English Bridge October 2002   More on count signals

My last article looked at giving count signals on the suits played by declarer. Here is another example to remind you.

♠5 3	Dummy		North	South
♥9 7 5				2NT
♦4 3 2			3NT	all pass
♣A Q J 9 3				

	♠J 10 6 4	You
N ↑	♥Q J 10	
	♦8 6 5	
	♣K 4 2	

Your partner leads ♦Q against 3NT. Declarer wins and leads ♣10. Partner follows with ♣5 and dummy plays low. Do you win the trick? Your answer should be NO! Partner has played the lowest missing club, showing either one or three clubs. If partner has three clubs, declarer has only two. If you refuse to win your ♣K, declarer can make at most two clubs, if the ♣A is played next time. If the finesse is repeated declarer makes only one club. This is more likely to happen if you play low quickly on ♣10, to give nothing away. Of course if partner only has one club, it doesn't matter what you do.

There is one special time when the system says that you must give a count signal, as opposed to the more normal attitude signal, on partner's lead. Suppose you have ♥6 4 2 and partner leads ♥K against 3NT. The king is a special lead. In Standard English it asks you to unblock an honour if you hold one and to give a count signal otherwise. Look how this can help partner.

	Dummy		South	North
	♥7 5 4		1NT	3NT

Partner	N ↑	You
♥K Q J 10 3		♥A 2
	♥9 8 6	

On the ♥K lead you must play your ♥A at trick one and return your ♥2 at trick 2. That way five tricks are quickly cashed.

	Dummy		South	North
	♥7 5 4		1NT	3NT

Partner	N ↑	You
♥A K J 10 3		♥Q 2
	♥9 8 6	

The system says play an honour if you hold one, so you drop the ♥Q under the ♥K and partner cashes five heart tricks. But suppose you don't have an honour? The hearts could be like this:

	Dummy		South	North
	♥7 5 4		1NT	3NT

Partner	N ↑	You
♥A K J 10 3		♥9 8 2
	♥Q 6	

Without an honour you give a count signal by playing ♥2, which shows three hearts. Partner knows that you do not have the ♥Q, but that you do have one or three hearts. If you have three, declarer has only two, so ♥Q will drop under ♥A.

	Dummy		South	North
	♥7 5 4		1NT	3NT
Partner	N	You		
♥A K J 10 3	↑	♥9 2		
	♥Q 8 6			

With no honour and two hearts, say ♥9 2, you must play your ♥9. Partner can tell you only have two hearts, so declarer must have three. The ♥Q won't drop under the ♥A. Partner switches to another suit, hoping that you can gain the lead and play a heart through declarer's ♥Q. That way declarer won't make a heart trick.

On partner's lead, we normally give an attitude signal. A high card is encouraging, saying we like the lead, and a low card is discouraging. More about this next time but here is one example where count and attitude signals lead to the same cards being played.

	Dummy		South	North
	♥Q 5 4		1♠	4♠
Partner	N	You		
♥A K 10 7 3	↑	♥9 2		
	♥J 8 6			

Partner leads the ♥A against 4♠ and you should encourage the suit by playing ♥9. You encourage because you have a doubleton and can ruff the third round. Partner will cash the ♥K and play another heart. If mistakenly you played ♥2, partner might switch to another suit and the ruff would be lost.

Remember:
- ❑ On declarer's lead give a count signal. Play high-low to show an even number of cards. A low card then a higher one shows an odd number of cards.
- ❑ On partner's lead we normally give an attitude signal (high card we like it, low we don't), with one important exception. If partner leads a king against no trumps, unblock any honour you hold. Without an honour you must give a count signal.