

Is it an attitude, a count, or a suit preference situation?

I was playing with Gail Greenberg in a Swiss Teams at the Cromwell Connecticut regional on February 19, 2006. I held the following hand:

♠109852 ♥AK109 ♦J105 ♣10. Nobody was vulnerable.

Gail opened 1♦ in third position and RHO doubled. I bid 1♠ and LHO bid 2♥. Partner doubled to show 3-card spade support. Here is your first question. Should your hand pass 2♥ doubled or bid 2♠? And does it matter if you take time to think or is it important to bid in tempo?

I think that if you bid 2♠, that it is important to bid in tempo. You don't want the opponents to even suspect that you are close to passing. You want them to compete higher.

How should you decide whether or not to pass 2♥ doubled? If you consider the law of total tricks, you can estimate that there are at least 16 trumps between the two hands (you and partner have 8 spades, and the opponents will usually have at least 8 hearts, and sometimes 9 hearts). Considering your heart spots, and lack of spade spots, it is reasonable to think that there will be around 17 total tricks on the hand (18 total trumps less one trick for defensive values in the opponent's trump suits). So, if the opponents make 2♥, you would probably go down one in 2♠. And if you beat the opponents 1 trick, then you probably make 2♠. In both those cases you are better off to bid 2♠. All this is assuming that partner has a singleton heart. If partner is void in hearts, then it is more dangerous to pass the double as there will probably be one more total trick on the hand. In order for defending to be better, you would have to beat 2♥ doubled 2 tricks, and that seems unlikely.

So, in tempo, I rebid 2♠ and this was passed around to my RHO who bid 3♥. I doubled and everyone passed. How safe is this double and what does it show?

It clearly shows a hand that expects to defeat 3♥ doubled, but was unwilling to risk defending 2♥ doubled. Furthermore, you are also prepared to play in 3♠ if partner really can't stand defending 3♥ doubled. But, you have made a clear statement that you want to defend, and partner will normally pass the double.

Partner led the King of Spades (showing Ace-King-small), and I saw the dummy: What do you think of dummy's 3♥ bid? And what card do you signal with at trick one?

Pass	Pass	1♦	Dble	Dummy	Nobody Vulnerable
1♠	2♥	Dble	Pass	♠QJ6	
2♠	Pass	Pass	3♥	♥J432	
Dble	Pass	Pass	Pass	♦Q6	
				♣AQJ4	
West (Gail)				You (Jeff)	
♠K = Opening Lead				♠109852	
				♥AK109	
				♦J105	
				♣10	

Dummy showed opening values with the original takeout double, and does not have extra values to tell his partner about. He can use the law of total tricks, and estimate that he and his partner have 8 hearts, while the opponents probably have 8 spades. If he stops there, and thinks that there are 16 total tricks, then it is worthwhile to bid 3♥ to potentially go down one trick for -50, while the opponents would probably make 110. But that is valid without making any adjustments. The ♠QJ6 are likely to be worth a trick on defense, while they probably are not worth anything on offense. That by itself is enough reason to reduce the estimate of total tricks from 16 to 15 tricks. Furthermore, the red suit honors are of questionable value, while the opponents might have key red cards that lead to even fewer total tricks. If there are only 15 total tricks, as should be expected, then dummy should have sold out to 2♠.

So, dummy overbid. You now want to beat 3♥ by at least 2 tricks. How do you want to defend? What signal is appropriate to partner at trick one?

If this is an *attitude* situation, then you want to play the spade 2 if you want to encourage partner to keep leading spades (you play upside down count and attitude). And if you want to discourage partner from continuing in spades, you play a high spade like the 10. It is a standard agreement to normally give attitude when partner leads at trick one.

If this is a *count* situation, then you want to play a high card like the 10, to show an odd number of spades (you are playing upside down count also), while a small card would show an even number of spades. Partner might need to know how many spades can cash before declarer can ruff. Also, there are some experts like Rick Zucker of New York who like to play count signals exclusively, but that is not standard.

If this is a *suit preference* situation, then if you want a shift to clubs you will play a small card like the 2, and if you want a shift to diamonds you will play a high card like the 10. Furthermore, if you play a middle spade (like the 8), that will show either no preference between clubs and diamonds, or a desire for a continuation of spades - partner would have to figure out which of those two scenarios you want.

I wanted Gail to shift to a club, and I felt that this was a suit preference situation, so I played the spade 2 at trick one. But Gail felt that this was a standard attitude situation, and cashed her spade ace. She felt that this was a standard attitude situation, and she thought that I wanted to cash our 2 spade tricks before they could potentially be discarded on dummy's club suit. She felt that since I wanted her to cash the two spade tricks, that I did not worry about establishing the spade queen for a potential discard.

Who do you agree with? This is the complete hand:

	Dummy	Nobody Vulnerable
	♠QJ6	
	♥J432	
	♦Q6	
West (Gail)	♣AQJ4	East (Jeff)
♠AK4		♠109852
♥5		♥AK109
♦A974		♦J105
♣97653	South	♣10
	♠73	
	♥Q87	
	♦K832	
	♣K82	

In my opinion, a partnership should have basic guidelines about when each of the defensive signals apply, and then they should have exceptions -- my basic guideline is that while I like to follow standard guidelines in defensive signaling, but when I know partner needs some specific information that is not the standard norm, then I will give partner the information that partner needs. Furthermore, I tend to use suit preference signals much more frequently than most pairs do.

Gail has been trying to adapt to my style, but this hand is a good example of where we have historically differences in carding.

Anyway, I still have not answered the question of what is best here. Let me now examine the three different styles of signaling here: attitude, count, or suit preference. You will see that in order to accomplish the desired defense, the suit preference signal is best. And that should be the final determinant of which type of signal should apply here.

If you play attitude or count here, then East can only direct the defense to continue leading spades or not. And East has more information about what the defense wants to accomplish than West does. After all, East is the defender who doubled the contract - he knows things that his partner does not know.

West can assume that East probably has exactly 5 spades since East didn't compete to 3♠. West can also assume that East has 4 strong hearts for suggesting the penalty. And West can assume that East has around 8 or 9HCP, since East bid 1♠ instead of redoubling. This is information that West should reasonably assume. But West does not know East's minor suit distributions, nor how East wants the defense to continue.

If you play suit preference signals here, you are allowing East to request a lead in a specific minor, and that is not available if you play count or attitude here. This allows East to direct the defense. That is very important.

With a club lead at trick two, then when East wins the trump shift at trick 3, he can play a low spade (again suit preference for clubs) to get partner to give him a club ruff. Then a diamond to partner will let you get another club ruff. That will beat the contract 3 tricks - you get 2 high spades, 2 high hearts, 1 high diamond, and 2 club ruffs.

Only suit preference signals here allow the defense to score 500 points, and that is why suit preference signals are best here. Attitude or count signals will only let the defense score 300 points.

Because suit preference signals allow the defenders to defend their best, and because East should be the captain of the defense, suit preference signals are best here.

Furthermore, if it is considered impossible to want to continue leading spades, then suit preference signals apply here. This could be analogous to when dummy had a void in spades after trick one, so the partner would usually play a low spade to request the lower non-trump suit, play a high spade to request the higher non-trump suit, and play a middle spade with no preference or a preference to continue leading spades.