



Alan Mould

## Cue-bid first-round controls first

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at [elena@ebu.co.uk](mailto:elena@ebu.co.uk)

LET'S first establish what this debate is about. It is about whether you should in general cue-bid first-round controls before second-round controls, or whether you always cue-bid the cheapest control regardless of whether it is first round or second round, an ace, a king, a void or a singleton.

Let's take an example sequence. You hold:  
♠ A Q 7 5 ♥ A K 6 ♦ 8 ♣ Q J 7 6 2  
and the bidding has gone: 1♠ – 1♠ – 3♠ – 4♦ – ?

What now? Playing the 'cheapest cue-bid first' method you must bid 4♣. Partner has denied any sort of club control so you know there are two clubs off the contract, so you have to sign off. So what's the problem, I hear you ask – am I arguing Chris's case for him? Well, the problem is three-fold in my view:

- Firstly (and doubtless Chris is going to say I will moan unjustifiably about this) it is possible to arrive in a slam missing two aces as everyone has gaily cue-bid kings and singletons and at the end no one can tell whether there are two aces off the contract. I recently watched a pair of the current great Italian team do precisely this. But to be fair, this is actually a pretty rare event. Sooner or later someone realises they have a heap of old rhubarb and signs off. So whilst this is unquestionably a downside, it is not as big a problem as might be first feared. Nowhere near as big as the other two issues in my view.
- Cheapest control first bidding works very well when the only issue in relation to a slam is that no suit is uncontrolled, but these hands are very rare. It simply is not the case that on most hands either player is in a position to know that a slam is good provided there are not two quick losers in a suit. Knowing that you don't have

two quick losers is not enough to make a slam – you need twelve tricks. Fifteen years ago someone wrote a book on slam bidding, and commented that you needed three things to make a slam: trumps, tricks and controls. Oh, yes, I remember now – it was me! Just because you have adequate controls does not mean you will be able to envisage the necessary tricks.

- The other objection I have to cheapest control first cue-bidding is the sheer dogmatic nature of it. There is no flexibility, no room for judgement or giving partner the most useful information. You must follow the rule that says you have to cue-bid the cheapest control first. Let's swing the sequence we looked at first around to responder. Say responder has:  
♠ K 9 8 6 4 3 ♥ 4 2 ♦ A K J 7 ♣ 3  
after the sequence 1♠ – 1♠ – 3♠ – ? and decides (quite rightly) that the hand is worth a slam try. Blackwood is silly with ♥x-x, so a cue-bid it is. Playing cheapest control first cue-bids, you have to bid 4♣, you cannot bid 4♦ as that denies a club control. If that seems sensible to you then fine, but it doesn't look sensible to me.

Why does this matter so much? Let's alter opener's hand slightly to:

♠ A J 7 5 ♥ A K 6 ♦ 8 ♣ K J 7 6 2  
and keep the sequence the same: 1♠ – 1♠ – 3♠ – 4♣ – ?

Now if opener can rely on partner to hold the ♠A for this bid, then this hand is really going places; a small slam is almost certain and a grand is still in play. The point is that you know the clubs will make some tricks – A-x in partner's hand gives a very good chance of four club tricks. These tricks are liable to be vital in the twelve necessary to make a slam. But what if partner can have a

singleton or void in clubs? Not so good now. The ♠K is a dubious asset and the long clubs will take an age to set up. Yes, you definitely do not have more than one loser in clubs, but neither do you necessarily have more than one winner. All you know for sure is that partner will be able to ruff your clubs with his trumps – trumps that partner will already have counted as tricks. Hands like this are simply much more difficult to judge with the dogmatic 'I must bid the cheapest control first' style.

For this reason I would never cue-bid a negative control as my first cue-bid in partner's suit – it is just so difficult to judge the trick-taking ability of the hands. The flip side is that I am happy to cue-bid a king in partner's suit if convenient. Partner is going to be really pleased to hear of an ace or king in his suit as it enables the trick-taking ability of the hands to be more accurately assessed. To swing around to responder again after the sequence: 1♠ – 1♠ – 3♠ – ? if I held:

♠ K 9 8 6 4 3 ♥ 4 2 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ K 3  
I would happily bid 4♣. Imagine how charmed partner is going to be hearing 4♣ if he holds a suit such as A-Q-J-x-x. He can count five tricks in the suit – but only if I can be trusted to hold a positive control.

This flexibility of approach and the ability to bid to tell partner the most important information is precisely what the cheapest control first style of cue-bidding denies you.

So, in summary, cheapest control first cue-bids work very well when the only issue is that all suits are controlled whereas the generally first-round controls before second-round works better when the issues are about the degree of fit and the ability to make twelve tricks. So vote for my argument and strike a blow for flexibility and intelligent bidding, and against slavish devotion to fixed rules. □

# Cue-bid cheapest controls first

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR).  
Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

THERE are three things you need to bid a slam:

1. Enough aces (or in fact, key cards)
2. Enough tricks
3. No ace-king cashing in a side suit

Blackwood, or some variant, is a very good tool for the first point, but you need cue-bids to solve points 2 and 3. This debate focuses on whether you can cue-bid a first- or a second-round control, or whether you can only cue-bid a first round control (unless you have already bypassed that suit, and can then cue-bid a second round control).

I am sure that Alan will come up with hands where knowing that partner has an ace in a suit is vital rather than having that uncertainty. But for each one of these there are a lot more bread-and-butter hands where a more flexible approach is needed. We need to think about the principles and the frequency.

## Enough tricks

Whether there are enough tricks is largely about judgement – about knowing when to cue-bid and when not to cue-bid. For example:

♠ A K Q 5 2 ♥ K 8 ♦ Q 9 3 ♣ K Q 6  
Suppose the auction (uncontested) starts 1♠ – 2♦ – 2NT – 3♣. If 2NT was showing 15-19 points (as many people play it), you now need to be able to show interest in slam, but you don't have an ace to cue-bid.

This seems like a common problem to me, and if I cannot cue-bid a king here then I really don't see any way round it. Allowing the cue-bid of an ace or king gives the extra flexibility needed to show interest in slam, without misleading partner. Opposite even quite a mediocre hand such as:

♠ J 7 6 ♥ A 9 5 ♦ A K 8 2 ♣ 7 5 4  
you would like to play in 6♣, but you are never even going to get close if you cannot show partner that you have a 19 count rather than a 15 count.

I suspect faced with this problem, Alan would just cue-bid 4♣ anyway and 'hope' – in which case wouldn't we prefer just to know what we are doing so that we don't have to hope?

Incidentally, it is important to note that very few top players play so-called 'mandatory' cue-bids, except when one hand is already quite limited in range, as it is far more important to be able to show or deny interest in slam. So with:

♠ K Q 5 4 2 ♥ K 8 ♦ Q 9 3 ♣ K Q 6  
you would simply raise 3♣ to 4♣.

Sticking with a similar sequence, suppose it starts 1♠ – 2♦ – 2NT – 3♣ – 4♦. If you hold the king of hearts and the ace of clubs, there will be many times where you would like to show slam interest, but don't want to go to the five level. How many times have you bid 5♣ in such a sequence and then subsided in 5♠? Don't you just groan and hope that 5♣ isn't going to be too high?

The more flexible cue-bid style allows you to bid 4♥ here, showing interest in slam, but gratefully allowing your partner to stop at the four level.

## No ace-king cashing in a side suit

The final key to bidding slams is to make sure that there are not two cashing tricks off it. Blackwood will check that two aces are not missing, but the ace-king combination requires cue-bidding.

Suppose as responder you have:  
♠ K J 8 ♥ K 9 ♦ K Q J 8 4 ♣ 7 6 2  
and the auction starts the same as above, with partner again cue-bidding 4♦. The



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full sequence has been: 1♠ – 2♦ – 2NT – 3♣ – 4♦.

If partner has denied the ace and king of clubs, then this is not a problem hand. You sign off in 4♣. Indeed, for those of you who want an easy life, I can see you nodding sagely at the table thinking 'that Chris has a good point'. And I confess to a certain satisfaction when playing with some of my slowest partners, as when this comes up I see them briefly wrestling to find something to think about, before deciding it is beyond them, and subsiding in game.

If, however, partner has denied the ace of clubs but not the king, I am left with a real problem. I don't have the ace of hearts to cue-bid, and I have very little idea what to do. Partner could have a 17 count such as:  
♠ A Q 7 6 4 ♥ A 8 3 ♦ A 5 ♣ K 5 3  
and slam is easy, or he might have a 19-count:

♠ A Q 7 6 4 ♥ A Q J ♦ A 5 ♣ Q 5 3,  
when 5♣ is going to be one off.

Once again, the flexible style of cue-bidding not only allows you to decide whether to go for slam or not, but it enables you to stop at the four level when not going for slam.

## Conclusion

We have shown that points 2 and 3 are much better handled by showing first- or second-round controls, and also the advantage of being able to stay low. There is actually one other advantage concerning the use of Blackwood. This style of cue-bid tends to show at a low level that all suits are covered, thus allowing Blackwood to be used, while cue-bidding the first-round control first often leads players to go to the five level to try to ascertain this, and even when this is right, they have then bypassed the Blackwood bid. □