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Bidding Matters

The 12 habits of highly effective bidders

6. They make the bids partner wants to hear (continued).

In previous articles, we looked at game-try auctions and the confusion that results from answering questions partner didn't ask. The same pitfalls occur when investigating slams, often with more disastrous consequences. Here's an auction that can cause problems for 2/1 pairs:

<i>You</i>	<i>Partner</i>
1♠	2♦
2♠	3♠

Partner would have bid 4♠ with a minimum, so 3♠ shows some extra values (a good 14 points or more) and gives you room to cuebid at the four level. Is this a demand for a cuebid, however, or just a suggestion? If you consider this an opportunity to make a "free" cuebid on the way to game, you'd bid 4♥ with:

♠K 107654 ♥AQJ ♦7 ♣QJ4.

So begins the auto-cuebid sequence, where you're both showing controls for slam, but neither of you knows if you have enough power to take even 11 tricks. You may land in 5♠ or 6♠ with a mediocre fit and only 27 or so high-card points.

The best way to manage this auction is to treat partner's space-saving raise as telling, not asking. He's showing his values and giving you the option to explore, but he hasn't made an "official" slam try. It's up to you to confirm your interest before a real investigation can begin.

With this hand, make the value bid of 4♠ to show a minimum. This doesn't deny an outside ace. If partner has enough to make 6♠ opposite your hand, he'll bid on.

Partner wants you to initiate a slam-try only if you have something extra:

♠AK9764 ♥A 105 ♦K6 ♣102.

This hand is worth a cuebid, and the standard choice would be 4♥. If you consider which cuebid will be most helpful to partner, though, you'll choose 4♦. You hope to talk partner into using Key Card Blackwood, and showing values in his suit is your most encouraging advance.

When-in-doubt cuebidding guidelines

A cuebidding sequence can be an advantage or an adventure in your search for a slam. Even expert pairs suffer the occasional disaster, so the shorter and simpler, the better. When faced with a dilemma about which suit to cuebid — or whether you should cuebid at all — your main consideration should be giving partner what he needs to make a decision. The guidelines below may help you resolve close cases.

A first-round cuebid doesn't have to promise an ace. The Italians popularized a system where early cuebids show first- or second-round controls. You don't have to be playing their system to use this strategy if you believe partner would rather hear about a king than an ace.

Show honors rather than shortness. If you have a choice of showing a void or an ace in an unbid suit, cuebid the ace. If choosing between a singleton and a king, cuebid the king. Don't cuebid voids or singletons in partner's suit.

If you want to encourage, cuebid the suit where you know partner has the problem. You open 1♠, partner bids 2NT (Jacoby forcing raise), and you bid 4♠ to show a balanced minimum. Partner now cuebids 5♣ and you hold:

♠107654 ♥AK4 ♦A65 ♣J4.

Partner is missing three red controls and is still trying for slam, so he must have powerful trumps. Cooperate by bidding 5♥, the suit he's most worried about (the missing heart control must be the reason he didn't Blackwood). If partner bids 5♠, you'll follow with 6♦ and hope he gets the message that you have both aces with concentrated heart values.

You're not bound to a cuebid sequence once it starts. A cuebid from partner doesn't always demand a return cuebid. You can start cuebidding then use Blackwood or jump to slam without showing all your controls.

Avoid the "practice" cuebid. If you already know what the final contract will be, get there quickly, before you tell the opponents what to lead.

A cuebid isn't always a cuebid. If your auction hasn't confirmed a trump fit and forcing-to-game strength, a new-suit bid at the three level — and sometimes the four level — should be interpreted as a game try or a natural suggestion of a trump suit.

If you have a clear alternative, don't start or continue a cuebid sequence. From partner's standpoint Blackwood or a jump to slam will be easier to handle than a cuebid. More to come in the next issue.