

## SUIT PREFERENCE SIGNALS in BRIDGE

by Robert Locke

I remember when I first heard about suit preference signals. I was playing against the Director and his wife at a local bridge club and she said something like, “Well, you told me that you wanted me to lead back a club and —”

Boy did my ears perk up! How did he do that? I didn’t see it or hear him convey that information, and isn’t it cheating? But gee, I want to learn more.

No, it is not cheating but very much a part of Defender strategy. I had heard early on about playing High-Low to show a doubleton, but this change-of-suit signaling was a brand new idea.

I don’t know which of the three usual choices this husband-wife partnership used: Standard, Odd-Even or Lavinthal. But I do know after much debate with partners and a lot of trial-and-error practice which system I prefer, and I can explain easily.

All three of the Suit Preference signals arrive, naturally enough, at the first discard (otherwise known as the first sluff). Usually Declarer is on-lead—or it might be Partner—and you cannot follow suit but need to discard another suit: it is that first discard where you can choose to signal Partner which suit you would like led in the future.

Great! But that said, in the interim I have found that most often—probably more than 95% of the time—I wish to decline to make such a signal for either of two reasons:

1) I have no particular preference.

or

2) I do not want Declarer to know my preference, and at that first discard a smart Declarer will ask my partner, “What is your system for Discards?”

So, below are the three most common choices of suit preference signaling, but I shall admit up front that I prefer Lavinthal which allows me most easily to decline to signal—well, almost always.

**Standard** — Probably this is easiest to describe because Standard is basically the same as with regular carding where you show Attitude about a given suit: if you sluff a low card it is discouraging about that suit while a high card is encouraging. A middle-rank card such as 5, 6 or 7 shows neither encouragement nor discouragement.

Some people play as Standard Discard signal that no matter how high the card they discard, they want that particular suit led back, presumably because they have one or more takers in that suit.

**N.B.** The problem with this practice is that you might well be signaling with a card that might later have taken a trick. I don’t like this.

**Odd-Even** — Many beginners are advised to use the Odd-Even system of discarding, presumably because the concept itself is so simple: if you like a suit, discard an Odd-rank card, 3, 5, 7, 9 while if you dislike a suit, discard an Even-rank card, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10.

Further if you do discard an Even-rank card, if it is a low card it indicates that you want the lower-ranking other suit led back to you, and if it is a higher-ranking card, you want the higher ranking other suit led back to you.

Get it? There are three suits for you to choose among when you are out of the suit that is being led. With an Even-rank discard, you **do not like** the suit you are discarding, and you are suggesting with a low card the lower-ranking of the other two suits, and with a high card, the higher ranking of the other two suits.

For example, spades is the suit being led, and you can't follow suit; you sluff the deuce of hearts indicating you do not like hearts but you prefer clubs, the lower ranking of the other two suits, but not diamonds, the higher ranking of the other two suits.

**N.B.** I dislike Odd-Even even more than Standard because of the same **N.B.** above describing the problem with Standard: if you sluff an Odd card you are shorting yourself in your preferred suit. Also, with Odd-Even you cannot decline to signal since you always must sluff either an odd or an even card.

**Lavinthal** — I find Lavinthal the most versatile choice because it does allow me to decline to signal, which I most frequently wish to do; yet, it also does allow me to signal when I am desperate for Partner to know, "Hey, Partner, lead me this suit! I've got tricks over here! I am desperate to get into the Lead."

With Lavinthal, you sluff a suit in which you have no interest. This is good because you never need to sluff a card that might later take a trick. As with the Even choice of Odd-Even, you sluff a low card to indicate you prefer the lower-ranking of the other two suits or a high card to indicate the higher-ranking.

If the discard is a 5, 6, or 7, a middle-rank card, it shows a decline to signal.

There in three short paragraphs, I have explained Lavinthal to its fullest extent; and yet when I try to explain to new partners my reasons for preferring Lavinthal as our Discard System, I am inevitably greeted with a groan. "It's too complicated."

Yet it is less complicated than Odd-Even and does not have the pitfalls of Standard where sometimes you must sluff a card that might later take a trick.

"What if I don't have the right card to sluff?" That is true of all the choices. Do your best and hope that Partner understands.

## SUIT PREFERENCE AT OTHER TIMES

This is where it gets really nifty. It takes a lot of playing to get to the point where you and Partner feel comfortable with Signals, but I hope you're beginning to see their value.

Let's say Partner's Opening Lead is an A (which usually means Partner has the K and plans to lead the suit a second time). But when Dummy comes down, you see a singleton in that suit; Partner now wants to learn your preference of suits for the second lead. Again, you choose a high card to play to that first trick to indicate the higher ranking other suit (excluding trump, usually) or a low card to indicate the lower ranking other suit. If you have no preference, hope to have a 5, 6 or 7 to indicate a decline to signal.

Even niftier, let's say Partner leads a suit which you are pretty sure is a singleton; Partner wants that suit led back so as to trump, and you oblige. After Partner takes this trick with a trump, Partner would like very much to know which suit to lead to get back into your hand so that Partner may trump again. Enter the Suit Preference Signal as described above.