English Bridge August 2002 Count signals

Most people think the Standard English system is just about what our bids mean. But they are wrong, any system of agreements will also cover the meaning of the cards we play in defence – that is, the message our leads and signals carry.

When we play as declarer, partner's hand is on the table and there is no need to signal to dummy. But when we defend, we cannot see partner's hand. So we must send messages to partner by the cards we play – not by speaking, nodding our head or by the faces we pull! Over the next couple of articles, I am going to look at the sort of messages we might want to send and I will try and explain why partner needs the information.

Look at this deal where South plays in 3NT. Your partner, West, leads ♦Q and when dummy goes down this is what you can see.

		North	South
sx5 3 Dummy			2NT
hx9 7 5			
dx4 3 2		3NT	all pass
cxK Q J 9 3			

N ↑   sxJ 10 6 4 You
hxQ J 10
dx8 6 5
cxA 4 2

The lead tells you that partner doesn't have ♦K but does have ♦Q and ♦J and often ♦10 too. The agreement that we lead the highest card from touching honours is made so that you get useful information from the lead. Declarer wins ♦K and leads ♣10. Partner plays ♣5 and dummy ♣3. What should you do? You can see that dummy has no entry outside clubs, so if declarer is to make four club tricks the entry to cash them must be in the club suit. You can foil declarer's plan by refusing to win ♣A – you are not obliged to win a trick just because you can.

To the next trick declarer plays ♣6, partner ♣7 and dummy ♣J. Should you win this trick? Or should you duck a second time? If you look carefully at the clubs played, there is just one you have not seen, ♣8. Is it in partner's hand or declarer's? If declarer's you should duck again and win the third round to ensure declarer is out of clubs. But if partner has ♣8, you should win this trick as declarer already has no more clubs left. How can you possibly tell?

The answer lies in the order partner played the clubs. On declarer's leads, our agreement is that we give a **count signal**. That is we play our cards so as to tell partner how many we hold. With an odd number of cards we play them upwards. With ♣8 7 5, partner would play ♣5 first time and ♣7 next time. However if partner held a doubleton, just ♣75 alone, partner would play ♣7 on the first round and ♣5 next time.

Back to the problem where partner has played ♣5 then ♣7 showing precisely three clubs. You should win the second club and play back a diamond. But if partner had played the ♣7 first then ♣5, you would duck the second club and stop declarer making the last two club tricks.

This was the complete deal.

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                  ♠5 3
                  ♥7 5 2
                  ♦4 3 2
                  ♣K Q J 9 3
♠Q 9 7                              ♠J 10 6 4
♥6 4 3                              ♥Q J 10
♦Q J 10 9                          ♦8 6 5
♣8 7 5            ♠A K 8 2          ♣A 4 2
                  ♥A K 9 8
                  ♦A K 7
                  ♣10 6
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If you mistakenly duck the second club, declarer will play three rounds of hearts. When the hearts break 3-3, declarer has nine tricks (two spades, three hearts, two diamonds and two clubs). If you win the second club, declarer should only make eight tricks for one down.

> When declarer plays a suit, both defenders should give a count signal. A high card then a low card shows an even number of cards. A low card then a higher one shows an even number of cards.

This deal is taken from a new book just published by the EBU, *Really Easy Defence*. The book covers all aspects of defence, including more examples and problems on count signals. It is available by mail order for £10.75 including postage and packing. You can ring 01296 317230 to order using your credit card.