



Signal Failure!

THERE IS plenty of scope for tricks to go astray when defending. Signalling is one of the major aspects that requires work. When considering the mistakes that people make in this area, I shall assume that standard signals are being used: High = Encouraging, and High = Even number of cards in the suit.

Signalling with Honours

Consider Example A:



You are defending a 4♠ contract. Your partner, West, leads the ace of hearts; which card should you play to this trick?

Mistakes People Make: Always Play Top of a Doubleton

While you would like to encourage your partner's lead, you fear that the three of hearts will look discouraging. You may then be tempted to play the queen of hearts. However, this will give your partner a dilemma: should he expect you to hold ♥Q-x, ♥Q or ♥Q-J? To save him having to guess, you should signal with an honour in the way that you would lead that honour, so playing ♥Q is consistent with a 'top of a sequence' play (from ♥Q-J), or a singleton. With ♥Q-3, play the ♥3. If your partner guesses to continue with the king of hearts and you play the heart queen, he will know that you started with a doubleton heart.

Congratulations to David Bakhshi who, together with US partner Billy Cohen, won the Silodor Open Pairs at the US Spring Nationals in March. David is the first Brit to win a major US pairs title since Tony Forrester won the same event in 1998.

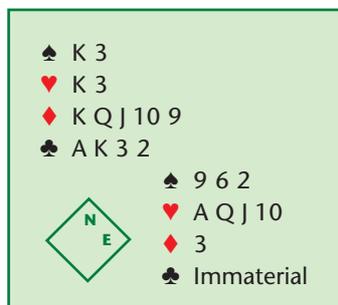
Discarding

Perhaps the toughest habits to develop involve deciding what to throw away (i.e. discarding).

Mistakes People Make: Signalling with (Potential) Winners

When discarding, it often feels crucial to ensure that your partner switches to your best suit, and a common question posed by bridge teachers asks whether it is better to throw an *encouraging* card from your *best* suit or a *discouraging* card from your *worst* suit.

Consider Example B:



You are defending a 3NT contract. Your partner, West, leads the two of diamonds and dummy comes down with the North hand in the diagram shown. Dummy's nine of diamonds wins as you follow with your singleton three, and the ten of diamonds is played at trick two. What do you discard on this trick?

It looks as if partner has the ace of diamonds, so he will need to know which major to switch to when he wins with the ♦A. If you are tempted to throw a heart, partner will know to switch to hearts, but at what cost? You will now have just three heart winners in addition to partner's ace of diamonds. However, had you kept all four hearts, you could have won another trick. It would therefore

have been better to throw a discouraging spade, relying on partner to work out that you would like a heart switch. This is a classic example of the power of negative inference in bridge.

It is also much easier to see if we frame our earlier question in a different way: 'Is it better to throw a winner or a loser'?

Mistakes People Make: Telling Partner What He Already Knows

Consider Example B again. Having avoided the trap of throwing a winning heart, another mistake your partner (never you, of course!) might make is to throw a discouraging club. Why is this also a mistake? Another principle for partnership defence involves observation of the dummy's assets when making decisions. Looking at the dummy, it should not be attractive to switch to clubs (one of dummy's strong suits), so you should anticipate your partner switching to a major and aim to eliminate the losing option accordingly. Discouraging clubs would not help partner decide which major to attack and would simply tell partner something he could figure out for himself by looking at the dummy.

Mistakes People Make: Signalling to Declarer's Benefit

Do you feel that your opponents often guess better than you do? There is one other common trap to avoid when discarding: try to avoid throwing discouraging cards from weak holdings in declarer's or dummy's long suits. This is especially important when declarer may face a decision as to the location of a missing card in that suit or whether to play for the suit to divide evenly. It is