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## **BBW Lesson #6: Leading & Signaling on Defense Against Non-Slam Contracts<sup>1</sup>**

**Bruce Thompson**

"Most players agree that **defensive play is the most difficult phase of bridge** [emphasis added]. Bidding can become pretty well standardized between any pair of players, and even two players who have no common bidding system can generally coordinate their ideas of bidding to such an extent that they will have some notion of what each is doing. The play of the Declarer is comparatively simple, for he always manipulates half the cards in the deck..., all of which he can see. The player on the Defending Side has no such advantage. He can see his own thirteen cards, and he can see the Dummy's thirteen cards. But the only cards he can play as he chooses are his own thirteen, and he cannot see his Partner's hand at all." (Louis H. Watson, 1958, Watson's Classic Book on the Play of the Hand at Bridge, p. 159)

Whether you are bidding, or you are defending against Opponents' contract, duplicate bridge is primarily about one, single thing: **communication with Partner!** And a duplicate bridge principle that is cardinal is: "**Never lie to your Partner!**" If you and your Partner can communicate successfully during (1) bidding and (2) play on defense, you are GOING TO WIN, regardless of what conventions you play, whether they are plain vanilla, or razzle dazzle!

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<sup>1</sup>Against **Slam** suit contracts, if you hold Aces, it is usually best to take your winners, if you can, as soon as possible, by leading them. However, if you or Partner bid the suit(s) with your Ace(s), and Opponents nevertheless bid a slam suit contract, be cautious.

## **During the Auction...**

A critical ingredient of playing successful bridge is for you and your Partner to "**Listen to the Auction!!!**" One aspect of this is estimating how many HCPs each Player has. For example, if Partner is Dealer, and Passes, and your RHO bids a suit, Partner holds less than 13 HCPs, and RHO holds 13+ HCPs, or maybe less if RHO is using the "Rule of 20". You hold 10 HCPs, and Pass. Your LHO supports your RHO's bid suit at the 2 level. Partner Passes again.

Ask yourself, "Where are the HCPs? And where are honors cards in different suits?" Your estimates should initially guide your play on defense. And, during play, you must constantly revise your view of the play landscape, as you and Partner continue to communicate!

## **2 Phases of Communicating with Partner on Defense**

There are 2 phases to communicating with Partner while you are on defense: (1) making the lead, and (2) "signaling" information to Partner during subsequent play. And, as might be expected, defense is played somewhat differently against **NT** versus suit contracts. It can be argued that defense against a **NT** contract is about *length*, while defense against a suit contract is about *strength*.

### **Selecting Your Lead**

#### **Leading Against Opponents' NT Contract**

Partner Bid a Suit During the Auction. If your Partner bid a suit during the auction, and you hold 2 or 3 cards in that suit, then you know that your Partnership holds 7 to 8+ cards in that suit. You also know that Opponents, assuming they made the first **NT** bid after your Partner bid a suit, hold a stopper or a "protected" stopper in Partner's suit. But you want to attack a long suit holding against a **NT** contract, even if Opponents can at least initially stop you "running" that suit.

You especially want to attack a long suit if you hold 3 cards in that suit, along with a "side entry" winner in a different suit, because this means that when you get in the lead a second time, you can again lead the suit back to your Partner. If you hold an

honor along with 2+ cards in Partner's suit, lead your honor in that bid suit to help Partner by the "promoting" the remaining cards in the suit in Partner's hand. For example, if you hold Q,x,x or J,x,x in Partner's bid suit, lead your honor. If you hold 3 small cards in Partner's bid suit, play a small card in the suit to tell Partner, "I can't help much with this suit. Good luck!"

Partner Passed at Each Turn. If Partner did not bid a suit during the auction (or if you hold only 1 card in Partner's bid suit), you generally want to "show" Partner your long suit, meaning 4+ cards.

If you hold "**touching**" honors in your long suit, and especially if you hold (1) 3 "touching" honors (e.g., Q,J,T,x), lead the top of your "touching" honors:

S K Q J 6 4  
 D Q J T 4 2  
 C J T 9 5 2

Leading an honor promises Partner that you hold at least the next lower honor. Do the same thing if you hold (2) 2 "touching" honors with a third card not more than one step lower:

H K Q T 3 2  
 D Q J 9 7 5  
 C J T 8 6 5

If you do not hold "touching" honors in your long suit, and Partner Passed throughout the auction, lead the **4<sup>th</sup> from the top** of your longest suit, especially if Opponents did not bid your long suit during the auction. This allows Partner (and the Declarer) to use what arguably is the most important "Rule" in bridge: the "Rule of 11."

The "**Rule of 11**" says that if Partner subtracts the "spot" value of your lead card from 11, that tells Partner how many cards in (1) Dummy, (2) Partner's hand, and (3) Declarer's hand are higher than the led card. For example, let's say you hold J,7,5,4,3 in Diamonds. When you lead the 4, Partner knows (1) Diamonds is your long suit, and (2) there are exactly  $11 - 4 = 7$  cards in (1) Dummy, (2) Partner's hand, and (3) Declarer's hand, higher than the 4. Furthermore, once the Dummy comes down, Partner can then subtract from 7 the number of Diamonds in Dummy that are higher than the 4, and Partner knows how many Diamonds Partner holds higher than the 4. Therefore, **Partner now also**

**knows how many Diamonds that Declarer holds that are higher than the 4!**

For example, if the Dummy holds the 8,6,2 Diamonds, of which **2** Diamonds are higher than the 4, and Partner holds the K,Q,9, of which **3** cards are higher than the led 4, then Partner knows that the Declarer holds exactly  $7-5 = 2$  cards that are higher than the 4! Thus, Partner knows that Declarer must hold the Ace of Diamonds, and that if Partner plays the King of Diamonds, Partner may take the trick, or may knock out Declarer's Ace and later Partner can take the Diamond winner, and lead back to the Player who initially led Diamonds.

### **Leading Against Opponents' Suit Contract**

As a *General Principle*, lead "**Bottom of Something, Top of Nothing**". So, holding **S**: 9,7,4,2; **H**: T,8,4; **D**: J,5,3; **C**: 8,6,3, assuming Partner has not bid, lead the Top of any of your miserable cards, as long as Opponents did not bid the suit. Holding **S**: 9,7,4,2; **H**: K,8,4; **D**: J,5,3; **C**: 8,6,3, assuming Partner has not bid, and Opponents did not bid Hearts, lead the 4 of Hearts, so that Partner will know you have at least some honor in that Hearts.

Partner Bid a Suit During the Auction. If Partner bid a suit during the auction, thus showing 5+ cards in the suit, and you hold 3+ cards, your Partnership holds 8+ cards in the non-trump suit, and the Declarer will now or soon be able to trump your Partnership's best suit. Thus, especially when both you and Partner hold a long, strong suit other than trump in a suit contract, it is usually best to "take your winners" early, before Declarer can start trumping!

When you hold **4+ cards** in Partner's bid non-trump suit, lead the **4<sup>th</sup> card from the top** of the suit, except (1) when you hold A,x,x,x, lead the Ace, and (2) when you hold Q,J,x,x, lead the Queen. When you hold **3 cards** in Partner's bid non-trump suit, if you hold (1) A,x,x, lead the Ace, and if you hold (2) J,x,x, lead the Jack. Otherwise, **lead low**. When you hold **2 cards** in Partner's bid non-trump suit, lead your top card.

Partner Passed at Each Turn. When Partner has Passed at each turn, there is a hierarchy of desirable leads that you can make. **First**, if you hold A,K,x or A,K,x,x in a non-trump suit, lead

your Ace to promise Partner that you hold the King, and will lead it next.<sup>2</sup>

**Second**, when you hold a non-trump singleton, *lead your singleton*. There is a Most Solemn Commandment in duplicate bridge: "In defense against a suit contract, **always return your Partner's lead!!!**" Once Partner secures the lead, Partner will lead back to you to trump!

When you hold a doubleton, *lead the top card in your non-trump doubleton* (e.g., Q,x). Partner will suspect you hold a doubleton, and, again, is likely later to lead this suit back to you to trump. And, additionally, the honor you lead may take the Trick, or "promote" Partners remaining honors into winners.

**Third**, if you hold "touching" honors, *lead the top honor*, even if (unlike defense against a **NT** contract) you hold only **2** (e.g., Q,J,x,x) rather than 3 "touching" honors. The difference in how you lead "touching" honors in defending against suit versus **NT** contracts involves the difference in the importance of time when playing suit contracts. In **NT** contracts, "winners" will often remain "winners" throughout the course of play, even if the "winners" are played late in play. In suit contracts, on the other hand, both Partnerships are in a "race" to take "winners" early in play, because in suit contracts your high card "winners" usually must be played in the first or second round of play, while these cards remain "winners," before the trumping begins.

If you hold "touching" honors that are "broken", *lead the top card from the interior "broken" sequence*. For example, if you hold K,J,T, lead the Jack.

**Fourth**, *lead a suit not bid by the Opponents*. If the Opponents have bid all 4 suits, lead a suit that *Dummy has bid*, in the hope that a relatively high card will be played from Dummy, in the further hope that Partner can both win the Trick and capture Dummy's high card. This hope is realistic when Declarer did not

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<sup>2</sup> If you hold an Ace singleton, against a non-Slam suit contract, an argument can be made for leading the Ace, in the expectation that when you do not subsequently lead the King, Partner will realize you are now void in the led suit, and can now trump the suit. However, an argument can also be made that Aces should usually only be played when they can "kill" an Opponent's King.

support Dummy's bid suit, and Partner therefore may have high holdings.

**Avoid:**

1. Leading an unsupported Ace (i.e., you do not hold the King).
2. Leading a suit Declarer has bid, because Declarer will play 4<sup>th</sup> on the Trick, and can likely win the Trick, even with a relatively low card.
3. Leading away from an "unsupported" Ace, where you do not hold the King, for two reasons. **First**, Aces are for "killing Opponents' King," and if you play your Ace early in play<sup>3</sup> without killing Opponents' King, you are "promoting" the Opponents' high honors. **Second**, reserving Aces can provide an important "entry" back to your hand later after you have "promoted" another suit.

**During Play on Defense**

**General Principles and Exceptions Thereto**

In general, on defense play "**second hand low, and third hand high**". Playing "third hand high" avoids giving the Declarer a cheap trick, and may "promote" a winner for Partner, especially if you are playing 3<sup>rd</sup> when Partner has led, and Partner has early led low, thus claiming an honor. If you are sitting 3<sup>rd</sup>, and you hold "touching" honors, play the *lowest* of your "touching" honors to try to signal to Partner that you hold another honor. If you are playing 3<sup>rd</sup>, if a low card is played from Dummy when Dummy holds an honor (e.g., Q,x,x in Dummy), and you hold "bracketing" honors (e.g., K,J,x), play your Jack.

If you are sitting 2<sup>nd</sup>, either after Declarer leads an honor, or Declarer leads an honor from Dummy, "**Cover an honor with an honor**", to force Declarer to spend 2 honors to capture your honor. And when you are playing 2<sup>nd</sup>, an *exception* to playing "second hand low" occurs when you hold "touching" honors (e.g., Q,J,T,x). Here play the *lowest* of your "touching" honors, to force Declarer to either (1) give you the Trick, or (2) win with

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<sup>3</sup> Playing your Ace once you are "on lead" later in play, after **2 or 3 Rounds of Tricks** in the suit in which you hold an "unsupported" Ace, on the other hand, may well be prudent! Playing your Ace at this time may help you avoid your never playing your Ace, and "taking your Ace to bed." Of course, if you are "on lead" against a slam suit contract, leading your Ace as your opening lead is often a good idea.

a high card, thus "promoting" your remaining honors. A second exception to playing "low when playing 2<sup>nd</sup>" is when you are "covering an honor with an honor," or you are playing an Ace to win against Opponents' King or Queen. Finally, a third exception to "playing low when playing 2<sup>nd</sup>" is when you decide to play your Ace because 2 or 3 Tricks in the suit have been played in a suit contract, and you fear your Ace will be trumped if you fail to take your Ace winner.

### **Giving Partner Information by "Signaling"**

There are 3 kinds of "signals" that you can communicate to Partner while playing on defense: (1) "**Attitude**": "Partner, I do, or I do not, like this suit!"; (2) "**Suit Preference**": "Partner, when playing against a suit contract, please lead the non-trump suit I designate when you next get the lead."; and (3) "**Card Count**": "Partner, I now hold an odd, or an even, number of cards in this suit."

**Attitude**. Whenever Partner leads a new non-trump suit, either on the 1<sup>st</sup> Trick or an early Trick, and especially when you did not bid during the auction, it is important to tell Partner either "I like this suit," or "I do not like this suit". Of the 3 kinds of "signals", "Attitude" is the *most straightforward* to convey.

For example, if Partner is "on opening lead," and leads the Queen of Diamonds, you can tell Partner whether you do, or do not, "like" Diamonds. Or, later in play, when you obtain the lead, and you lead a new suit by playing the Ace of Clubs, Partner can tell you Partner's "attitude" toward Clubs. "Attitude" is always shown **only when either you or Partner lead on defense**.

There are 2 possible approaches to convey your suit attitude. **First**, you can play "High" = "Yes"/"Low" = "No". To show "Attitude" in this way, you playing a high "spot" card higher than the 6 (e.g., the 8, or the 9) says, "I like this suit, and hold honors in the suit, or I soon will be able to trump this suit." Playing a low card (e.g., the 2 or the 4) says, "I do not like this suit, and don't expect to take any winners in this suit." This information guides Partner toward leads that result in additional Tricks that otherwise might never be captured.

**Second**, you can play "Inverted Attitude", or "Upside Down Attitude" (U.D.A.). In "Inverted Attitude," "Low" = "Yes", and "High" = "No." There are 2 advantages to playing "Inverted Attitude" against the more conventional "Attitude" system: (1) you are not using high "spot" cards to say you like the suit, and these high "spot" cards could potentially later become winners; and (2) Opponents will be less familiar with this "Attitude" system.

It is particularly critical for Partners to communicate "Attitude" when the Partner on lead against a suit contract holds A,K, and some (but not many) smaller cards in a given non-trump suit. Whenever you make an opening lead of an honor, you are solemnly promising Partner that you hold the "touching" honor. For example, if you are on lead, and you lead the King, you are telling Partner, "I also hold the Queen, and if I win the Trick, I will then lead my Queen. Otherwise, if Opponents overtake my King with the Ace, later lead this suit back to me, so that I can take my Queen winner."

When you are on lead, and **hold A,K and a few smaller cards in the same suit**, there are massive advantages to leading your Ace: (1) you and Partner will get to see the Dummy before your second lead, and (2) your lead **requires** Partner to communicate through "Attitude" the answer to the question, "Can you take the **third** Trick, either with the Queen, or by trumping?"

I play "inverted attitude." When I lead the Ace, Dummy comes down, and Partner can see the Dummy before Partner gives the **required** answer to my question about Partner taking the **third** Trick. If Partner plays low, then I know that Partner says, "I can indeed take the Third Trick in this suit," or Partner has no high cards. But if Dummy holds only a few cards in the suit, and I hold only a few cards, Partner's play of a low card give me more useful information, because the 3<sup>rd</sup> Trick in the suit is then less likely to be trumped by Declarer or Dummy.

And once I play my King, if Partner plays a higher second card, called the "**echo**," *regardless* of the face values of the 2 cards, I now DEFINITELY know that Partner's first card was "low," and Partner can take the third Trick. This line of play is particularly sweet if Partner can take a third Trick winner by trumping, because this converts Opponents' Queen winner into a

loser, and allows our Partnership to use a trump card early in play, on the third Trick, prior to trump being drawn.

**"Suit Preference"**. Either later in play or when Dummy first comes down, you may see 2 situations in which "signaling" "Attitude" to Partner is not appropriate: (1) Dummy holds trump cards plus only 1 or 2 remaining cards in the led suit, and you know that Dummy cards can be used to win the Trick by trumping, or (2) Dummy or you hold great length in the suit, such that you expect Declarer to soon be able to trump in Declarer's hand. In these cases, you should communicate to Partner your "Suit Preference." Of course, "suit preference" signals are especially useful when you have not declared a suit preference by bidding a suit during the auction!

Consider the following Board, where you are sitting EAST, SOUTH is Declarer, and the contract is 4**H**:

	NORTH (10)	
	<b>S:</b> 8	
	<b>H:</b> A T 6 3	
	<b>D:</b> K 8 4 2	
	<b>C:</b> K 8 4 2	
WEST (9)		EAST (6)
<b>S:</b> A K 9 4		<b>S:</b> T 6 5 3 2
<b>H:</b> 8 2		<b>H:</b> 9 4
<b>D:</b> J 9 5 3		<b>D:</b> T 7 6
<b>C:</b> J T 3		<b>C:</b> A Q 5
	SOUTH (15)	
	<b>S:</b> Q J 7	
	<b>H:</b> K Q J 7 5	
	<b>D:</b> A Q	
	<b>C:</b> 9 7 6	

WEST leads the Ace of Spades. The Dummy comes down, and EAST and WEST both can see that EAST cannot possibly take the 3<sup>rd</sup> Spade Trick (or even the second Spade Trick).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, EAST will try to "signal" "suit preference" to WEST.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that even if the Dummy held 3 low Spade cards, EAST and WEST might both suspect that a third Spade Trick will not be successful, given that EAST holds 5 Spades, and EAST knows that WEST probably holds 3 or 4 Spades. So, again, EAST might try to "signal" "Suit Preference" to WEST, knowing, however, that this "signal" is harder for WEST to hear, and might result in a miscommunication. But maybe WEST will correctly suss out the "signal" so it might be worth a try.

WEST knows that Hearts are trump, and that Spades should not be played next. There are 2 remaining suit options to lead: Diamonds or Clubs. Playing a *high* Spade on the led Ace of Spades says, "Please lead the *higher* of the 2 suits between the choices of Diamonds or Clubs." Playing a *low* Spade on the led Ace of Spades says, "Please lead the *lower* of the 2 suits between the choices of Diamonds or Clubs." Here EAST plays the 2 of Spades to tell WEST, "Please lead a low Club on your 2<sup>nd</sup> lead."

Some Partners also show "**suit preference via a ruff**". The very first time I ruff, I may be saying to Partner, "Lead this suit to me once you obtain the lead."

**"Card Count"**. "Card Count" "signals" allow me to signal to Partner whether I hold an even number of cards in a suit, or an odd number of cards. "Card Count" "signals" can be differentiated from "Attitude" signals, because "Attitude" "signals" **only** occur when Partner or I lead a new suit. "Card Count" "signals", on the other hand, **only** occur when Declarer leads either from Declarer's hand or the Dummy.

Playing "high-low" (e.g., 7, then the 2, or 8, and then the 5) on cards led in a suit by Declarer or Dummy says, "I have an **even** number of cards in this suit." Playing "low-high" (e.g., 2,9, or 4,7) on cards led in a suit by Declarer or Dummy says, "I have an **odd** number of cards in this suit."

"Card Count" "signals" are especially useful against **NT** contracts, and even more against high-level **NT** contracts. As an example, let's say that SOUTH opened by bidding 2**NT**, NORTH responded by bidding 4**C** as Gerber, and the contract is set at 6**NT** in the SOUTH.

You as WEST hold Q,9,2 in Clubs, and Q,T,4 in Diamonds. Partner EAST holds T,8,7,5,3 in Clubs, and 9,7,6,5 in Diamonds. Because Opponents hold "boat loads" of HCPs, especially in Declarer's hand, Declarer is going to win the 1<sup>st</sup> Trick, pretty much no matter what.

What you need is for Partner EAST to tell you EAST's "Card Counts" for the Minors, so that toward the end of play, if you have to "throw off" a Queen, you know which Queen to keep! When you make an opening lead of a Heart, SOUTH will take the Trick

somewhere. Later in play, SOUTH may take 2 Club winners. When your Partner, EAST, plays the 3 of Clubs, and then later the 7 of Clubs, Partner by playing "**low-high**" is saying, "I *originally* held an **odd** number of Clubs."

Let's say you can see **3** Clubs in your hand, and **3** Clubs in Dummy. So, Partner EAST initially held either 7, 5, 3, or 1 Clubs. Given that Opponents bid **NT**, Opponents must hold "square" or "flat" hands. Therefore, EAST most likely holds 5 or 3 Clubs, and most likely 5 Clubs. This tells EAST that the Declarer, SOUTH, likely holds only 2 Clubs. This means that "throwing off" the Queen of Clubs is more likely to be helpful, by reserving the Queen of Diamonds, because Declarer holding short Clubs must have more Diamonds that must be played.

"Signaling" "Card Count" is **very hard**. Most beginning players would probably do well to focus on other aspects of play on defense, and reserve mastery of "Card Count" "signaling" until having played for several years!

#### **Bonus Link**

You may also be interested in Jack Feagin's posting, "Introduction to the Simple Squeeze", as one of the Duplicate Bridge Association of Atlanta's lectures:

[https://www.whidco.com/DBAA/350\\_LectureSeries/DBAA\\_2009\\_Simple\\_Squeezes.pdf](https://www.whidco.com/DBAA/350_LectureSeries/DBAA_2009_Simple_Squeezes.pdf)

Just remember that how Partners signal is a matter of Partnership Agreement. Some Partners signal "Hi" = "No" and "Low" = "Yes" (Upside Down Attitude or U.D.A.), while others do the opposite.

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