

LSD

To those of us who have been around for awhile LSD stands for Lysergic Acid Diethylamide or that stuff that was, years ago, more commonly referred to as “acid”. It was probably the most potent mood-altering chemical of my youth. (Not that I would know from experience!)

Now LSD has a new meaning for me. It stands for Leading, Signaling and Discarding and is that part of the game of bridge that probably has the most potent mood-altering effect on my game these days.

My plan is to take some of your valuable time and explain the way the defenders should play their cards. Long ago someone told me that each and every card played carries some message. Thus it is important to understand the most logical meaning of each and every card and the order in which they are played. And perhaps it is even more important to understand the inferences from the cards that are not played as well as to be careful about assigning more than one meaning to a card that is played. To do all of these things we need to have a firm understanding of what is considered standard in light of partnership agreements to the contrary.

My goal is to improve your defense. However, providing you with a summary of standard methods and associated rules of LSD does NOT prevent you from thinking! Bridge is not nor was it ever intended to be a game of rote. While the basics that we learn are important, the game’s main attributes are more along the lines of logic, creativity, vision and judgment.

Part I - STANDARD OPENING LEADS in General

The opening lead against any contract is the first big advantage to the defensive players. Try not to blow it. Many times it determines the fate of the contract. Unless you have been paying attention to the auction and assimilating all its nuances, you are making a “blind lead”. On the other hand, if you have been listening to the bidding and understanding the significance of all calls made, you’ll more than likely have some idea of what suit to lead. It is a good habit to be anticipating what you might lead during the auction. Thinking ahead is a good habit to develop and it saves time as you are thinking while the opponents are thinking. It’s always been rather interesting to me to see a long pause followed by bid and then another long pause by the defender who is next to bid. What was that person thinking about while he/she was waiting for RHO to bid??

And remember, asking about the auction before you decide what to lead, is PERMITTED; if there was some part of the auction you didn’t understand, ask about all the alerted bids and anything else that might be confusing about the auction before you lead. (If you’re the partner of the opening leader, be sure to wait until he leads before you ask these questions!)

Your objective when defending is (1) to defeat the contract or hold it to as few overtricks as possible. To achieve this goal it is necessary to communicate with partner about the holdings in your hand by leading and signaling properly. The main difference between defending suit contracts and notrump contracts is that you are no longer trying to set up long suits in suit contracts because the declarer has the trump suit to counteract those measures. Therefore, against suit contracts you are more likely to be leading from shorter suits.

Basically, once you have decided upon the suit to be led, the card most likely to be led is whatever is standard from your holding in that suit. The following are some of the so-called standard leads:

(1) From the AK(xxx's) the standard lead against suit contracts is either the Ace or the King depending upon your partnership agreement. (And make sure you have a partnership agreement!!) While you might want to lead 4th best against notrump as you would be trying to set up a long suit for the defense, against suit contracts you should be more concerned with developing tricks quickly. Please note that the leading of Aces and Kings has different meanings versus suit contracts than against notrump contracts. The old-fashioned standard method is that an Ace lead against a notrump contract asks for partner to unblock any honors, or absent any honors, to give count while the lead of a King versus notrump generally asks for attitude.

Regardless of your choice of the Ace or the King holding AK, there are a couple of exceptions that should always apply. Lead the King from AK when:

- (a) You hold AK doubleton and your otherwise normal lead is the A from AK.
- (b) You are leading against a 5-level contract or higher.
- (c) You are leading partner’s bid suit.

(2) From the KQx, KQxx, KQxxx, etc., against suit contracts the standard lead is the King. Against notrump contracts when leading from length, 4th would usually be the correct lead (unless you also hold high interior spot cards like the 10 and/or the nine). Leads from the AK or KQ are the strongest leads that can be made against suit contracts. If partner doesn't lead a King in an

unbid suit (or Ace, if you play Ace from AK), generally it's because he doesn't have one of those holdings.

(3) If you choose to lead from a suit headed by the Ace (no King), the standard card to lead is the Ace. It is generally best not to underlead an Ace against a suit contract although upon occasion it may seem like the best way to attack. I do recommend that if you are thinking about leading an unsupported Ace, you rethink it several times as often unsupported Ace leads help the declarer more than the defenders.

(4) From three small in partner's bid suit (assuming that you have not supported), lead your smallest card. This will help to clarify the three small versus doubleton holdings. If you have supported partner, from three small lead the highest card.

(5) With length in the suit, lead the higher of two touching honor cards against suit contracts; it is no longer necessary to have a sequence of three cards from which to lead. For example lead the Queen from QJ754. On the other hand, against notrump contracts, it's usually better to lead 4th best from this holding (or 5th is that is your spot card leads choice).

(6) Lead 4th best from an honor if that is your partnership agreement and remember that the Rule of Eleven* applies. If you and your partner prefer 3/5 or 3/lowest leads, spot card leads will be 3rd from an even number of cards in the suit (Rule of Twelve applies) and lowest (often 5th best) from an odd number of cards in the suit.

[*The Rule of Eleven is used by a Defender (partner of the opening leader) and the Declarer to determine the number of high cards in the other hands. Subtract the value of the card led from eleven. The resulting answer tells you the number of cards higher than the card led that are in Dummy, your hand, and either Declarer's hand (if you are a Defender) or in the other Defender's hand (if you are the Declarer). This rule only works when the lead is the 4th best card in the suit led. However, when the opponents lead 3rd best, the Rule of Twelve can be applied in the same manner. And when the lead is 5th best, the Rule of Ten can be applied.]

I suggest that if you don't feel secure in your knowledge of standard leads, you may want to quickly review what leads are considered standard on the back of a convention card (those in **bold** are the standard ones).

LEADS (circle card led, if not in Bold)			
vs SUITS		vs NT	
xx	xxxx	xx	xxxx
xxx	xxxxx	xxx	xxxxx
AK x	T 9x	AK Jx	AQ Jx
KQ x	KJ 10x	AJ T9	AT 9x
QJ x	KT 9x	KQ Jx	KQ T9
JT 9	QT 9x	KJ T9	KT 9x
KQT 9		QJ Tx	QT 9x
		JT 9x	T 9xx

Part II – Opening Leads versus Suit Contracts

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of bridge is defense but it can also be fun! Many players become adequate bidders by simply learning the point count requirements for various bids; others find that playing the dummy becomes easier with practice. For some reason the declarer-play aspect of bridge gets far more attention than defense does. But, since it's likely that in good competitive games, you'll be defending approximately 50% of the time, it's worth your efforts to learn how to do it well. Knowing the fundamentals of LSD (Leading, Signaling and Discarding) is extremely important to being able to defend to the best of your abilities. But as I have mentioned before, knowing the rules is one thing; knowing how to apply them logically and with good judgment is essential to good bridge and requires THINKING. And whatever else you think about the game of bridge, it does require THINKING.

As we continue to discuss the L of LSD, the first and most important thing that the opening leader must do is to determine the selection of the suit to be led. Once again you must have listened to and remembered the bidding before making that choice. The following are some considerations:

- (1) Lead partner's suit if he has bid unless you have a solid sequence of your own and an entry.
Example: KQJxx with side Ace.
- (2) Lead from AKx, AK, KQ, KQx, QJ10 or similar strength holding in an unbid suit.
- (3) Lead from a sequence in preference to 4th best (or 3/5) if both suits are unbid.
- 4) With length in the trump suit, lead from length in a side suit, not from shortness. For example, against a 1♠ - 2♠ - 4♠ auction, holding ♠K964 ♥K8643 ♦Q2 ♣54, lead the ♥ 4 (or the ♥ 3 if you play 3/5). The idea is to force declarer to trump so that you will soon have as many or more trumps than he has.
- (5) If there are two unbid suits and you hold the Ace in one of them, lead the other suit. Ace-leads make it too easy for declarer.
- (6) Lead trumps (small from two or four small, middle from three small) when:
 - (a) The bidding indicates that declarer intends to ruff in dummy.
 - (b) Partner has passed your takeout double.
 - (c) Declarer has bid two suits, one of which you are strong in and the other becomes the trump suit.
 - (d) You and your partner have most of the high cards and the opponents are sacrificing.
- (7) Lead a short suit (singleton or doubleton) when you have a trump entry and a reasonable chance to get a ruff. For example, after an auction of 1♠ - 2♠ - 4♠, from ♠A32 ♥K1065 ♦Q986 ♣76, lead the seven of clubs. Since you're going to get in with the Ace of trumps, you may be able to get a club ruff.

(8) Since the opponents have stayed away from notrump, give consideration to leading the unbid suit even if you would be leading from a combination that you wouldn't generally lead from.

(9) Make a passive lead when you are faced with a collection of unpleasant choices from which to lead and the bidding has been uninformative. This will avoid giving the declarer a free gift.

(10) When you have a choice of leading from two unbid suits of approximately equal strength, leading from the longer suit is safer, but leading from the shorter suit, while more aggressive, is more likely to establish tricks for your side. For example: leading from Qxxxx is safer than leading from Qxx.

(11) Play a forcing game (leading good tricks to force declarer to ruff) when you are long in trumps as you may cause declarer to lose control.

There's also a list of leads to avoid:

- (1) Avoid leading suits the opponents have bid unless you have a sequence.
- (2) Don't lead Aces as they were meant to capture Kings and Queens, not two's and three's.
- (3) Avoid leading suits that partner could have overcalled at the one level, but did not.
- (4) Don't be hesitant to lead 4th best (or 3/5) from an honor such as the King. Whoever said, "don't lead away from a King" doesn't do very well at defending. It's also permissible to lead away from Queens and Jacks. It's very hard to develop tricks for the defensive side if you don't take some risks.
- (5) Don't lead a trump just because you're in doubt ... in spite of what you have heard. Don't lead a trump when you are very long in declarer's side suit as partner will need his trumps to overruff dummy. And usually it's not the best idea to lead a trump from a holding that is likely to cost a trick.

The following hand from a recent team game is an example of when it's right to lead trumps and when it's right to lead your suit in an attempt to shorten declarer's trumps:

	North	
	♠ QJ1095	
	♥	
	♦ Q974	
	♣ AQJ6	
West		East
♠ 87		♠ AK42
♥ KQJ73		♥ A10954
♦ J862		♦ 3
♣ 108		♣ 742
	South	
	♠ 63	
	♥ 862	
	♦ AK105	
	♣ K953	

At our table I was South and we were defending 4♥ doubled. I neglected to lead a trump (a heart) so we were minus 790. Our teammates at the other table defended 4♠ doubled by North and East neglected to lead a heart. Thus our teammates were also minus 790. Both defenders should have led the heart suit! In my case leading a heart (a trump) every time I was in would have lessened declarer's ruffing power by taking a trump from each hand on each lead. At the other table leading a heart against 4♠ doubled would have forced declarer to ruff soon giving East more trumps (spades) than declarer.

Part III - STANDARD OPENING LEADS versus NT Contracts

As a defender, you have your own objective and, hopefully, it is contrary to that of the declarer. Your objective is to take enough tricks to set the contract, or, if that appears to be impossible, to hold declarer to as few overtricks as possible. The defenders cannot see each other's hands so must take advantage of all the skills they can master in order to communicate with each other about the defense of the hand.

The first big advantage of the defenders is the opening lead. Opening leads can be a source of immense profit (or loss) as well as one of the most entertaining and challenging aspects of the game. Opening leads should be based upon what you have learned from the bidding and what you can see in your hand. Sometimes, the bidding will make it clear as to what suit to lead, other times you will have a clear-cut lead in your own hand. The rest of the time you will have to make an intelligent guess. The most important point here is to listen to the bidding (or watch if you use bidding boxes). Without listening and/or watching you cannot begin to defend.

During the auction be attentive to what the opponents are telling you. Think about their hand and anticipate what you will lead if you become the opening leader. As a general rule, declarer will try to establish his longest suit in declaring notrump contracts; the defense will try to do the same and will generally begin by leading its own long suit. That's why, with nothing else to go by, against notrump contracts, an opening leader leads from length. However, if the opponents have vigorously bid your longest suit, you should probably select some other opening lead.

If partner has bid you should probably lead his suit. Perhaps Alfred Sheinwold said it best: "there are only two acceptable excuses for not leading the suit your partner has bid: having no cards in the suit, and sudden death."

Often the opponents' bidding will point out their weak spots, their distribution, and their strengths. But one must be listening to hear the information that is passed. In addition, the strength of one's own hand and the strength of your own suits provides valuable information about opponents' and partner's hands.

(1) The normal lead when leading from length (a suit of four or more cards) is 4th best. Fourth-best means the 4th card down from the top. There are some who prefer the 3/5 leads versus NT as well as against suits, but that is rare. 3/5 or 3/lowest leads mean 3rd card down from a suit with an even number of cards and 5th or lowest from a suit which is at least five cards long and contains an odd number of cards. Generally, the 4th lead (or 3/5) will be from an honor (A,K,Q,J, or 10), but if you have outside entries and would like to have your suit returned, it is permissible to lead 4th (or 3/5) from four or five small cards.

If faced with a choice of suits to lead, consider leading a major suit if one hasn't been bid or indicated in the auction. As partner of the opening leader, be sure to apply the Rule of Eleven to the opening lead. (See last month's article for more on Rule of Eleven, etc.) Note: Some partnerships prefer to play attitude leads versus NT contracts, which means that they lead their lowest card regardless of how many cards they have in the suit. They are not showing any certain number of cards in the suit but are indicating that they want it returned. In my estimation this method is for those who prefer to play by rote and don't want their partner involved in analyzing the hand.

(2) The first exception to the 4th or 3/5 lead is when your holding in the suit to be led is headed by at least a three-card sequence, in which case the top of the sequence should be led (Example:

QJ1032). Sequence leads are usually better than fourth-best leads so a four-card suit headed by a three-card sequence is often better than a longer suit without a sequence (Example: QJ103 versus 108654). Sequence leads also apply when the third card in the sequence is missing by one spot (Example: QJ93).

(3) A second exception to the 4th or 3/5 best lead occurs when the suit to be led is comprised of honors of which two are touching. In this case the standard lead is the top of the interior sequence. For this consideration, the nine is an honor. The standard lead is underlined in the following examples: (a) AJ109 (b) KJ109 (c) A1097 (d) K1097 (e) Q1098 (f) K109.

Note: Many bridge players have adopted non-standard leading methods such as Journalist where the lead of a Jack denies a higher honor in the suit and the lead of a ten indicates an interior sequence and shows the Jack and one honor higher than the Jack. It is always wise to check the back of the opponents' convention cards in order to be aware of their leading and carding agreements.

(4) If the bidding has made it illogical to lead your four-card or longer suit of if partner has bid, it may be necessary to lead from a three-card suit. Different rules apply in this case. Now, from two touching honor cards, it is proper to lead the higher one. (Exception: lead the King from AKx). Again, the nine is considered an honor card. The proper lead from the following combinations is underlined: KQx, QJx, J10x, 109x. If you have three cards in the suit to be led and that suit is headed by either one honor or two non-touching honors, it is proper to lead your lowest card. For example, from Q104 or from K54, the proper lead is the four. (Exception: from Axx in partner's bid suit, do not underlead the Ace as it will only confuse partner.)

(5) If you have three small cards in the suit to be led, lead the top card. This is called the "top of nothing" lead. Examples are the 8 from 842, or the 9 from 975. Also, lead the top card from a doubleton, as the 7 from 76 or the 8 from 84. The way that partner can tell the difference from these two holdings is the card played the next time the suit is played (provided they are watching the spot cards). If the lead was "top of nothing" from three small cards, it is important to play the next card down the second time the suit is played and not the lowest card as that is the card played per force with an original doubleton holding.

Note: While some of you may think that MUD (Middle, Up, Down) is a good idea for leading from three small, remember that partner can't tell that you're not leading from shortness until you've played the second card which is the same situation as when leading top of three small.

(6) When leading from four or more small cards, the recommended lead is either the top card or the one beneath it. For example, from 97543, lead the second highest card, the seven, as the nine may be too valuable a card to part with. But with 76432, lead the top card, the seven, as the seven and the six are equals. As indicated earlier, it is permissible to lead fourth-best from these holdings, but expect partner to play you for an honor and to return the suit when on lead. And whatever you do, don't lead the second highest when the two highest cards are touching spot cards!

(7) Unless there has been a preemptive bid or some kind of clear-cut indication that either the declarer or the dummy has a long running suit, an Ace lead against notrump shows a powerful suit. Examples: AKJ1076 or AQJ105. In response to this opening lead, the partner is obligated to clarify his holding in the suit by playing any honor above the Ten that is held in his hand, or without an honor, by giving count in the suit so that the opening leader knows whether the suit will run.

Part IV – Third Hand Play

Partner leads before he/she gets to see dummy. However, the Third Hand gets to see dummy first before he/she plays to Trick 1. If you are that Third Hand person, before playing, take the time to review the auction (if necessary) and think about partner's lead (and partner's hand) and also think about what declarer's hand might be. Do not play until you have decided what the lead is about.

When partner leads a small card, unless the dummy and/or the bidding dictates otherwise, it is proper to assume that the lead is small from an honor (3rd, 4th, or 5th depending upon your agreement and what partner's holding is). Thus your first possible choice is to win the trick if possible by playing "third hand high". Have you heard that someplace before? If you can't win the trick or partner's lead is an honor that might win the trick or declarer plays a card from dummy that is higher than any cards you have in that suit, you have some obligations. In order of importance, your priorities are as follows:

Signal Attitude by playing a spot card that indicates whether or not you like the lead. Playing standard carding a high spot card indicates a desire for continuation of that suit, but playing UDCA (upside down carding) a low spot card asks for continuation. Usually this attitude signal occurs when dummy wins the trick or when partner leads a high card that is likely to win the trick. Remember to apply the Equal Honor Rule which states that whenever partner leads an honor card, you should signal you like the lead to tell partner that you have an honor of equal value in his suit.

Give a Count signal if your attitude is obvious by your failure to play higher than dummy. Playing standard carding high-low in a suit shows an even number of cards and low-high an odd number of cards but playing UDCA high-low shows an odd number of cards and low-high an even number of cards.

In some situations it helps the defense if you can give a Suit Preference signal; an example would be when partner leads an honor and there is a singleton in that suit on the dummy. Normally suit preference signals are the same regardless of whether you are playing standard carding or UDCA a high card in the suit played shows something in the higher ranking outside suit while a low card shows something in the lower ranking outside suit.

The third hand's responsibility does not end with the selection of the proper card to play at trick one. If he retains the lead or gains the lead later and wishes to return partner's suit, it is important to know which card to return. When you are left with exactly two cards in the suit that partner led, you should return the higher of the two. If you should happen to have four cards in partner's suit, the proper return card is fourth best unless it would block the suit. This carding is an application of present count.

If you have determined that partner led his 4th best card (or 3/5 as the case may be), use the appropriate rule to help determine partner's holding in that suit. The Rules of Eleven, Twelve and even Fifteen often apply regardless of whether you're defending a suit contract or a notrump contract.

When partner leads a small card and you determine that it's low from an honor (based upon dummy's cards, your cards, and the bidding), the rules change when there is an honor in dummy. When dummy has one honor card and third hand has a higher honor, third hand should normally save his honor unless dummy's honor is played. If third hand has a high spot card (nine), it can

sometimes be played if the honor is not played from dummy. An important exception to this rule is that when third hand has the Ace and dummy has the Jack or the Ten, the third hand should play the Ace.

It is very important to take the whole hand into consideration before finessing your partner's opening lead. Instead of memorizing rules, try to apply guidelines in order to determine whether to play the honor or a high spot card.

When partner leads an honor against either a suit or a notrump contract, the third hand must be alert as there are various overtaking and unblocking plays that must be considered. The third hand must be trained to overtake whenever he has the necessary spot cards and wants to ensure that the suit is continued. In addition, an unblocking or overtaking play tends to indicate an outside entry so that when the lead is gained by the third hand, there will not be any problems continuing the suit.

There are a few other considerations that will help the third hand to read partner's lead. Some of these we may have talked about when we discussed opening leads, but it won't hurt to remind third hand about leading tendencies, etc. (1) Since we generally don't underlead Aces against suit contracts, a 4th best lead will likely be from a King-high or Queen-high suit. (2) If it looks like the lead might be from a leads from Jxxx are considered undesirable. (3) When you or your partner is known to be long in trumps, partner is more likely to lead from length against suit contracts. (4) When partner and you have bid and raised a suit and partner leads another, he either (a) has the Ace of your bid suit, or (b) is leading a short suit and has trump control.

Part V - MORE SUGGESTIONS ON OPENING LEADS (I)

Continuing our discussion of LSD, we're still hung up on the L part ... those opening leads. Obviously there's a lot to this subject or there wouldn't be so many books written on the subject. There's a great deal of satisfaction from making the "best" lead on a hand as it gets the defense off to its best possible start. The following are some general overall tips.

1. When you lead a singleton against a trump contract, lead it with your left hand if right-handed but with your right hand if left-handed. This alerts partner to an unusual lead. (I'm joking folks!)
2. At matchpoints it is often tempting to lead an Ace against a small slam. Against 6NT, resist the temptation as the Ace is unlikely to go away. Against suit slams beware of leading an Ace when the opponents have not used Blackwood as one opponent is likely to be void.
3. If declarer makes a game try bid and dummy rejects the invitation, consider leading the suit in which the game try was made.
4. If you have opened the bidding and partner was unable to respond, avoid bidding a second suit unless you want partner to lead the second suit.
5. When the opponents have bid to a high level without a lot of high cards, lean towards leading a trump to cut down on the ruffing power of the two hands.
6. Try doubling an opponent's bid of an artificial suit or a second suit in order to get partner to lead that suit.
7. When partner is marked with length in the trump suit, try to make the declarer ruff in order to reduce his trumps.
8. Never lead a singleton trump
 - 8a. There is no such thing as a rule that contains the word "Never" or "Always".
9. Lead trumps against sacrifice bids.
10. Have a clear understanding of what a double of a splinter bid means. (Length, strength, lead-directing, sacrifice-suggesting?)
11. When in the auction you have shown a long suit (usually by preempting) and you also hold a void, try leading a suit preference card in your long suit so that perhaps partner can read it and give you a ruff. For example:

	Dummy	
	♠ AQ54	
	♥ AQ107	
	♦ AKJ7	
	♣ 7	
YOU		Partner (Dealer)
♠ 1032		♠ 9876
♥ 54		♥ 3
♦		♦ Q987432
♣ KQJ98542		♣ A8
	Declarer	
	♠ KJ	
	♥ KJ9862	
	♦ 1065	
	♣ 106	

Auction:	Pass	Pass	4 ♣	Double
	5 ♣	5 ♥	Pass	5 ♥

Opening lead: ♣2

The two of clubs is a suit preference signal. You come to this conclusion because it can't be explained in any other way. Since all other interpretations are impossible so it must be suit preference. You might worry for a moment that if you return a diamond you might be giving up a trick, but this needs rethinking. If partner is really void, it is likely that Declarer will be able to get rid of that diamond loser on dummy's spades. Return a diamond and take your partner out of his agony.

Part VI - MORE SUGGESTIONS ON OPENING LEADS (II)

No discussion of opening leads is complete without mentioning some conventional leads that some partnerships employ. These should be clearly marked on the convention card so it's best to peruse it before commencing play.

Rusinow Leads. Instead of making standard leads it is possible to employ Rusinow leads. The principle behind Rusinow leads is simply the leading of the lower of touching honors. They are only used on the first trick against a suit contract in a suit that partner has not bid during the auction. It is uncommon to employ the Rusinow leads also against a No Trump contract since the purpose of the lead against a No Trump contract is entirely different in nature, but it is not illegal.

The main principles of the Rusinow leads are as follows:

1. Ace: this lead denies the King, except when holding the Ace-King as a doubleton.
2. King: this lead is from Ace-King or King Queen doubleton. The third hand should signal with the Queen or a doubleton in the first case or the Ace in the second case.
3. Queen: this lead is from King-Queen with length (KQx etc.). The third hand should normally signal with the Ace or Jack, but not with a doubleton if the dummy contains three or four small cards of the same suit. This may be to avoid a Bath Coup, whereby the declarer could possibly be holding the Ace-Jack-x, and thereby cash two tricks.
4. Jack: this lead is from Queen-Jack.
5. Ten: this lead is from Jack-Ten.
6. Nine: this lead is from Ten-Nine.

Below is a success story for Rusinow leads: Playing Rusinow leads, West leads the ♠ King which East quickly identifies as a singleton or doubleton. East encourages and then overtakes West's ♠ Queen with his ♠ Ace, returning a third spade for West to ruff. The ♠ Ace is the setting trick. Playing standard leads East has to guess and probably will not overtake the ♠ Queen and give West a ruff.

	North	
	♠ 972	
	♥ KJ5	
	♦ AKJ94	
	♣ Q3	
West		East
♠ KQ		♠ A864
♥ A4		♥ 86
♦ 1053		♦ 872
♣ K87642		♣ J1095
	South	
	♠ J1053	
	♥ Q109732	
	♦ Q6	
	♣ A	

Auction:	North	East	South	West
	1 ♦	Pass	1 ♥	Pass
	2 ♥	Pass	4 ♥	Pass
	Pass	Pass		

Journalist Leads. In order to solve the ambiguity problem presented by the standard lead of an honor from an interior sequence, Journalist leads were invented. For example, the standard lead from KJ10x is the Jack but sometimes it's impossible to figure out if partner is leading the Jack from KJ10x(xx) or if he's leading the Jack from J109x(xx). Journalist leads of honors occur against No Trump contracts as follows:

1. The lead of a Jack denies a higher-ranking honor.
2. The lead of a Ten promises the Ace, the King or the Queen.
3. The lead of a Nine promises the Ten or no higher-ranking honor or a doubleton.
4. The lead of an Ace shows AKJxx or AKQ10x or AK109x.
5. The lead of a King shows Ace-King or King-Queen.
6. The lead of a Queen shows QJ10 or KQ109 and requests unblocking the Jack when held.

Although Journalist leads usually apply versus NoTrump, they can be used against suit contracts. Here they work much like Rusinow in that the lead is the lower of touching honors. They also incorporate the idea of 3/lowest spot card leads (3rd from an even number and lowest from an odd number).

Part VII - Signaling in General (or Time to Watch those Spot Cards)

Having made it through the L of LSD, it's time to dwell on the S or Signaling ... and the things that can be communicated to partner by careful play of all your cards. Fasten your seat belts we're in for a ride.

There are many ways to tell partner about your hand by your leads, plays or discards of a specific card or cards. These defensive signals have definite meanings and belong in every partnership agreement. While not perfect they are certainly far better than nothing. What follows is a short summary of the basic approach to signaling. While a partnership may use a different approach, all good bridge players should have a firm understanding of this basic approach.

All of the signals discussed here are legal ones and while there are several methods they are all used as a means of conveying information.

In defending there are three basic signals that good partnerships use. They are (in order of importance): (1) the ATTITUDE signal, (2) the COUNT signal, and (3) the SUIT-PREFERENCE signal. Signals take place in three different circumstances: on partner's lead, on declarer's lead, and in discarding on a suit led by either partner or declarer. There is one overlying basic principle that applies in all three of these signaling situations. Always signal with the most extreme card (high or low) that does not sacrifice a trick.

The rules that follow deal with signaling in general and can be applied to either standard or UDCA methods.

1. When following to a suit or when discarding in a suit, the size of the spot card used to signal is relative to one's holding in that suit. For example: Holding AK432 the 4 is a high spot card, but holding 654 the 4 is a low spot card.
2. Signals are usually given with spot cards generally the two through the nine, but it is possible to signal with honors.
3. If you're paying attention and watching the spot cards a signal can usually be interpreted by using the bidding, by looking at the cards in dummy and by looking at the cards you hold.
4. It is sometimes necessary for partner to be able to make two signals in a suit in order to fully understand a signal.
5. Be aware that signaling often helps declarer as much as it does your partner so it may not be appropriate to signal with a strong defensive hand.
6. It is not mandatory to follow your partner's signals. Thinking is permitted!
7. It is generally profitable to signal as much as possible against less experienced players.
8. It is strongly recommended to always signal attitude on the opening lead.

There are, of course, some rules that apply when signaling. Most follow those listed below. As you can see the rules change according to who initiated the play to the present trick.

1. When following to a suit led by your partner: (a) signal attitude with your first card, and (b) signal suit preference with your second card
2. When following to a suit led by declarer: (a) start to signal count with the first card, and (b) signal suit preference with the second card
3. When discarding in a suit not yet led: (a) signal attitude with your first discard, and (b) signal present count* with the second card.
4. When discarding in a suit already led: (a) signal present count*.

*Present count can probably best be described as count according to what you have left in that suit. For example: If you started with the 642 of a suit which partner led and dummy won with you playing the 2 (standard count methods), the next time you play a card in this suit you would play the 6 as you have the 64 doubleton left.

Part VIII – SIGNALING – Attitude is Everything (Almost)

Signaling in bridge is the art of communicating with partner by the specific cards played and by the order in which they are played. More than any other aspect of bridge, defense is a partnership endeavor and it's very important that you and your partner send each other clues about the cards you hold. And smiling and frowning are NOT permissible methods.

Using standard methods the attitude signal is simply given as follows: a high card is encouraging while a low card is discouraging. The attitude signal applies primarily when partner is leading a suit but it can be applied (usually with negative inferences) when you are discarding. In general, a high card shows interest in the suit being played and asks for continuation of that suit, while a low card shows weakness in the suit and suggests a lead or interest in some other suit. If you've elected to play UDCA, the signaling cards are switched high card instead of low card and low card instead of high card.

It is important to understand that cards played in attitude situations do not carry suit preference significance.

In notrump contracts the most important defensive signal comes at trick one. For examples, when partner leads an Ace against a notrump contract, he wants to know one of two things. Does partner have the missing high honor in the suit, and, if not, how many small cards does partner have? In response to the Ace lead the third hand throws any high honor (Jack or better) or failing to have an honor, gives distributional count. (Count signals will be explained later.)

The lead of an Ace against a suit contract is far less common unless the partnership has agreed to lead Ace from Ace-King combinations. In fact, leading Aces from almost any other holding is helpful only to the declarer and should be avoided at all costs. However, if the partnership does lead the Ace from Ace-King, the partner of the opening leader should treat it like a King lead unless the King appears in the dummy.

Although the lead of a King is occasionally made from short suit holdings against suit contracts, against notrump contracts more often than not it is made from length combinations headed by KQJ or KQ10. Regardless, when a King is led, the opening leader wants to know whether his partner has a high honor --- the Jack, Queen, or Ace.

If partner does have a high honor, he encourages; if partner does not have it, he discourages. (With the doubleton Ace, overtake and return the suit; with the doubleton Jack, unblock.) Generally, if the King lead holds, it is right to continue the suit by playing a second high honor. If the opening leader wants partner to play his highest remaining card the second time the suit is led, he should continue the suit with the lowest of his touching honors. For example, when leading from KQJ98, first lead the King, then the Jack so that partner knows to play the ten if he has it.

One holding that can be a problem if partner leads the King (or the Ace from Ace-King against suit contracts) is the QJ combination with or without small cards. The play of the Queen by the partner of the opening leader guarantees either the Jack or a singleton so that the opening leader can determine how best to continue the suit.

The lead of a Queen is similar to that of the King. All partner wants to know is whether or not partner has a high honor in the suit; in this case the significant honors are the Ace, King and Ten. The general rule, therefore, is to encourage if you have one of these cards and to discourage if you don't. With a doubleton Ace, King or Ten, the honor is played at once in order to unblock.

Since the lead of a Jack or a Ten can be made from either the top of a sequence or the top of an interior sequence, extra care must be taken in order to avoid confusion. If the missing honor cards are not visible in the dummy, the partner should play a missing honor or signal violently that he has one. If the dummy has one of the missing honors, the third hand should not play his higher honor until dummy's is played.

The proper card to play in response to an honor lead by partner can best be summarized by the Equal Honor Rule. This rule states that whenever partner leads an honor card, you should signal that you like it (positive attitude) to tell partner that you have an honor of equal value in his suit.

The lead of a low spot card is usually 4th best (or 3/5 is that is your choice). When partner of the opening leader protects partner by playing third hand high, signaling is not the problem. But when dummy wins the trick, the third hand should make an intelligent signal. If dummy wins the trick with an Ace or King, encourage only if you have a high honor (Queen or King), but if dummy wins the trick with a card lower than the King, give the count signal.

Another point to remember when signaling is that it is the relative size, not the absolute size, of a card that determines whether or not it is a signal. Thus, the number of cards which are not visible will generally determine if partner's card is an encouraging or a discouraging signal. If you notice that only one card is missing beneath the card that partner played, it may or may not be a signal; however, if there are two or more lower cards missing it is a very good indication that partner is signaling.

Part IX – Signaling – Count (and Keep on Counting)

Basically, standard count is given by playing high-low with two cards in a suit, the lowest card from three or five cards in a suit, the second or third highest from four or six cards in a suit. Playing UDCA low-high shows an even number of cards in the suit while high-low shows an odd number of cards. Distributional count signals can be very important to the defenders in certain situations. Perhaps the most common use of the count signal is when declarer attacks a suit in which length or high cards are held by the dummy which, otherwise, has no apparent entry. If the defenders hold the Ace of the suit, it is important that the player with the Ace take his trick at the right time, i.e. when declarer has no more cards in that suit. To do so requires that the partner of the person holding the Ace give count the first time the suit is played or the first time he discards in that suit. For example, against a 4♠ contract:

Dummy holds:	♠ 54	You hold:	♠ Q109
	♥ KQJ10		♥ A762
	♦ 543		♦ 762
	♣ 8764		♣ QJ9

To obtain the best results on this hand, it is imperative that your partner give you count in the ♥ suit so that you don't take the ♥ Ace until the declarer plays his last one. Therefore, playing standard signals, your partner must play up the line with an odd number of ♥'s, but begin a high-low with two or four ♥'s. (With two he would play his highest ♥ the first time, with four he would play his highest or second highest ♥ the first time.) Of course, playing UDCA these count signals are reversed.

Similar situations arise in notrump contracts when there is a long suit in dummy. Extra care must be taken to "hold up" winning your control trick of that suit in order to ensure that declarer can't take advantage of the tricks from the long suit. For example, against a 3NT contract:

Dummy holds:	♠ Q4	You hold:	♠ K1098
	♥ 863		♥ 42
	♦ KJ1093		♦ A82
	♣ 853		♣ J1097

Partner leads the ♥ Jack, you play the ♥ two (attitude), and declarer wins the ♥ King. When declarer plays the ♦ Queen, partner begins a count signal (either standard or upside down) and you duck until declarer plays his last ♠. Even if the declarer should overtake his ♦ Queen with the ♦ King, you would duck until the proper time because you trust partner, right?

The count signal is also given when partner, who has bid the suit, leads the Ace and the King appears in dummy. Failure to give count in these situations may cause partner to attempt to give you a ruff on the next trick, when in reality he would be giving the declarer the opportunity to pitch a loser. (If the Ace lead can be presumed to be from shortness, the third hand should give a suit-preference signal. See below.)

Count should also be given when partner leads the King against a suit contract and the Queen appears in dummy. Partner needs to know whether the Ace will cash or not. In unclear situations the King leader should probably switch rather than getting his Ace trumped at trick two and thereby setting up the Queen in dummy for a discard by the declarer.

Count should also be given in situations where you are trying for a ruff. For example, against suit contracts, if partner leads the King of a side suit and you hold the 108 doubleton, the recommended play is the ten (or the upside down 8) in the hopes that partner is leading from the Ace-King combination rather than the King-Queen combination. However, if the bidding makes it clear that declarer has the Ace, play the eight the first time.

When discarding from a suit that you obviously don't want led, it is usually right to give the count signal. This situation may occur when declarer or partner is running a long suit, but is more likely to occur when declarer is playing on one suit, but another good suit is visible in the dummy. This should help partner to determine declarer's holding in that suit. For example, against a 3 NT contract:

Dummy holds:	♠ 104	You hold:	♠ J7
	♥ 853		♥ QJ764
	♦ KQJ96		♦ 10872
	♣ 932		♣ K10

Partner leads a ♣ against the 3NT contract and you win the King and return the ten. Declarer ducks and partner overtakes with the Jack and returns the Queen. You can discard the ♦'s giving count, thereby providing partner with the necessary count information in case he holds the Ace of ♦'s.

Another important factor in determining count is that of second-round count. If your first play in a suit did not indicate count (generally because you led or played an honor or because you gave an attitude signal), **present count** should be given on the second round when leading, following or discarding. Play the highest card you can spare from an original odd number (your present count is now even); lowest from an original even number of cards (your present count is now odd). For example, if the underlined card was your first play, then:

K9753 next play the 9 or the 7 – showing two or four cards left in the suit
A98752 next play is the 2 – showing three or five cards left in the suit.

Part X - Suit Preference Signals – Last but Not Least

The remaining signal, the suit-preference signal, must be used with extreme care. Its major use applies when you are returning partner's lead because you think he is going to trump the suit you are returning. Obviously, partner will not know which suit to return after trumping unless you tell him. Since talking across the table is forbidden and conveying information by way of a look or gesture is considered the lowest form of bridge ethics, we must find a legal way to tell partner which suit to lead. It works like this: a high card in the suit led asks for the higher ranking suit, a low card asks for the lower ranking suit, and a middle card asks partner to use his own judgment. For example, against a 4♥ contract:

Dummy holds:	♠ Q83	You hold:	♠ 102
	♥ K102		♥ 54
	♦ AKQ107		♦ J9832
	♣ 54		♣ QJ103

Partner leads the ♠ King and you start a count signal. Partner continues with the Ace and the Jack of ♠'s which you trump. Since partner appears to have gone to great extremes to get you to lead a ♦ (the higher of the two side suits), you lead back the ♦ three and partner ruffs, thereby setting the contract one trick.

The suit-preference signal is a very important tool in the hands of competent defenders. However, it can be overused and many inexperienced players attempt to apply it in situations where its meaning will be misinterpreted. Keep in mind that if a signal can logically be interpreted as either attitude or count, that meaning takes priority; suit-preference signals apply only when the attitude and count are already known or are clearly of no importance.

One situation in which suit-preference signals could and should be used is when the opening leader leads a high card (usually Ace or King) and the dummy's holding (singleton or high honors) indicates that a switch is in order. In this case the card played by the third hand is generally considered to be suit-preference.

Another time that the opening leader or his partner can give a suit-preference signal on the opening lead is when either defender is known from the bidding to have excess length in the suit led.

Another common use of suit-preference signals is when discarding from a suit in which you have already provided partner with attitude and count information about that suit. While it is very hard to indicate outside club cards by discarding low cards, it is quite easy to indicate strength in a higher ranking suit by discarding your higher cards first.

When all else fails, it may be possible to give suit preference signals in the trump suit. However, as one can imagine this method is fraught with danger as it's often too difficult to read the trump spot cards accurately.

By now it should be quite clear that it is always important to pay attention to the spot cards being played. In fact, it will probably be impossible to interpret a suit-preference request correctly if you haven't paid strict attention to the cards previously played in the suit. Perhaps an example hand will help to illustrate how suit preference can be used:

	Dummy	
	♠ 3	
	♥ A843	
	♦ Q10652	
	♣ K54	
Partner		You
♠ AK1098		♠ 7542
♥ 762		♥ 109
♦ 43		♦ 987
♣ J109		♣ AQ62
	Declarer	
	♠ QJ6	
	♥ KQJ5	
	♦ AKJ	
	♣ 873	

Defending a contract of 4 ♥'s partner leads the ♠ Ace, presumably holding the ♠ King as well. Dummy come down with a singleton spade. You hold the ♣AQxx behind dummy's ♣Kxx. If partner were to continue the spades, declarer would ruff so you should play a suit preference low spade indicating your wish that partner switch to a club, the lower of the remaining two suits (trump suit excluded). Good partner that he is, he now plays the ♣ Jack, the card that his hand would otherwise normally lead in that suit. Declarer plays the ♠ King which you win with the ♠ Ace and lead the ♠ Queen. Knowing that partner either a doubleton club or the ♠10, you continue with a low club and the contract has been set one trick. Without the suit preference ♠2 partner could well have led a diamond which allows the contract to be made as declarer would have taken the trick, pulled trump and discarded two of his losing clubs on the diamonds.

Part XI – Other Signaling Tools

There are two other signals that are worth mentioning. The first is the trump echo signal which is a high-low in the trump suit to indicate the possession of a third trump. It is the reverse of normal count and typically is used when: (1) leading the trump suit in order to help partner to get a count on the trump suit and the hand, (2) when trying to alert partner that you are short-suited and would desire a ruff, and (3) when actually ruffing in order to show a holding of exactly three trumps. For example, against 4♠'s:

Dummy holds:	♠ KQ109	You hold:	♠ A6432
	♥ 8		♥ A7
	♦ KJ1096		♦ 7532
	♣ Q76		♣ 94

Partner leads the ♠Jack which you win with the ♠ Ace and return a middle ♠ showing no desire for any particular return. Partner trumps with the ♥3 and plays a ♣. Declarer plays the ♥ King, partner playing the ♥2 and you win the ♥ Ace and play another ♠ knowing that partner started with three trumps and can trump another spade.

The second is the Smith Echo or the Reverse Smith Echo. This is a defensive convention, usually only used against notrump contracts. It occurs at a defender's first opportunity to play to a suit declarer leads provided that he has a choice in the card he plays. For example is he has a singleton in that suit or needs to win the trick or to force an honor, the Smith signal does not apply. Otherwise a higher than necessary card suggests that the defender likes the suit of the opening lead and becomes a Smith Echo. The defender's lowest card suggests that he did not like the opening lead and suggests a switch.

Reverse Smith is identical except that high-low suggests a switch and low-high suggests continuation

With either Smith or Reverse Smith, the signal is off is the information is already know either by the opening lead or by the auction. In addition, if declarer attacks a long suit in a dummy that has no entry, count in the suit led takes priority.

Perhaps a very simple example will help:

	North	
	98	
West		East
A10765		QJ2
	South	
	K43	

Against a NT contract, West leads the 6 and East's Jack forces declarer's King at trick one. If West wins the first defensive trick in a different suit, he won't know whether declarer started with Kxx or with KQx of the original suit. If the latter he needs to find an outside entry to East's hand. However, when East has the Queen, he should play high in the suit declarer led at trick two giving a Smith Echo encouragement (or low if the partnership prefer Reverse Smith Echo)

Naturally, when the dummy has KQJxx and no outside entry, a count signal needs to have precedence over Smith so that the defender with the Ace will know how long to hold up. But when there is not need hold a hold-up, the Smith Echo or Reverse Smith Echo can be very useful.

Part XII – Discarding

Finally we've reached the D of L S D Discarding. There are many types of discards...all of which are intended to convey information to your partner. Is the ideal discard system out there? It is doubtful as there doesn't seem to be one method that works perfectly for all occasions. However, let's examine a few methods to see how each method works and can be used.

Attitude discards are the simplest system of signaling. If you use standard signals a high card in the suit discarded encourages that suit and a low card discourages. If you use upside-down signals a low card in the suit discarded encourages that suit while a high card discourages. The upside-down or reverse attitude signals tend to work best as you do not need to throw potentially useful cards to encourage a suit.

Playing standard **Count discards** a high-low in a suit shows an even number and playing low-high shows an odd number of cards. It's possible to reverse this and play reverse count or upside down count in which case high-low shows an odd number of cards in the suit and low-high shows an even number of cards. Count discards are often unclear to the early defense of a hand but tend to become more helpful as the play progresses. Count is perhaps a more useful method for subsequent discards after the first one. For example many good pairs play the first discard is attitude and then subsequent discards show count.

Lavinthal discards are one of the most widespread and easy to use systems. In Europe they are often referred to as suit preference. The discard of a low card in one suit suggests interest in the lower of the other suits. Similarly a high card suggests interest in the higher of the other suits. For example, discarding a low diamond on a spade would suggest a club (the lower suit), while discarding a high diamond would suggest a heart (the higher suit). There is at least one problem with Lavinthal discards and that is the inability to make a neutral card, which carries no meaning. When you have no particular preference for a switch, there is no card in your hand which does not carry a message; however, some players overcome this problem by keeping the discard of a 5 or 6 (7 too if you like) as a neutral card which conveys no positive message to partner.

Roman or Odd-Even (Italian) discards give different meanings to odd and even cards. This allows you to combine attitude and suit preference signals. An odd card encourages that suit while an even card is Lavinthal or suit preference. The problem with this system is that sometimes you don't hold odd cards when you need them or even cards for the proper suit preference signal. A similar disadvantage is that defenders who are unlucky enough to hold the wrong cards for signaling often take undue time trying to figure out what to do.....thus conveying to partner that they have a problem.

Revolving discards are not revolting but are instead a simple and effective system which is easy to remember. A high card shows interest in the next suit up, while a low card shows interest in the suit down. For example a low heart asks for diamond, a low club asks for a spade, and a high spade asks for a club. While this system takes some getting used to, it seems to have merit.

A little used system is that of **Dodds discards** which is similar to Odd-Even or Italian. Even cards are encouraging while odd discards are discouraging and ask for the suit of the same color. This is little used because there is quite a high frequency of hands where you have no useful discard and you end up misleading partner.

There is no right answer to choosing a discard system. Some work well on one hand but not on another. It is useful to know the shape of partner's hand (count) so that you can cash the right

number of winners before switching. But more often it is useful that the first discard is a clear signal for one suit. Playing attitude or reverse attitude satisfies this requirement.

Whichever method you are playing make sure that partner is on the same wavelength. As with so much in bridge, effective signaling and discards are a partnership problem.

Part XIII – More Defensive Tips

I'm sure you have noticed that in this series on defense I have not mentioned some things that I'm sure you are used to hearing and perhaps blindly following such things as “third hand high”, “second hand low”, “return partner's suit”, and “cover an honor with an honor”. While there are some truths to these sayings, they are not to be applied indiscriminately. It's much better to THINK!

In addition to the good opening leads and proper signaling techniques that's we've been discussing there are many other facets worth learning and remembering. Here are a few of them.

Sometimes when defending you will find that you must do a whole lot of discarding. While signaling does not always apply while discarding, there are several other facts that need to be considered as literally millions of points have been thrown away by defenders who do not know how to discard. The following is a list of rules to use when discarding.

(1) Early in the play of the hand when following suit to declarer's plays it is probably best to give count unless that information is clearly more beneficial to declarer than to partner. After count has been established, remaining cards in the suit can be used to indicate suit-preference. For example, holding the 952 in the suit led by declarer, the first card played indicates count (the 2 if playing standard, probably the 9 if playing UDCA); the second card played, particularly if it's the 9, should be considered as suit-preference for the higher ranking suit as it is a departure from the normal way you would play the two remaining cards.

(2) Try to keep length parity with the dummy for as long as possible. If you have a four card suit and dummy also has four cards in that suit, be very reluctant to part with one of the cards in that suit unless (a) all four cards in dummy are higher than all four of yours, (b) you have reason to believe that partner also has four cards in that suit, (c) one of dummy's cards in that suit gets discarded, or (d) you simply have to hold on to something else more valuable. The same reasoning applies if you have reason to believe that declarer's hand (the closed hand) has a four card suit in which you also have four. For example, against a 3NT contract:

Dummy holds:	♠ AQ93	You hold:	♠ 10752
	♥ 764		♥ 93
	♦ 54		♦ J1097
	♣ KQJ10		♣ 765

Partner leads the ♥ King and continues with the ♥ Jack which declarer wins with the Ace. Declarer now plays off three rounds of clubs, partner signaling with the ♦8 on the third round. So when a fourth club is played you can safely pitch a diamond and retain your four spades keeping parity with dummy. On the other hand if partner follows to three clubs and you must pitch before he does, you should still pitch a diamond because declarer has nine tricks if he holds the ♦AKQ.

(2a) Retain length in a suit held by declarer if such length was disclosed in the bidding or by partner's carding.

(3) When faced with a choice of giving an encouraging signal in a suit that you want led or a discouraging signal in a suit you don't want led, it is almost always right to make the negative discard so you can keep your good card and maintain the original length of the suit. However, this should not be confused with a situation in which your long suit is already established and you can

signal where your entry is as in the example above. Perhaps an example will help. Again, the contract is 3NT:

Dummy holds:	♠ Q107	You hold:	♠ 65432
	♥ 765		♥ AQ84
	♦ 74		♦ 105
	♣ J10954		♣ 86

Declarer wins the opening ♦3 lead with the ♦ King and plays the ♣ King. Partner plays the ♣2 and you begin a count signal with either the ♣8 or the ♣6 depending upon your methods. Partner wins the third club with the ♣ Ace and you must discard. It is far better to discard by discouraging in spades rather than to discard an encouraging heart as that card may be a defensive trick later.

(4) When discarding from complete honor sequences such as J1098, QJ109, KQJ10, or AKQJ, a discard of the highest honor guarantees possession of the lower honors. Of course, the corollary is that the play of any honor denies holding the one immediately above it. In discarding from these kinds of sequences, the discard should be the card that would be led when leading the suit. For example, against a 7NT contract:

Dummy holds:	♠ K76	You hold:	♠ 532
	♥ K4		♥ J76
	♦ KQJ106		♦ 32
	♣ 732		♣ QJ1098

Your partner leads the ♠ Jack which declarer wins with the ♠ Ace. When declarer plays five rounds of diamonds your first discard should be the ♣ Queen. Partner, who actually holds the ♣Kx will be eternally grateful because he now knows that he can discard his clubs in order to protect spades and hearts.

(5) When discarding a card from the suit that partner led, discard the card that you would have led when returning the suit. For example, against a NT contract:

Dummy holds:	♠ 74	You hold:	♠ Q962
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Partner leads the ♠5, you play the ♠ Queen and declarer wins with the ♠ King. If you have to make an early discard, play the ♠2 telling partner that you started with four spades as the 2 is the card you would have returned had you had the chance to do so. This is present count and tells partner how many cards you have remaining in the suit. Present count applies when you are discarding the suit partner has led as well as when you are returning his lead. With two cards remaining in the suit, discard or return the higher card; with three or more cards left, discard or return the original fourth-best. (The exception to this rule is that with a sequence of honors, return the top honor unless you think that partner has led from a suit that holds fewer cards in it than you have in the suit.)

Another item of importance in defense is to always remember the bidding and to use it to your advantage. Perhaps the following examples will help:

Example 1:	South	North	Example 2:	South	North
	1 ♠	1 NT		1 ♣	1 ♥
	2 ♠	Pass		2 NT	3 NT

In Example 1, you should assume that South has a minimum hand (11-14 HCP) with a six-card spade suit. In Example 2, you should assume that South has 18-19 HCP, balanced distribution (no singletons or voids), and less than 4 hearts.

Just as it is important for declarer to always attempt to count the number of tricks available, so is it important for the defense to attempt to count the number of tricks that are available to declarer. The following example should help you in counting the declarer's tricks:

Bidding:	South	North
	1 ♣	1 ♦
	1 NT	3 NT

Dummy holds:	♠ 32	You hold:	♠ A765
(North)	♥ 75	(East)	♥ QJ109
	♦ AQJ1087		♦ 432
	♣ AQ2		♣ 43

Partner leads the ♠ Queen. As East you should be thinking (before playing) as follows: Declarer has shown a minimum balanced hand of 12-14 points. Dummy has 13 points. I have 7 points. That totals between 32 and 34. Therefore, partner has a maximum of 8 and a minimum of 6 and 3 points are known (the ♠ Queen and ♠ Jack). Now to count declarer's tricks --- the ♠ King is one, the diamonds will provide six as declarer either has the King or it can be finessed; in clubs, if declarer has the King, there are at least three tricks available. That's a total of 9-10 tricks. So, if you win the ♠ Ace and return a spade, you can expect declarer to win those 9-10 tricks. But what if partner holds the ♥ Ace! Therefore, the proper play is to win the ♠ Ace of spades and switch to the ♥ Queen of hearts in the hopes that partner does have the Ace so that you can get your defensive tricks before the declarer can get his offensive tricks.
Good luck!