

UPSIDE-DOWN v. STANDARD
Leads, sluffs opposite Partner, sluffs opposite Declarer
by Robert Locke

“In its own weird little way, that makes a kind of good sense.” I loved hearing those words, even though they seemed begrudging and noncommittal. I’m going to call this guy Bob so as to make him seem non-villainous, which indeed he was. We Bobs are all very nice guys, and so was this guy; just a little short with his words.

Filling in at the last moment for a sick friend, I was partnering an extremely good player with many thousands of master points, and I was a little intimidated. As usual, when a more experienced player partners a less experienced player, Bob had volunteered to accept my Convention Card — which included Upside-Down-Count-and-Attitude— and he had already allowed to one of his friends when he had made a Reverse Bergen raise and the friend had sarcastically remarked upon that fact — “Well, under duress”— and so I knew that there was a bit of condescension going on in this night’s partnership. But, oh, it’s all in the game.

Still, when we got to the sit-out table and had a moment to talk quietly, I did have to get straight something we had been neglecting to do: “I just realized that we are forgetting to pre-announce that we lead low from a worthless doubleton.”

“What?”

“We have to pre-announce it. It’s part of Upside-Down-Count-and-Attitude,” and I pointed to the Convention Card, the top choice under leads **xx**, with the first **x** **bolded** because that is the Standard lead to show a worthless doubleton —High-Low— and the red **x** meaning that leading low from a worthless doubleton requires a pre-announcement because it cannot be alerted in the normal way, at the moment it actually happens. It is not understood until the play of the next card in that suit.

“That’s not part of Upside-Down-Count-and-Attitude,” Bob said without further elaboration.

I was rather stunned, since what else indeed could it be? There is the Standard lead from a doubleton —High-Low— and then there is this other option: the reverse of Standard. What else would it be called, if not “upside-down”?

But I let that go. In a few moments, however, when I was carrying on with my signaling, I said, “And if I have a tripleton, I play Middle-Down-Up.”

I knew that this, too, was not Standard, where one plays Up-the-Line to show a tripleton or an odd-number holding, with High-Low to show an even-number holding. (I remember all too well when once my partner played High-Low and I took him for a doubleton when actually he had four in that suit. It was a disastrous outcome. And IMHO it’s a bum system.)

“What do you do with four?” Bob asked shortly.

“Middle-Down-Lowest Down-Up, which not only allows you to save your highest card for the fourth time around where it will probably now be the taker, but is also unmistakable.”

Bob gave it a second’s more thought before dismissing it with, “In its own weird little way, that makes a kind of good sense.”

So here I offer my UDCA advice with the caveat that indeed it might not even **be** UDCA. What do I know? I can barely stand to even read everyone else's words about UDCA, let alone take them in and regurgitate them. But I have at least one egg-spurt who has told me about my own system, "In its own weird little way, that makes a kind of good sense."

And it does. If you have ever been faced with the choice of sluffing a Jack from Jx just to show that it is a doubleton, you might better understand. That Jack might have been a crucial pusher or even a taker on the second round but was wasted on the first round. Besides that, it would be confusing to my Partner who might think the Jack is singleton. I don't like Standard High-Low; I don't like it; I don't like it, and I'll say it again, I don't like it.

With UDCA, you never have that problem, and for that reason alone I decided to try UDCA with my partners. It took a lot of pushing, but the more I played UDCA, the more I made it my own and still can't find anything wrong with it.

And, I thought, if it works for sluffing, why wouldn't it work just as well for Leads? I had listened to my most regular Partner, Wayne, as he would go on and on about how when it is Partner-in-the-Lead you are supposed to follow one set of signaling rules, but when it is Declarer-in-the-Lead you are supposed to follow another set of rules. That is the kind of rote memorization with which I have a great deal of difficulty. What is the logic? Where is the consistency? That is never discussed; it is merely rote memorization of rules.

So I proposed, "Why not **always** play a low card to **encourage**, always play the **reverse** to **discourage**?"

"My other partners wouldn't get it," Wayne would argue each time I brought it forward. "It would be too complicated for them. They're used to Standard. They can't change."

"Who can't change?" I wanted to ask, but gee, that would have been rude. And I have to say a little proudly now that Wayne finally did change, and I think he's okay with the change. And I think one of his other regular partners made the change, too, and she's okay with it. And all of my other regular partners made the change, and I think they are okay with it. And I am very happy with it.

I think it must have been in Caveman Whist days that the Standard arrangement for playing High-Low to show a doubleton must have been invented: "Hey, Partner, we don't have to just sluff any old useless cards; we can sluff with a purpose, and signal each other. If I have a seven and a deuce doubleton, why don't I sluff the seven first and later the deuce, and that will be a signal to you."

Well, of course the reverse can be just as true, provided you and Partner are agreed upon it, and alert to the idea of signaling. Nowadays, when I see a deuce come out of Partner's hand, it is like a blinking neon light; yet it is the rare Declarer who even notices because it appears to be a common sluff.

Because it is so easy and so simple and consistent, you can forget all the terminology except "UPSIDE-DOWN-COUNT-AND-ATTITUDE". Falling back on my drama student roots as I continued to see my partners stammering into the beaks of raptor Declarers who would turn upon them abruptly demanding, "What is your Carding?" I began rehearsing my partners in saying out loud again and again until they would gain fluency, "Upside-Down-Count-and-Attitude." As Hamlet advised his Players, "Speak the speech, I pray you as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue."

Yes, a mouthful. "Uh, uh, uh—" one of my partners stammered to one such hawkish Declarer, later confessing to me, "Bob, all I could think to say was 'merry-go-round'." Ha!

But it is not just the words “Upside-Down-Count-and-Attitude” that you can rehearse, it is also the concepts: so easy, so simple, so consistent. With a doubleton, you play Down-Up; with a tripleton you play Middle-Down-Up, with more you play Middle-Down-Lowest Down-Up. To encourage, you play your lowest card; to discourage you play a higher card.

That’s it. That’s UDCA. Or at least that’s the Locke version of UDCA. If there is a problem with that logic, nobody has yet convinced me of it. Try it. All it takes is opening your mind and shutting out a lot of unnecessary signaling advice that writers try to peddle.

It’s pretty easy to read (or deduce) what your Partner’s holding, and a deuce becomes a flashing neon light. “Partner, I LIKE this suit.” Ditto the trey when the deuce is otherwise visible. Ditto the four and the five and the six when the other lower cards are visible. “I am being **EN**couraged.”

A middle or highish card is **DIS**couraging.

Why is showing COUNT and ATTITUDE important, and how are those two terms different from one another? Well, in a certain sense Count and Attitude are the same. In the case of a doubleton, for example, your Count is 2, and your Attitude about that suit is good; you want to give partner a come-on. Say Partner leads an Ace. Usually and without bidding showing something otherwise, Partner has the King to support that Ace and wants to know from you, “Are you doubleton? Or do you have the Queen?”

You play your lowest card: “Yes.”

Or you play a higher card: “No. I have three worthless.”

It is rare that your Partner cannot read this signal pretty clearly. Yes, there are exceptions; don’t struggle over them; they are rare.

Now there are other times when you might choose SUIT PREFERENCE as your first signal. And different partnerships have different agreements. But that is another issue. Let us not struggle over those issues at this time, either

Now if you ask, “Well, why do so many people play ‘Standard’ if your version of UDCA is so easy and good?”

“Because Standard is what they learned,” I guess. “And no one has taught them anything else.”