

CUE-BIDDING (SHOWING CONTROLS) LOOKING FOR SLAM by Maritha Pottenger

Blackwood was originally designed to keep people OUT of slam when they were missing two Aces. However, people have a tendency to overuse Blackwood. Nowadays you can find out about the King of trumps (and even the Queen of trumps) as well, but Roman Key Card Blackwood can also be overused.

For many hands, particularly when you have a small doubleton in a suit (and the possibility of two quick losers there), it is better to cue-bid than to just ask for Aces. When you have a void, if you have been unable to show it in other ways (e.g., over a Jacoby 2NT or with a splinter bid), you want to cue-bid rather than just ask for Aces. In order to cue-bid, you must have **suit agreement** (or implied suit agreement). An example would be: **1S-P-3S**-- spades are agreed suit. New suits show controls—1st-round control (Ace or void) OR 2nd-round control (King or singleton).

Originally people had to show first round controls FIRST and second round controls could only be shown after one of the partners had shown a first round control in that suit. However, **it is more efficient to make the cheapest cue-bid you can first**. So most people play that each cue bid (control showing bid) can show FIRST OR SECOND ROUND control (as long as you are below 4NT). **When you bypass one suit, to cue-bid in a higher suit, you DENY first-round OR 2nd-round control in the suit you bypass**. Therefore, after 1S-P-3S, 4C shows ace—or void—or King or singleton in clubs; 4D shows Ace or void or King or singleton in diamonds and DENIES ANY control of clubs; 4H shows Ace—or void—or singleton or King in hearts and DENIES control of clubs AND diamonds. If either partner goes past 4NT to bid a control for the first time in that suit, that control MUST be a FIRST round control (because partner no longer has Roman Key Card Blackwood available to confirm which bids were Aces and which were Kings).

Once EITHER partner has shown a control in a suit, the other partner bidding that suit again show the OTHER control. (First bid could have shown King and second bid Ace OR first bid could have shown Ace and second bid King.) Those later bids CAN take place above 4NT because one partner has already shown a control in the suit in question.

1S-P-4C (a splinter bid agrees to spades); 4D by Opener shows first OR second round control of diamonds.
1S-P-2NT-??—(Jacoby 2NT agrees to spades.) Regardless of Opener's next bid—which could show shortness; bid game; bid 3 of major, show side 5-card suit), if Responder bids a new suit, it is a cue-bid, showing first or second round control. If Opener, for example, bids 3C showing shortness, then 3D by Responder shows a diamond control. 3H by Responder shows heart control and DENIES any diamond control. Etc.
2C-P-2D-P-2S-P-3S-P (spades are agreed suit; any new suit now bid is a cue-bid).

Once in a great while, cue-bids look like game tries in the beginning. For example, 1D-P-1S-P-2S-P-3C: Opener should assume that Responder is making a game try, asking for help in the club suit. If Opener likes his/her hand and/or has help in clubs, bid 4S. Otherwise, bid 3S. If you try to sign off at 3S and partner makes ANOTHER cue bid (e.g., 4D or 4H), now you know that the first bid was a cue-bid & not a game try.

Generally, however, game tries are made after one of a major followed by two of a major. Cue-bids, looking for slam, are usually made at the three-level or above (e.g., 1S-P-3S-P-new suit here is a cue-bid.)

Sample auctions:

1S-P-3S-P-4C-P-4H-P-4S: Opener has shown a club control. Responder has shown 1st or 2nd round control of hearts (and denied ANY control of diamonds). Either defender, no matter what their diamond holding, should lead a diamond!! Opener may have something like AKxxxxx x xx AKQ.

2C-P-2H-P-2S-P-3S-P-4C-P-4D-P-4H-P-4S-P-5C-P-5D-P-7S: Opener has shown a club control. Responder has shown a diamond control. Opener has shown a heart control. Responder temporizes by bidding trump suit. Opener shows second-round control of clubs and Responder then shows second-round control of diamonds. Opener bids the grand slam. Opener probably has something like AKQJ10x A QJ10x AK.

1S-P-4C-P-4H-P-4S-P-5C-P: Responder splinters and Opener shows a heart control. Responder signs off at game and Opener shows first-round control of clubs (going past 4NT ask). Clearly, Opener is desperately hoping that Responder has 1st or second-round control of diamonds. If Responder has the Ace of diamonds, s/he should bid 5D. With King of diamonds, bid 6S (and hope Ace is favorably placed or that partner has Queen). Otherwise, bid 5S & partner will give up. (A diamond lead is obligatory for defenders!) Opener may have something like AKxxxx A xx Axxx. Incidentally, a 5H call by Responder would show King of hearts and deny King of diamonds.

FOOTNOTE:

The advantage of showing 1st OR 2nd round controls as you go along is that you save more bidding room (usually). Also, **if one partner by-passes a suit completely, the other partner KNOWS that slam is off the table if s/he also has two quick losers in the suit that was by-passed.**

For example, **1S-P-3S-P-4D** (showing Ace OR King of diamonds and looking for slam). Since clubs have been by-passed, unless Responder has Ace, King, or singleton or void in clubs, s/he should sign off at 4S.

If you adopt this version (which is recommended), you can only bid 1st OR 2nd round controls BELOW 4NT. Partner must have the option of using 4NT to confirm which of your control-showing cue bids were Aces and which were not!

An example. You hold: AKxxxx KQx xx AK and open 1S. Partner jumps to 3S (promising 4 trumps). You bid 4C, showing 1st or 2nd (at least) control of clubs. Partner bids 4H—showing the Ace of hearts since you are looking at the King and Queen. Partner has by-passed diamonds. You both have two quick diamond losers. Sign off in 4S.

If, by contrast, over your 4C control bid, partner bids 4D, you can now shift to 4NT (Roman Key Card Blackwood), knowing that partner has either the Ace or King of diamonds. If partner shows you two Aces, you will ask for Kings. If partner shows you one King as well, you will bid 7NT. [You are not worried about the Queen of spades as you have a 10-card fit.] If partner shows you only one Ace, you will bid 6S and hope that the Ace of diamonds is onside if partner's Ace is in hearts; or that the Ace of hearts is onside (or partner has the Jack) and that partner has the King of diamonds (or at least the Queen for a finesse option) to go with that Ace.