



Suit Preference Signals

A nifty gadget to add to your arsenal for defense is signaling for suit preference. There are a couple of places where this commonly comes into play, and having this agreement with your partner **could make or break THEIR contract**.

- Against a suit contract, when partner has led a card and is going to win the trick, if attitude on the suit is known -- (for example, partner leads Ace from Ace-King, and the dummy has the Queen) -- take the opportunity to show partner suit preference. Playing a low card suggests a preference for the lower of the side suits, and playing a high card -- (as high as you can afford) -- shows preference for the higher.
- The above is also called for when partner's opening lead of an Ace finds the dummy with either a singleton or a void in that suit. Play to partner's trick, and play a low card to ask for the lower of the other two suits, and play a high card to ask for the higher of the other two suits. For both of these instances, if you have no preference, or don't have the right card to signal, try to choose something middle-ish and ambiguous. Maybe partner will work it out!
- The same premise is used when you are on lead, and you know that partner is about to ruff your trick. The card that you send to partner to trump is itself a signal! It says "partner, when you trump this, I want you to lead THIS SUIT back." And "this suit" is designated in your trumped card - a low one says lead back the lower of the other two suits, and a high one asks for the return of the higher two suits. The aim of this system is to get you back on lead so that you can return another one of that suit, so partner can get another ruff before declarer can get in and draw trumps!
- Odd/even: The first time you cannot follow suit, you have to discard in another suit. If you discard an odd card, it tells partner that you like that suit. Discarding an even card says you don't like the suit.
- Lavinthal: This agreement says that with your first discard, the suit you use to signal is one where you have no interest. A low card asks for the lower-ranking of the other two suits, and a high card asks for the higher-ranking of the other two. This system works well against a NT contract. (This is called McKenney in the UK.)

But, of course...

All of these scenarios depend on three important things:

- (1) you actually having a preference for the shift, and
- (2) you actually having the correct card for the signal, and
- (3) your partner is watching what you play to the trick!

No system is perfect. But often an imperfect system is better than no system at all!

Suit Preference Signal -- THINK!

Board 3
South Deals
E-W Vul

<p>♠ 5 3 ♥ Q J 10 9 ♦ A 7 6 2 ♣ A 9 5</p>	<p>♠ A J 4 ♥ 7 4 ♦ K J 9 8 5 ♣ K 8 6</p>	<p>♠ 9 8 2 ♥ K 8 6 5 3 2 ♦ 4 ♣ J 7 3</p>	
<p>♠ K Q 10 7 6 ♥ A ♦ Q 10 3 ♣ Q 10 4 2</p>			
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 ♠
Pass	2 ♦	Pass	3 ♦
Pass	4 ♠	All pass	

Auction: Some Wests might make a Takeout Double here, but when EW is vulnerable and NS is not, East planning a ♥ sacrifice is a bad idea. Doubled, down just 2 is going to give NS more than their contract is worth - for a bottom board.

Opening Lead: Although the Q♥ (top of a sequence of honors) is a desirable lead, West must THINK before leading it. North bid 2♦, and then South supported the ♦. Holding 4 pieces in that suit, it sure sounds to West like East could have no more than 1♦. Using this knowledge, West is going to lead the A♦ and get a look at the dummy.

Planning the Play: Declarer counts losers in a suit contract, and finds the two minor suit Aces missing. This should make one overtrick, but it's not enough for slam. Nice stop, partner!

Defenders: West is pleased with his lead decision. Partner is either void, or holds a singleton ♦. So a ♦ ruff is next. WHICH ♦ West leads now tells partner which outside suit to return. Since West wants to win with the A♣ on the next trick, and ♣s is the LOWER of the other two suits, West sends a LOW ♣ (the 5♣) to East. East trumps it, reads the signal, and next plays the 3♣ back to partner's A♣. Another ♣ back for East to ruff, and the contract has just failed.

Takeaway:

Reflexive leads and plays are not always the best ones. Using everything you've gained from the auction so far, you might find a better alternative. Always THINK before you play!

Board 5

North Deals
None Vul

	♠ A K 6		
	♥ A K Q 5 4		
	♦ Q 8		
	♣ Q 7 5		
♠ 10 7 5 2		♠ J 9 4 3	
♥ 2		♥ J 8 3	
♦ A 10 6		♦ J 7 5 3 2	
♣ A 10 8 4 3		♣ 9	
	♠ Q 8		
	♥ 10 9 7 6		
	♦ K 9 4		
	♣ K J 6 2		
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	2 N	Pass	3 ♣
Pass	3 ♥	Pass	4 ♥
All pass			

Auction: North has a balanced NT shape, 5-3-3-2, and opens 2 NT to show 20-21 HCP. All systems are on over an opening of 2 NT. Responder uses Stayman, 3 ♣ at this level, hoping to find a heart fit. Once that's accomplished, there is more than enough combined to bid game.

Opening Lead: 9 ♣

Planning the Play: Declarer counts losers while planning in a suit contract, and finds the two minor suit Aces missing. This hand should make one overtrick, but it's not enough for slam.

Defenders: The defenders must help each other to defeat the contract. West wins the A ♣, and counts 9 ♣s between West and dummy, and North has at least 2 for the balanced opening. Hoping that 9 ♣ lead is a singleton, West will give partner a ♣ ruff next. Removing the trump suit (♠) and the suit being trumped (♣s) from the picture, that leaves the red suits. West wants the LOWER-RANKING of those red suits back, (a ♦), so West must send partner the 3 ♣ to ruff. East trumps, plays back a small ♦, West wins the A ♦ and plays another ♣.

Suddenly the hand with the overtrick has turned into a hand with an undertrick. This will be a good score for the EW pair if others don't use suit preference signals!

Takeaway:

When the Stayman convention is used on the 1-level, we all know that you need 8+ points to do it. The reason for this, incidentally, is that if you don't find a major suit fit with your partner, you're going to end up bidding some amount of NT. And if the Stayman bidder doesn't have 8 points, and opener has a bare 15, 2 NT isn't going to make. But at the 2-level, you only need enough points opposite partner's 20-21 to make 3 NT (which is 5). Take it to the bank!

Board 8
 West Deals
 None Vul

Suit Preference Signals

♠ 6 4 3			
♥ 7			
♦ 9 6 5 3 2			
♣ 6 5 3 2			
♠ A Q 10 9 2	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> N W E S </div>	♠ K 8 7 5	
♥ 10 5 3 2		♥ K Q J	
♦ 10 7		♦ K Q J	
♣ A K		♣ 10 8 7	
		♠ J	
		♥ A 9 8 6 4	
		♦ A 8 4	
		♣ Q J 9 4	

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1 ♠	Pass	2 ♣	Pass
2 ♥	Pass	4 ♠	All pass

Auction: In an auction, the stronger you are the slower you should go. Bidding 4 ♠ directly over 1 ♠ shows the "Weak Freak,: 5 trumps, very few HCP, and an outside singleton. Take your time, allowing you to find out more about partner's hand. There might be just the right circumstances to try a slam. Responder is in charge anyway, just bid 2 ♣ to keep the bidding alive and wait to hear opener's rebid. Remember that every time responder changes suits, it's absolutely 100% forcing! (And if you know the Jacoby 2 NT convention, you can use it to show at least an opening hand and 4 trumps, and the followup steps of the convention will clearly define opener's hand for you, so you will know how high to go -- or when to stop!)

Opening Lead: 7 ♥ (singleton, hoping for a ruff)

Planning the Play: Declarer counts losers, and sees only the 2 missing red Aces. This contract ought to be a breeze.

Defenders: NOT SO FAST, DECLARER! South will win this first trick with the A ♦, and then give partner another ♥ to ruff. But WHICH ♥ to send back? Using "Suit Preference Signaling," South can tell partner which suit to return, and she doesn't have to guess. It works like this:

- Always remove trump from the equation (♠s).
- Also remove the suit that partner is ruffing (♥s). Your other two suits are ♦s and ♣s.
- When you want the HIGHER of these side suits returned, send partner a HIGH ♥ to ruff.
- When you want the LOWER of the other two suits back, send partner a LOW ♥ to ruff.

You have a shot at defeating them if you can get back in immediately. So return the "high" 9 ♥, asking for the higher of the remaining suits. Partner will ruff the 9 ♥ and send back a ♦. You win the A ♦ and shoot back another ♥, and partner trumps, which is the setting trick. You've worked the defense together to set a perfectly good 4 ♠ contract! Well done!