

Suit-Preference Discards: McKenney et al.



In the last issue, we reviewed the “standard” methods for sending a signal with a discard (mainly high to encourage and low to discourage).

Many duplicate players, however, tend not to use these standard methods. One of the most common of the alternative methods is that a discard gives a *suit-preference signal*. Some players do this by using a system called *Lavinthal* (after Hy Lavinthal, its inventor) or *McKenney* (its publicist). As “McKenney” is the name best known in the UK, this is what I shall use in this article.

The McKenney discard in suit contracts

First, let’s establish what constitutes a suit-preference discard. It is the play of a card directing partner’s attention to some other suit. That other suit is never the suit led or the suit discarded, and in suit contracts it will never be the trump suit – on which the discard is most likely to occur. So, in a suit contract, it will be one of two side suits.

The signal conveyed to partner is that the play of a conspicuously high card asks for the higher-ranking remaining suit, whilst the play of your lowest card asks for the lower-ranking remaining suit.

For example:

♠	10 8 6 3	♠	J									
♥	K 8 5 4	♥	A Q 9 2									
♦	8	♦	Q 10 6 5 2									
♣	K 7 6 5	♣	Q 9 3									
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Suppose that South plays in 4♠. Partner leads a low diamond and your queen loses to the ace. Declarer cashes the ace of trumps and continues with a second round.

It looks natural to discard a diamond. Using McKenney discards, how can you ask partner for hearts as you do so? We exclude two suits – diamonds, the suit you are discarding – and spades – the (trump) suit being led. A McKenney discard can thus ask either for hearts or clubs. Since hearts is higher ranking than clubs, a high diamond asks for a heart.

The clearest diamond to play to ask for a heart is the ten, your highest remaining diamond. Although declarer might have J-9-x and be able to take a ruffing finesse against partner’s king, a single discard from dummy is unlikely to be of much benefit. More likely, in any case, is that declarer holds the king of diamonds – otherwise why play on

trumps rather than ruffing diamonds in dummy?

Now imagine that you regard a diamond discard as too risky. Perhaps the bidding puts South with 5-5 in spades and diamonds. Can you still find a way of asking for a heart?

Since a McKenney discard never asks for the suit discarded, you cannot do it by discarding a heart. You will have to throw a club. If you are throwing a club, a McKenney discard will be for either hearts or diamonds. With hearts the higher-ranking suit, you want to throw a high club – the nine – to ask for a heart. The fact that, when you want to ask for a particular suit, you have a choice of two suits from which to discard is one of the strengths of the method.

♠	10 8 6 3	♠	J									
♥	K 8 5 4	♥	Q 9 3									
♦	8	♦	Q 10 6 5 2									
♣	K 7 6 5	♣	A Q 9 2									
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The contract (4♠ by South), the dummy and the early play are the same as before, but your holdings in hearts and clubs have changed slightly. What should you discard on the second round of spades?

This time you want to ask for a club. Clubs, being the lowest-ranking suit of all, will always be the lower-ranking suit, so you know straight away that you want to discard a low card. If you discard a diamond, it should be the two. If you discard a heart (because you think declarer has a side suit of diamonds), you discard the three.

Continued on page 25 ►

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POTTAGE ON DEFENCE continued from page 24

Now let's face a slightly different problem:

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

The contract, dummy and early play are again the same. This time, however, your holdings in hearts and clubs are such that you cannot so easily say which suit you want partner to lead. Perhaps a passive exit in trumps or diamonds is better than opening up either of those suits. How do you say: "I don't know what suit you should lead?"

You may have guessed the answer. If a high card asks for a high-ranking suit and a low card for a low-ranking suit, a *middle* card logically cannot ask for either. While the definitions (without discussion) of a high card (the highest card you can afford) and of a low card (your lowest card) are clear-cut, it is not quite so clear what constitutes a middle card. Some people seek to avoid any confusion by saying this:

The seven, eight, nine (and any higher cards) are high.
The two, three and four are low.
The five and six are middle cards.

What this loses in efficiency (you may be stuck if you have A-9-8-7 or K-4-3-2, for instance) is probably more than made up (in all but expert partnerships) by the avoidance of misunderstanding.

On this particular deal, since the five and six of diamonds are both (on the definition suggested) middle cards, you can discard either of these cards to convey a neutral message. You would not, however, be able to discard either a heart or a club without asking for a particular suit. The ten of clubs would ask for a heart, the three of hearts for a club and any of the other three cards (the nine of hearts and the two and four of clubs) would ask for a diamond.

The McKenney discard in no-trump contracts

You can play McKenney discards just the same at no-trump contracts. Remember, your discard cannot ask either for the suit discarded or the suit being played, so there are only two suits it might ask for. For example:

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

On this hand, you lead the jack of spades against South's contract of 3NT. Declarer wins in hand with the king, leads the queen of diamonds and, when this holds, continues with a low one. Partner, you hope, has held up the ace of diamonds and will want to know what to lead after getting in with it.

You want a heart back and have a choice of ways to ask for it. You could throw a high spade, either the ten or the eight – hearts are higher than clubs, which is why a high spade asks for a heart. Alternatively, you could throw your lowest club, the four – hearts are lower than spades, so a low club asks for a heart.

Now consider this deal:

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

The early play, contract (and bidding, which I had not given you: 2NT – 3NT, perhaps) are the same as before. Once again, you need to find a discard on the second round of diamonds. Since spades rank higher than either hearts or clubs, you will need to discard a high card: the queen of hearts or the nine of

clubs (discard the highest from equals as this is clearest). In practice, you will prefer the nine of clubs to the queen of hearts.

Similarly:

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

Given the same situation, this time you want to ask for a club as you hope to run the suit if partner has Q-x-x, K-x-x or better. Since clubs is the lowest-ranking suit, your two ways of asking for a club are both with low cards. You can discard either the two of hearts or the two of spades. Either will clearly ask for a club, and a heart must be safer than a spade because one discard will unguard the spade ten but not the heart queen.

The flaw in the system

One of the reasons why McKenney discards are popular is that people are familiar with suit-preference signals on leading (particularly when you expect partner to ruff) and in following suit. They suffer from a technical flaw, however, when you want to ask for the highest-ranking suit. You may have a choice of ways to do so but both involve discarding a high (spot) card.

This was the situation that we had on the very first example on this page:

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

South, you recall, was in 4♠ and your queen of diamonds had forced out the ace. When you came to discard on the second round of trumps you could ask for a heart either with the ten of diamonds or the nine of clubs. I mentioned

Continued on page 27 ►

a danger with the ten of diamonds discard (setting up a ruffing finesse if South started with A-J-9) and you can probably think of others. It might not make much difference here, but it would not be too difficult to imagine a layout on which you would prefer to part with the three of clubs rather than the nine.

Revolving discards

The solution is to play a system known as *Revolving* discards. The principles are similar to McKenney discards: any discard expresses a preference between the two suits other than the one led and the one discarded. The key difference is that one thinks of the suits in a circular ranking order, with clubs *both* below diamonds and above spades as in the diagram below.



So, a high card asks for the suit above in the circle (move clockwise). A low card asks for suit below in the circle (move anti-clockwise). Looking at the circle, you would expect the following: a low club discard asks for a spade; a high club discard asks for a diamond.

However, if, as in the example at the bottom of the previous page, the led suit is spades, you miss out the spades and clubs rank above hearts instead. Hence a high heart asks for a club, the suit “above” (when spades are out of the equation); a low heart asks for a diamond, the next suit down. A high diamond asks for a heart and a low diamond asks for a club. A high club asks for a diamond and a low club asks for a heart (because clubs are “above” spades

but you cannot ask for a spade when spades are being led).

Playing *Revolving* discards instead of McKenney discards does require a little more mental agility. The gain is that, when you can only afford low cards, you can ask for any suit.

The flaw in both systems

You may have noticed another possible weakness with suit-preference discards, be they McKenney or *Revolving*: you cannot readily ask for the suit you are discarding. Suppose that, defending a contract of 4♠, you have a diamond suit of A-Q-10-8-5-2. It is likely that a diamond discard (presumably on a trump) will be the safest option. Although you cannot directly ask for a diamond (with either McKenney or *Revolving* discards), you can try discarding the neutral five. Partner may know from the bidding and the dummy that you have a string of diamonds. By inference, therefore, you would be likely to have either a high-enough card to ask for a heart, or a low-enough card to ask for a club. Your failure to play such a card would thus suggest that you do not want either of those suits but you want a diamond. It is not a sure thing, however. You might equally discard the five of diamonds from J-9-8-5-4-2 because you have roughly equal holdings in hearts and clubs.

Other suit-preference discards

One way round this is to play a slightly more sophisticated system (*complicated* is the alternative adjective!) called *Odd/Even* discards. Odd cards ask for the suit discarded and even cards express suit preference. So, with A-Q-10-8-5-2 of diamonds and a spade led, your options

are as follows:

the five:	an <i>odd</i> card, asks for a diamond – your likely choice
the two:	a <i>low even</i> card, asks for a club
the eight and ten:	<i>high even</i> cards, ask for a heart

With the other diamond holding, J-9-8-5-4-2, your options are as follows:

the five	an <i>odd</i> card, asks for a diamond
the two and four	<i>low even</i> cards, ask for a club
the eight	a <i>high even</i> card, asks for a heart

Although you now have more options of what suits to ask for, there is an increased risk that you do not have the right card. Suppose you hold J-9-7-5-2. With only one even card, a low one, you can ask for a low-ranking suit but not for a high-ranking one. You also partially lose the ability to make a neutral discard. (I say “partially” because the usual agreement among more experienced partnerships is that a low odd card is more encouraging than a high odd card; a high-low with odd cards is thus neutral).

There is a further variation, which goes by the name of *Dodd* discards. An even card encourages the suit discarded and an odd card discourages the suit, at the same time suggesting a liking for the other suit of the same colour.

I prefer *Dodd* discards to *Odd/Even* discards because they gives you so many more cards that are neutral. For example, with spades as trumps, any odd club is neutral since it notionally asks for the other black suit, spades.

The truth is that no method is perfect, else everyone would play it. You and your partner need to decide what is most important to you – and ease of memory can certainly count as a factor in this. ■

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