

English Bridge October 2004

High is encouraging

Last time, we looked at how to tell partner what you think of the opening lead by the card you play to the first trick. Standard English recommends that on partner's lead you play:

HELD = High Encouraging Low Discouraging

HELD is also played when you are unable to follow suit and having to make a discard.

♠A 9 5
♥K Q J 10 9
♦5 4 3
♣6 4

South opens 1NT and North bids 3NT. Hearts is your best suit and when you have driven out ♥A, your side will have four heart winners. You lead ♥K, the top card of a sequence to tell partner that you have a good hearts. The ♥K wins the trick, partner playing ♥5. You continue with ♥Q. That wins too and partner discards ♣2, declarer is not obliged to win the trick just because he has ♥A. Don't stop playing hearts having made two tricks, lead ♥J to trick three, partner throws ♣3 whilst declarer wins ♥A.

Declarer cashes five club tricks, what three cards do you discard on the long clubs? Here is the complete deal to help you decide:

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

You must let partner know you have ♠A. If partner gets the lead you want a spade lead not a diamond, to put you on lead to cash your hearts. Throw ♠9 first then ♠5. This is a very clear HELD signal, showing you like spades. On the last club throw ♦3, showing you have nothing in diamonds. If you don't make a clear signal in spades partner has an awkward decision whether to throw spades or diamonds on the club winners. If he throws diamonds, declarer's two little diamonds become winners and 3NT makes ten tricks. Make up the hands and play them out. See what happens if partner makes the wrong discard. Defence is a partnership activity, you must tell partner what he needs to know. If 3NT makes on the hand, you are at fault, not your partner!

Let's change the hand a bit. Swap declarer's ♦A with your ♦5 and your ♠A with declarer's ♠3. Declarer still has 12 points, you still have an entry.

♠9 5 3
♥K Q J 10 9
♦A 4 3
♣6 4

You lead ♥K and continue playing the suit until declarer wins ♥A. You have ♦A as an entry to cash the heart winners, so 3NT should still go down. As before declarer cashes five club winners and you throw two diamonds, playing high-low to show your diamond entry. The only problem is that both your diamonds are very small, playing high-low means playing ♦4 then ♦3. If partner is not paying attention, the signal may be missed. You just have to trust partner is properly awake, since there is nothing else you can do.

Watch the cards your partner discards. They should carry a helpful message.

Well there is just one thing that might help. After winning ♥ K and ♥ Q you are left with ♥ J 10 9 and it really doesn't matter which one you lead next as they are all of equal value. But if you lead ♥9 and declarer wins ♥A, partner should realise you deliberately played a low heart. When playing equal cards, use the lowest one to suggest you hold diamonds, a lower unseen suit, and the highest one to suggest a higher suit, spades.

Sometimes you can signal with the card you lead.

A high card = a higher suit.

A low card = a lower suit.

♠ 2
♥ A K J 9 3
♦ 10 8 2
♣ A Q 6 2

So far the contract has been in no trumps, but signals can be made in suit contracts too. Look at this deal where South opened 1♠, you overcalled 2♥ and North bid 3♠ and South went 4♠. What should you lead?

The ♥A is correct. We lead the higher card from touching honours, so the ♥A should tell partner that you have the ♥K too. You should lead hearts rather than clubs, as your heart suit is better and less likely to give a trick away. Dummy goes down and everyone follows to ♥A. What do you do next?

Before answering, you should ask me what card partner played on the ♥A. It was ♥10 and a high card should mean partner liked the lead. As partner can't have a heart honour, partner must like the lead because holding only a doubleton, he hopes for a ruff. So cash your ♥K and play a third heart for partner to ruff.

Your side need just one more trick, but how will partner know whether to try a club or a diamond? Both dummy and partner have identical holdings in the two suits. Again the answer is the size of the heart you lead to trick three. If you led ♥3 partner should play a club. If you led the ♥J partner should play a diamond. A diamond lead gets 4♠ two down, a club lead lets the contract make. If you answered ♥J, you are ready for the more advanced articles in this magazine!

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

This instruction to partner, made with the card you lead is usually called a **suit preference signal** or sometimes a McKenney signal after its American inventor William E McKenney. But the name doesn't matter. What is important is that you play a card that alerts partner to the message you want to send. And if there is any danger at all that partner won't notice the message, cash your ♦A before you give partner a heart ruff.

Probably you won't have room for this

Finally, here is a problem to think about. South opens 1NT and everybody passes. Partner leads ♠A, you play ♠3 to show that you have no interesting cards in spades. Partner continues with ♠K, ♠Q and ♠10. Declarer started with four small spades. What two discards do you make?

♠J 4 2
♥7 2
♦9 7 3
♣K Q 9 8 5

♠5 3
♥K Q J 10 9
♦5 2
♣J 10 4 2

Answer (perhaps put it upside down)

You can't spare a club or dummy will make five club tricks. You could throw ♦2 then ♦5, but partner may not realise how good your hearts are. Throw ♥K, the card you would have led, this should get across how good your hearts are. Then throw ♦2. At most three heart tricks are needed to beat 1NT so throwing the king won't give the contract.