



Ask Jerry

BY JERRY HELMS  jerryhelms.com

Dear Jerry,

I am so confused. It seems that every card my partner plays when we are defending is some type of message for me to shift to a different suit on my next play or the next time I get the lead. Truthfully, I might as well close my eyes, shuffle my cards and lead whatever is closest to my thumb since, by his standards, I never get it right. Help!

Confused

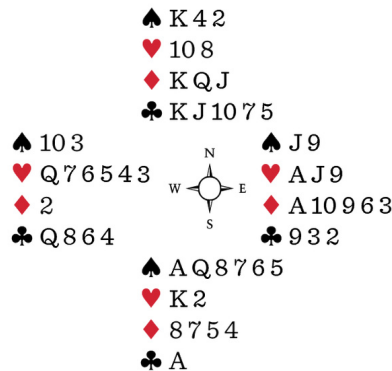
Hi, Confused,

Sadly, many people would be better off using your “shuffle your cards and make a blind lead” method. Actually, your partner’s mania for what is referred to as suit preference is a relatively common affliction suffered by a large number of misinformed players. I think if I hear one more time, “When I played the two, you should have known I wanted you to shift to a club,” I may just lose it, destroying my reputation of having an even temper at the bridge table.

In the world of bridge carding, there are three basic signals: attitude, count and suit preference. If forced to pick one of the three to eliminate from the arsenal of most players, suit preference would clearly be the first to go because of frequent abuse.

There is, however, one specific area in defense where virtually everyone needs to play suit preference: when partner is ruffing and wants to know

what to play after he ruffs. Look at this deal:



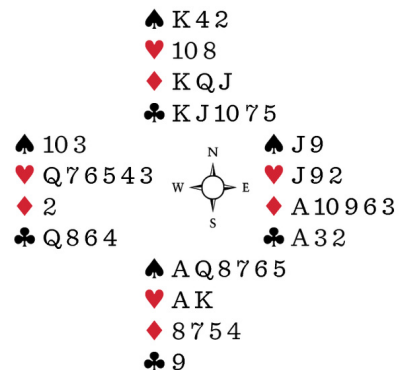
Defending 4 ♠, your partner leads the ♦ 2, which you believe is a singleton. You win the ♦ A, and return a diamond which partner ruffs. Then ...

Provided partner returns a heart, you will win and give him a second ruff to set 4 ♠ one. If, however, partner returns a club at trick three, things do not work out quite so well, as declarer would win the ♣ A, draw trumps, lose the ♥ A and make his contract. How does partner know what to do? Because you can, and should, tell him what to do.

Any time you are leading a card for partner to ruff, the size of the card you return expresses suit preference for what partner should do upon gaining the lead. In the deal above, you want partner to lead back a heart to your ace so that you can give him another ruff. Because hearts is the higher of the non-trump suits, you lead a high

diamond – the ♦ 10 – to ask partner to return a heart.

Let’s change the layout:



This time, your side entry is the ♣ A, the lower of the non-trump suits. To give partner a second ruff, you should return your lowest diamond, the ♦ 3, to request a club return.

In each of these layouts, the wrong shift at trick three spells disaster. In the real world, the card partner returns will not always be clear as a high or low preference – sometimes because of the spot cards you have to work with and sometimes because you have no preference. Even in these cases, you are certainly better off, or at least aware, that your partner is trying to help.

In the world of experts, there are certainly extended options for utilizing suit preference, but for the vast majority, focusing on just those occasions when getting back to partner after a ruff is a fine first step. ■