for one. How?

What is partner's holding in Hearts? Does he have another Heart? Probably (otherwise Declarer would have five and might well be playing Hearts not Spades). Does partner have the ♥Q? No, he probably would have just cashed it. He ought to have the ♥J. Therefore, declarer has the ♥Q. Therefore, partner has led the smallest heart he has for you to ruff. Why, because he is making a suit preference signal for you to lead a Club (the lower-ranking of the outstanding suits). So when you ruff you return a club to his (presumed) ♣A, and he plays a 4<sup>th</sup> heart for you to either over ruff dummy or to promote a trump in your hand if dummy ruffs with ♠Q. Of course if he wanted you to return a Diamond not a Club, he would have led the ♥J for you to ruff (not the ♥4), being a high card asking for a switch to the higher-ranking suit i.e. Diamonds not Clubs.

And that covers most aspects of legal signalling.

You should be aware that there are other signalling conventions – particularly when discarding. Some players play a system called "Revolving Discards", others use the discard of an even or an odd card to carry a specific meaning. And there are others – but if you stick with the high/low card to encourage/discourage and throw in the odd meaning-full discard, then you will be surprised on many contracts you can defeat, and how much your partnership understanding improves. There is nothing more satisfying than rattling of the first five tricks against a "Cold" game contract just because you make and read signals correctly.