

## **SMITH ECHO -- THE BASICS**

The Smith Echo is an extremely useful defensive signal that is played by a high percentage of experienced players. It is highly recommended.... and if you master Smith Echo, you and your partners will find that your defense against NT contracts really improves.

"Echo" is a British term that means "high-low" – so when you play a high spot and then a low spot, you are giving an "echo."

Smith Echo only applies in NT contracts..... from 1NT on up to 7NT. Let's assume the opponents have bid 3NT. Partner leads something. Declarer takes the trick and starts to work on his best suit to develop tricks. What would it mean if you played a high spot and then a low spot when declarer leads his suit? Presumably, this would show count in that suit. Is this really the most useful meaning to attach to an "echo" in this situation? Other than one very specific situation (discussed below), giving count here isn't that important. There must be a more valuable way to use the "echo" here.

What if there were a way – after the first trick is completed – to tell your partner, "Wow, I really liked your opening lead – let's keep going in that suit." Or, conversely, "Your opening lead didn't work out so hot, partner – let's consider switching to a different suit when we get a chance."

What if there were a way – as the opening leader – to tell your partner, "My opening lead has worked out great – please be sure to return my suit." Or, conversely, "My opening lead turned out to be a dud, partner – please feel free to switch to something else if you get a chance."

Smith Echo lets you and your partner send all of these messages.

Here's how it works.

On the first trick after declarer has gained the lead, when declarer goes after another suit, if either defender plays a high spot in that suit, it means that defender liked the way the opening lead turned out and encourages continuing that suit when the defense gets the lead. If either defender plays a low spot in that suit, it is a discouraging signal about the opening lead.

Let's be sure to understand from the beginning that encourage and discourage are both relative terms, based on the exact context of what happened on the first trick(s) in the opening lead suit, what the dummy looks like, what the bidding was, etc. More on that as we go along.

Here is an example of Smith Echo in action –

♠ QT2	
♥ 76	
♦ Q654	
♣ AQJ4	
♠ 987	♠ KJ64
♥ AT842	♥ QJ5
♦ K3	♦ 987
♣ 973	♣ T82
♠ A53	
♥ K93	
♦ AJT2	
♣ K65	

You and your partner are E-W. The N-S opponents have bid 1NT-3NT.

Let's say you are sitting West and decide to lead the 4 of hearts..... low from dummy, J from partner, K from declarer. Declarer now plays the K of clubs and another club, running four tricks in that suit. He then leads the Q of diamonds and lets it ride to your K.

Now what? You need to know whether partner has the Q of hearts.... and you really can't tell either way from the opening trick. You have two options: (1) lead a low heart, hoping partner has the Q, or (2) lead a spade, hoping partner can win the trick and lead a heart through declarer's Q. How can you tell what to do?

Smith Echo gives you the answer.

If partner played high-low on the first two rounds of declarer's suit (clubs), that means partner liked your opening lead and wants you to

continue it.... so you play a low heart to partner's Q of hearts, and the defense runs the hearts. Down 1.

But let's say partner played low-high on the first two club tricks. Partner is telling you that he has no further help for you in hearts, and it follows that declarer must have the Q of hearts. Now your only chance is to switch to the 9 of spades and hope partner has the A. If partner's actual hand is ♠ AJ64 ♥ J93 ♦ 987 ♣ T2, he will take his A of spades and lead a heart through declarer, allowing you to run the suit and set the contract. How will partner know to go back to hearts? Your 9 of spades (as opposed to a low spade) says, "I'm not interested in spades"..... and, of course, you will have played Smith Echo yourself (high-low on the first two club tricks) to tell partner that your opening lead has worked out well and you want him to lead it back whenever he gets a chance.

Let's try another example –

♠ 5432	
♥ 9	
♦ AQJT7	
♣ AJ4	
♠ AQT9	♠ J8
♥ J8642	♥ QT53
♦ 962	♦ K53
♣ 5	♣ 8763
♠ K76	
♥ AK7	
♦ 84	
♣ KQT92	

This time, the N-S bidding was 1♦-2♣, 2♦-3NT. Partner leads the 4 of hearts..... 9 from dummy, Q from you, and declarer wins the K. Now declarer leads the 4 of diamonds, partner plays the 2, declarer tries the Q from dummy, and you win your K.

No problem, right? Partner led hearts, you have good hearts yourself, and maybe partner will have the AJ of hearts so the suit will run. It's a piece of cake.

Hold on a second! If you are thinking hard about this as we go along, you should have a nagging bad feeling about that heart return. If partner has the AJ and hearts are ready to run, why did she play the 2 of diamonds on the first round? Why didn't she do a Smith Echo to tell you she is in love with hearts? It appears she doesn't have the A of hearts after all..... and if declarer has it, then that means there are 4 diamond tricks, several club tricks, and two heart tricks ready to be taken..... more than enough to make the contract.

So, if you trust your partner – and if you have the helpful inference from the fact that she didn't Smith Echo – you will switch to the J of spades as your only hope to set the contract. Bingo! Four spade tricks to go with your K of diamonds. Down 1!

Earlier, we said that encourage and discourage are relative terms. Let's explore that a little further.

Example 1: Partner leads the 4 of diamonds against 3NT. Dummy has J53 and you have 962. Dummy plays low, you put up your 9, and declarer wins the K. Declarer now starts to work on clubs. There are two things to think about here. First, you have no help in diamonds, so you don't want to encourage more diamonds. Play low-high on declarer's clubs (i.e., don't Smith Echo). If you get the lead, should you lead back diamonds to partner? If partner used a Smith Echo on the clubs, then yes, you should. If she didn't, then you should analyze the situation to see whether there is a good shift you can make.

Example 2: You lead the 6 of hearts from J9762 against 3NT. Dummy has K4 and wins the K. Declarer now leads diamonds to build some tricks. Let's say you win a diamond trick. Should you continue hearts or lead something else? The answer probably lies in what partner did on declarer's diamonds. Did she play high-low to encourage more hearts? Then you should play them. Did she play low-high to discourage hearts? Then you should consider a switch.

Example 3: Partner leads a low spade against 3NT. Dummy has two small and you have QT5. You play the Q and declarer wins the K. When

declarer leads clubs, what should you do? Take a close look at that T5 of spades you have left. Partner knows you don't have the A of spades or the J of spades – from AQ5 you would have played the A, and from QJ5 you would have played the J. So, in context, the T of spades is the best possible card you could have left in the suit..... tell partner that by using a Smith Echo.

When does Smith Echo not apply? There are two important cases.

First, dummy has a source of tricks but no entry in a side suit. In this situation, the defenders must give each other count when declarer tries to set up dummy's source of tricks, because a holdup might be critical.

Say the bidding has been 2NT-3NT, and dummy tables with:

♠ 984  
♥ T7  
♦ KQJ93  
♣ 953

The opening lead is a heart. Declarer wins a top heart and leads the 5 of diamonds. Smith Echo is nice..... but it has to take a back seat to the more important task of cutting declarer off from those diamonds, if possible. Both defenders must signal count – not Smith Echo – in this situation.

Second, Smith Echo does not apply when a defender does not have flexible cards in the suit that declarer is leading. In other words, that defender may not have the ability to "echo," because he has a singleton in declarer's suit..... or maybe Qx.... or Kx.... or singleton honor. When that happens, there can be no Smith Echo.

Some people play that, when a defender's awkward cards have kept her from making a Smith Echo, the play of a high spot at the first possible time is treated as a Smith Echo (either discarding or following to the first trick in a new suit). That treatment should be avoided when you are learning Smith Echo. Once you have mastered it, then you and your partner can consider whether to expand Smith Echo to these fairly infrequent situations.

Some players use "reverse" Smith Echo. This is analogous to upside-down carding..... low is encouraging, so high-low (an echo) is discouraging. Practically speaking, there is no real difference. You and your partner can

play regular Smith Echo (this is what I play) or reverse Smith Echo. The only thing that really matters is you both are playing the same thing!

Once last word of advice. To play Smith Echo, you have to watch the spot cards closely. A seven-spot can be low, and a 3-spot can be high. Pay careful attention to both rounds of a suit, so you can tell for sure whether partner made a Smith Echo or didn't. There have been many occasions where a 3 from 32 or a J from JT tight was a Smith Echo, and a 10 from JT tight has been a clear failure to Smith Echo. Watch the details, and you will be just fine.