



Ask Jerry

Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions.
Send your questions to askjerry@jerryhelms.com.

Dear Jerry: What do you think about odd/even signals?

—D. I., Washington, DC

Dear D. I.: The OFFICIAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BRIDGE provides this definition of odd/even signals:

A signaling method that assigns different meanings to odd- and even-numbered spot cards. An odd discard or signal encourages in that suit; an even discard or signal discourages and often doubles as a suit preference signal.

In simpler terms, if your first play in a suit is a 3, 5, 7, or 9, you are making a positive signal about strength in that suit, with the size of the card being irrelevant. If your first play is a 2, 4, 6, 8, or 10, you are making a discouraging signal about that suit.

The size of an even-numbered card becomes suit preference. With spades as trumps, for example, if your first discard is a low, even-numbered heart, such as the ♥2 or ♥4, you are showing interest in the lower ranking of the other two suits—clubs. If you discard the ♥8 or ♥10, you show interest in the higher of the other suits—diamonds.

As with most issues, there are both good and bad things, and occasionally there are ethical considerations.

The good: When you have a clear preference to express to your partner, and your spot cards are appropriate, it is easy to send an unmistakable signal. This is especially useful when playing with less experienced partners. You can direct their defense with the appropriate discard, and when they tell you what they think, you can factor in all the relevant information and try to do what you think is right rather than robotically following their directive.

The bad: Your first discard, playing odd/even always means something. What happens when you have no

preference to express? Remember, if you play any odd card, you like that suit; if you play any even cards, you dislike that suit, but you are giving a suit preference message.

Yes, I have heard people say that the 6 becomes a neutral signal. Unfortunately, there are only four of those in the deck, and sometimes you don't have one.

In addition, what happens when you are dealt inappropriate spot cards for your signaling system? For example, suppose spades are trump, and on the third round of spades you must choose a discard from this hand:

♠ 4 3
♥ A K 8 4 2
♦ 7 5 3
♣ 7 5 3

Discarding from either minor suit shows encouragement in that suit, since it would be an odd card. And a heart discard, an even spot card, is discouraging in hearts and shows preference toward one of your 7-5-3 holdings!

Using standard methods, you have an easy discard of the ♥8.

Here's another example. Hearts are trumps, and on the third round it's time to choose a discard from this hand:

♠ 8 5 3
♥ 4 3
♦ K 5 4 2
♣ K 5 4 2

With absolutely zero preference between clubs and diamonds, what discard do you make?

In standard methods, you could simply discourage in spades by discarding the ♠3. That would leave it up to partner to decide whether to lead a diamond or a club on gaining the lead, based on partner's holdings in the suits and whatever other clues partner has available, such as dummy's holdings.

Ethical considerations: A fast odd discard is clearly encouraging, but how do you read a slow, thoughtful, odd discard? Even the most ethical players would have difficulty choosing the appropriate card to play from the two earlier examples.

When you make a slow odd discard, is your partner supposed to ignore the implications of your agreements based on the pace of your play? I think not. Actually, I know not. Experienced partnerships can usually overcome this obstacle more easily than less experienced players or partnerships.

Bottom line: I don't recommend odd/even signals. Stick with standard signals...or upside-down signals if you prefer them. —JH ♠

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