

English Bridge

Signals and Discards

by David Bakhshi



Discarding

Part I



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HAVING considered the three basic forms of signals – the attitude signal, the count signal and the suit-preference signal, let's turn to the issue of discarding. This time I will focus on the methods employed by many expert partnerships, and in the next article I shall examine those preferred by many club players.

Is discarding different to signalling?

Though many people treat them differently, the choice of card that one discards constitutes a form of signal. The distinction being that discards are signals made when throwing away, and therefore occur at a point where more information is typically available to the partnership.

How can the principles of attitude, count and suit-preference signals be applied to discarding?

This is the area which sees the greatest diversity between the approaches employed by experts and club players. Most expert partnerships tend to treat signalling as an exchange of information and rely on their powers of logical reasoning and deduction to work out the best line of defence. Thus, when discarding, the primary signal of choice is the attitude signal. Example A illustrates a classic use of such a discard:

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

South opens 1NT, and North raises to 3NT. West leads the ♣5; dummy plays the ♣2; East plays the ♣8 and South wins with the ♣Q. South next leads the ♣4; West wins with the ♣A, and East throws . . . ?

Playing standard signals, East can either throw a low spade or a low diamond to *discourage* those suits, or he can throw a high heart to *encourage* a switch to hearts. Which is the best card to choose? While it may seem that throwing an encouraging heart makes it easy for partner to switch to your best suit, this is at a great cost. This dilemma is made clearer if you ask: 'Is it better to throw a winner or a loser?'

It is clearly desirable to retain your winning cards, so you should prefer to discourage alternative switches. To achieve this, use the fact that dummy is visible to both defenders. In the case of Example A, it is clear that East cannot want a switch to diamonds, so West will choose between the major suits. If East can eliminate spades as a good option, then West should deduce that East wants him to switch to hearts. The best discard is therefore the ♠3. Throwing a low spade eliminates spades, and in effect shows heart strength without having to throw a heart winner.

Is it ever useful to give count signals when discarding?

We have previously seen that the preferred order of priority involves count as a secondary signal. The count signal being most useful when declarer leads a suit, or when a player's attitude is already 'known'. This last principle can be extended to discarding. Consider the situation that arises in Example B:

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

South's 1NT opening is raised to 3NT, and West leads the ♠4.

Dummy plays low at trick one; East plays the ♠K and South wins with the ♠A. Declarer leads a diamond to dummy's ♦8 at trick two, then continues diamonds at trick three. What should East discard?

This is a situation in which one can anticipate a fairly common dilemma for West. If he holds the ♦A and ♠Q-10-x-x or ♠Q-10-x-x-x, knowing how many spades East holds (and as a result how many spades are held by declarer) will make a huge difference to him. If declarer has the ♠J-x remaining, it will be necessary to find a way to put East on lead so that East can lead a spade through declarer. However, if declarer has just the ♠J left, it could be crucial for West to cash his spades immediately. It is therefore most useful to give a *count* signal.

When giving count in a suit which has already been played, the most common approach is to give *remaining count*, i.e. to tell partner how many cards you have left in that suit. The standard approach is to throw high from an even number and low from an odd number. So, in Example B, East should throw the ♠2, to show an odd number remaining (or an original even number of spades). If West started with five spades, he will now know that declarer has only one spade left, and that the suit is ready to run if he holds the ♠Q.

Are suit-preference signals useful when discarding?

Many expert partnerships consider the appropriate use of attitude and count signals to be sufficient for effective communication when discarding, and save suit-preference signals for the situations discussed in my last article. However, it is possible to make use of suit-preference signals when discarding, and the ways in which this is typically done will be something I will consider next time. □



David Bakhshi

Discarding

Part II

IN my October article I began looking at discarding, discussing the application of attitude and count signals when throwing away. This time I shall examine alternative discarding methods which primarily involve the suit-preference signal.

How can suit-preference signals be used when discarding?

The basic idea of the suit-preference signal is that the choice of card played can be used to show an interest in a suit either higher or lower ranking than the one being played. This idea can be therefore be applied to discarding. Consider Example A from the October issue:

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

South opens 1NT, and North raises to 3NT.

West leads the five of clubs, dummy plays the two, East plays the eight and South wins with the queen of clubs. South next leads the four of clubs, West wins with the ace, and East throws . . . ?

I explained that playing standard signals East would do best to throw a discouraging spade, relying on West to figure out that he cannot want a diamond switch, and therefore has heart strength. Using suit-preference discards, East conveys the same message by discarding from a suit he does not wish his partner to play, but throws a low card to show interest in the lower

ranking of the remaining suits and a high card to show an interest in the higher ranking suit. Thus, in example A, East would either throw a low diamond or a high spade to show strength in hearts. This idea was put forward by Hy Lavinthal in the 1960s, and is often known as *McKenney* after the writer who promoted its usage.

Are there any problems with this approach?

There are a couple of negative issues. One is common to all forms of signalling in that recognising a card as high or low may not be easy since it is the relative value of the card that is important. So, in Example A, if East's diamonds were 9-8-7, then throwing the seven of diamonds may not clearly be seen as an attempt to throw a low diamond. Likewise, if his spades were 4-3-2, then throwing the four of spades may not clearly be seen as a 'high' spade.

The second problem is that when seeking to request a switch to a higher ranking suit, it is always necessary to throw a high card, and this may not always be possible (or desirable).

Can these problems be overcome?

An alternative approach is to use a system of discarding called *Revolving Discards*. Though based on similar principles of suit preference, these work in a slightly different way. The main idea necessary to understand this system is that the suits are considered to be part of a cycle, with clubs lying above spades, spades above hearts, hearts above diamonds and diamonds above clubs. When making a discard, a high card shows interest in the suit above, and a low card expresses interest in the suit below. Thus, in Example A, East would throw either a high diamond or a low spade to show strength in hearts.

The advantages of this approach are that a player making a discard can show strength in any suit, and also has a choice whether to use a high card to ask for the suit above or a low card to ask for the suit below, thereby avoiding the issue that occurs when holding inappropriate cards for a regular suit-preference signal.

However, the downsides are that it is not possible to signal for a suit by throwing a card in that suit, and it is also very hard to make a neutral discard, since in theory, all cards convey an interest in another suit.

Are there any other variations on the theme of suit-preference signals when discarding?

Rather than relying on a player distinguishing strength according to the value of the card thrown, the final category of discards take into account whether the value of the card thrown is odd or even. The most common of these are often referred to as *Italian Discards*.

The basic idea is that an odd card is encouraging in the suit thrown, whilst an even card carries a suit-preference meaning. For example, if spades have been led, then throwing the five of diamonds would encourage a switch to diamonds, whilst throwing the four of diamonds (a low even card) would show an interest in clubs, and throwing the eight of diamonds (a high even card) would show an interest in hearts.

So, in Example A, East could not signal for hearts by throwing a spade (he only has odd cards in spades). Holding only even cards in diamonds, however, he could show an interest in hearts (the lower of the remaining suits) by throwing the four of diamonds.

This raises the main problem with this method, which is that a player seeking to make a discard may not always have a card of the appropriate value with which to make a signal. In example A, if East's diamonds had also been odd cards, he ↻

HESITATING

Is there anything wrong in hesitating during the auction?

Generally no, unless you do it deliberately to put the opposition off. Sometimes you need to hesitate, for example if your opponent has made a Stop bid. Sometimes you will hesitate because you have a difficult problem. In such circumstances you can communicate information to partner that he should not have and must not use.

Should I try to avoid hesitating?

If you can then yes, unless it is mandatory (e.g. after a Stop bid by your right-hand opponent, see above) but this is easier said than done especially, for example, with high-level decisions.

I hesitated during the auction and my opponent called the director and said I should be fined for this.

I rather hope the director told him off. First of all it is not an offence to hesitate and secondly it is not the job of the opponent to decide who should be fined.

If I hesitate, what constraints does this put on partner?

If you hesitate and this conveys infor-

mation to partner, then he must not act on it. Suppose you double slowly in a competitive auction after some thought. Partner will be in possession of the information that you do not have three or four trump tricks but he has come by this information only as a result of the tempo of the auction. He may not use this information to assist his final decision.

So what can partner do?

After you have hesitated, partner may not choose, from logical alternatives, one that is suggested by the pause. Generally this means that partner may choose a clearcut action. A director will decide using Law 16B 1 (b). If a significant proportion of a player's peers would have considered the action complained of (say, about 80%) and some of those would have actually chosen it, then the director is likely to allow the action.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a hesitation does *not* preclude you from doing something that is obvious.

In most circumstances directors will consult other players and directors to help them decide.

⇒ would have no way of signalling for hearts. This can be particularly problematic in creating ethical dilemmas. With only odd cards in the remaining suits, it is likely that East would take longer to select a discard. This causes a potential problem for West, who must not allow his decision process to be affected by the time taken for East to choose a card, and must instead base his decision on the value of the card thrown (i.e. he should aim to interpret the card thrown irrespective of the time taken to make that choice).

The final variation on this theme involves a system of discards called *Dodds*. In this method, a discard of an even card is encouraging in that suit, whilst an odd card is both discouraging in that suit, and encouraging in the other suit of the same colour. Though this method is popular amongst club players, I have never seen it

used by an expert partnership. Apart from the fact that it is confusing to describe (and I imagine even more confusing to play), it has the obvious disadvantage that it is very restrictive in nature. In essence, to encourage a switch to a red suit, for example, it is necessary to throw an odd card in the other red suit. As with Odd/Even Discards, this approach is very difficult to handle without placing ethical pressure on partner when faced with impossible choices which result in plays at an irregular tempo.

In summary then, there are various approaches which make use of suit-preference principles when discarding. However, each has its own inherent problems, in addition to the fact that all are by nature more complex than the more natural Attitude approach favoured by most top players. □

CLUB PLAYER'S BIDDING QUIZ

ON each of the following problems, you are West. What should you bid with each hand on the given auction?

Julian Pottage gives his answers on page 44.

Hand 1	W	N	E	S
♠ 7 6 5			1♦	Pass
♥ A 10 3	?			
♦ K Q 8				
♣ J 8 3 2				

Hand 2	W	N	E	S
♠ K J 10				1♥
♥ K 6 3	?			
♦ K 7 5 3				
♣ A 5 4				

Hand 3	W	N	E	S
♠ Q 5 4				1NT Pass
♥ A 9 4 3	2♣*	Pass	2♦	Pass
♦ A 10 8 7 6	?			
♣ A				

* Stayman

Hand 4	W	N	E	S
♠ K Q J 10 8	1♠	Pass	2♣	Pass
♥ A K 7 2	?			
♦ K 2				
♣ 7 4				

Hand 5	W	N	E	S
♠ Q 6 4			1♠	2♦
♥ A J 8	?			
♦ 10 4 2				
♣ 7 6 5 4				

Hand 6	W	N	E	S
♠ J 10 9 8			1♠	Dble
♥ A	?			
♦ 10 9 7 5 4				
♣ Q 10 5				