

## SUIT PREFERENCE SIGNALS AT WORK

Apart from the obvious uses for suit preference signals, there are plenty of others.

One of my favourite occasions was this:

♠ K 10 3	
♥ J 10 9	
♦ A J 10 6	
♣ A K 2	
♠ 6 2	♠ 9 8 4
♥ K	♥ 8 6 5 4 3 2
♦ 9 8 5 3 2	♦ void
♣ J 10 9 5 4	♣ Q 8 7 3
♠ A Q J 7 5	
♥ A Q 7	
♦ K Q 7 4	
♣ 6	

North-South Vulnerable

West	North	East	South
			1♠
Pass	2♦ (1)	Pass	3♦ (2)
Pass	3♠	Pass	4NT
Pass	5♦ (3)	Pass	5NT (4)
Pass	6♠ (5)	All Pass	

- (1) Game forcing
- (2) I'm unsure why he didn't splinter with 4♣
- (3) 0 or 3 key cards
- (4) Guaranteeing all the key cards
- (5) No outside Kings

Sitting West, early in the auction, I was confident that my partner held a diamond void. I even knew that he had been considering a Lightner double (asking to lead dummy's first-bid suit) until he realised that 5NT guaranteed all the key cards. (If South had, instead, jumped to 6♠ over 5♦, he would have doubled, expecting me to hold an Ace – or key card – as the re-entry for more diamond ruffs.)

My diamond lead should therefore be a suit preference lead, even at trick 1. Thus I led the ♦9, asking for a heart return (*remember, I didn't know what dummy would look like*). Partner ruffed the diamond lead, as expected, and returned a heart.

The best news for us was that the ruff at trick 1 left declarer with only 11 top tricks (5 spades, 2 clubs, 3 diamonds, 1 heart). Therefore, he needed the heart finesse for his twelfth trick. Once he took the finesse, the roof caved in. I won the ♥K, led the ♦8 to continue the message about hearts – ruffed, partner returned a heart – and declarer tried claiming. We cross-ruffed another three tricks, for 5 down in a voluntarily bid (vulnerable) slam.

One of my particular joys in bridge is when, as a defender, we make all our trumps separately – as on this hand. Another joy, from this particular hand, was that our team-mates reached 6NT, which had 12 tricks on top.

That was an example of suit preference at trick 1, assuming partner was ruffing.

Here's another example, but with a difference.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		Pass	1NT
Pass	2♦ (1)	Pass	2NT (2)
Pass	3♦ (3)	Pass	3♥
Pass	4♥	All Pass	

- (1) Showing 4+ hearts
- (2) Guaranteeing 4 hearts and a minimum 1NT opening bid
- (3) Re-transfer (to 3♥)

West leads the ♠3 and you, East see:

*Dummy*

♠ 2  
 ♥ A J 7 6 2  
 ♦ Q 5 2  
 ♣ K Q 6 2

*You*

♠ A 10 4  
 ♥ 5  
 ♦ A J 8 4  
 ♣ 9 8 7 5 4

You win the ♠A, declarer dropping the ♠J. What next?

You must stop and think. Playing 4<sup>th</sup> highest leads, partner led the ♠3. If this is a genuine lead, that gives the 1NT opener 5 spades and 4 hearts – a highly unlikely holding for a 1NT bid, particularly with that ♠J from declarer. So, since you trust South and partner, the lead is not 4<sup>th</sup> highest. If it isn't 4<sup>th</sup> highest, it should be suit preference, asking for a club lead (*note: it wouldn't work if the void wasn't the low suit!*).

You should return a club at trick 2, hoping she was using the lead to show her club shortage. Which club should you lead – a suit preference ♣2, of course, asking for diamonds. Partner ruffs, returns a diamond to your Ace and you give her another ruff.

I failed this one! I didn't stop and think – and count – at trick 2. I did stop but my analysis was superficial, and decided to return a diamond, hoping partner held the King and we could take four quick tricks. Whoops – those weren't our four tricks, and partner had found a very clever lead:

♠ 2  
 ♥ A J 7 6 2  
 ♦ Q 5 2  
 ♣ K Q 6 2

♠ Q 9 8 7 6 5 3      ♠ A 10 4  
 ♥ Q 10 3              ♥ 5  
 ♦ 10 6 3              ♦ A J 8 4  
 ♣ void                 ♣ 9 8 7 5 4

♠ K J  
 ♥ K 9 8 4  
 ♦ K 9 7  
 ♣ A J 10 3

That was another suit preference lead but, as I said, it was different. You can also try that sort of suit preference lead when you've shown a long suit yourself, then lead the 2 in that suit.

The next defence involved a lot of subtle suit preference signalling, especially for a first-time partnership.

♠ K 7 6 4 2  
 ♥ 9 7 5 4  
 ♦ K 10  
 ♣ A Q

♠ A J 9                      ♠ Q 10 8 3  
 ♥ 8                          ♥ A Q 10 3 2  
 ♦ A 8 5 4                 ♦ Q  
 ♣ K J 4 3 2               ♣ 10 9 6

♠ 5  
 ♥ K J 6  
 ♦ J 9 7 6 3 2  
 ♣ 8 7 5

East-West Vulnerable

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		Pass	Pass
1♣	1♠	2♥	Pass
3♣	Pass	3NT	All Pass

East-West were playing Acol, and this auction progressed very poorly for them. West was 'stuck' over the 2♥ response, not wanting to leave partner in a 5-1 fit. She couldn't rebid 2NT, because that would show 15-17 HCP, so rebid her club suit. If I'd been East, I would now have passed, but East obviously thought her club fit was useful, her spade stopper was good, and so she took a punt on the better-scoring 3NT.

Given the auction and my singleton spade, I was disinclined to lead partner's suit. I thought my heart suit may provide entries to my hand, so tried my own long suit. The ♦6 went to partner's King, dropping declarer's Queen. The ♦10 was returned and allowed to hold. On the ♦10, I played the ♦7. Since partner knew I held the remaining diamonds, this should surely be a suit preference signal – for hearts rather than clubs. (If I had held the ♦J-9-8, I would have overtaken the 10 myself, to continue the suit.)

Partner duly switched to a high-ish heart, declarer's Queen losing to my King. I continued with the ♦J – again this was a suit preference message, about hearts, otherwise I would have led the ♦9. Declarer won the ♦A and led the ♠J. Partner won the ♠A and could lead another heart. At most, declarer now had five tricks (3 spades, 1 heart and 1 diamond), however she tried for more. Perhaps she hadn't taken heed of my signals? She finessed the ♥10 to my Jack and the hand collapsed. We took 5 diamonds, 2 hearts, 1 spade and 2 clubs (at the end), for down six, and a 'different' way to score 600.

Having used that rather extreme example, at the very least I would like you to think about signalling when you are establishing a long suit, especially against 3NT. Let's imagine you hold K-Q-J-10-9 against a No Trump contract. You lead the King and it wins. Now you can continue with any combination of the remaining cards, and each should contain a message to your partner about where your outside entry lies.

Leading the Queen then the Jack should ask for the highest of the remaining three suits.

Leading the 9 then the 10 should ask for the lowest of the remaining three suits.

Leading the Jack then the 10 should indicate you like the middle suit.

It's not that difficult but, as with all signalling, it takes practice. It also requires both players in the partnership to be watching and working together. Have fun acquiring that mastery!

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