

Cue Bidding for Slam Exploration

What does this auction show?

1C	1H	
1S		Unbal. probably 4-5 Spades/Clubs
	2D	GF (XYZ or 4 th Suit Forcing)
2H		3 Hearts
	2S	Spade fit - suit agreement
3C		2 of top 3 C's
	3D	D control
3S		S control, no H control
	3N	12-14, with a H control, not to play
?		

What about here?

AT54 AK8 AQ95 J8

1D	1S	
3S	4D	
?		bid 4S.

Why? P has denied a C control and you lack one as well.

You can only have these conversations, and make informed decisions about slam, if you have a few fundamental agreements in place.

In this session, my plan is to introduce you to 12 “rules” for more structured cue bidding and will deal with Fast Arrival, Non-Serious 3N and Italian Cue bids.

1. Introduction

My plan is to outline agreements I like to use. You can pick and choose - even if you don't like my suggestions, perhaps I'm flagging areas where you and your partner should still consider figuring out what you want to play (rather than fielding it at the table).

I'll try to identify what's “standard” along the way, and what's more unusual.

There are 3 basic objectives for effective cue bidding

(i) **1st Objective:** *making sure you do not have 2 quick losers in any suit.* Small slam is a good prospect if you have 33 points. But that means the Opp's might have as much as an A and a K. All is usually good, unless those 7 points are in the same suit....

(i) **2nd Objective:** signalling to P which of 4 hands you might have:

- (a) dead min.
- (b) normal opening
- (c) extras (15+)
- (d) 19+ (no need to signal here, if P opens and you have this big a hand, your only concern is the 1st objective)

We all have the tools to get to the 5 level. What we need are agreements to prevent that from happening too often!

(iii) **3rd Objective:** evaluating fit for slam - and counting tricks.

Do your current tools allow you to do all of these things?

2. *Italian cue bids? Or showing First round controls?*

The previous standard used to be: first cue bid shows 1st round control. Many still like this approach. I think this “works” if it's combined with less well-defined agreements respecting Fast Arrival (and it was popular at a time when there were fewer sophisticated keycard agreements).

BBO robots cue bid 1st round controls.

“Italian Cue Bidding” shows 1st and 2nd round controls up the line. If you skip over a suit, you deny a control in that suit. If P skips over a suit and you continue to cue bid, you promise a control in the skipped suit.

Initially, cuebidding 1st and 2nd round controls may seem confusing

Personally, I think it solves most problems, and any ambiguity can be sorted out by asking about keycards later (which you can often do, because you save space by efficiently bidding 1st and 2nd round controls up the line).

Let's see how bidding 1st round controls works:

KJ7 AKJ974 87 K7

1H
2C 2H
3H ?

This is a great hand and with a nice 6c trump suit and side controls; obviously you are looking at slam. But you can't ask for keycards until you make sure you don't have 2 quick D losers. If you're not playing Italian Cue bids, how do you do that without any 1st round controls?

Change the hand so that you have the AC instead of the KC

KJ7 AKJ974 87 A7

Now you can cuebid 4C, but you've skipped over S's - and P doesn't know if S's are a concern.

Does P need to know which suits are of concern? Not always, but what if your hand is

QJ4 AKJ974 A8 A7

Now you cuebid 4C. What does P's 4H bid say now?

Agreeing that cue bids promise 1st round control answers some questions, but makes many hands very difficult to deal with.

Go back to the original hand and say the bidding goes as suggested below:

KJ7 AKJ974 87 K7

	1H	
2C		
	2H	
3H		I don't have a Fast Arrival hand
	3S	I have the A or K of S's
4C		I have the A or K of C's (You know it's the AC)
	4H	I don't have a D control
?		Now P can figure out that a D control is gold and the necessary ingredient for asking about keycards

“Rule” 1: effective cue bidding requires showing 1st and 2nd round controls up the line.

3. Tools Needed to Cue Bid effectively

(i) Fast Arrival Agreement

- do you play Fast Arrival? (FA means that, in a GF auction, you bid game as soon as possible with minimum values.)

If you do, how specifically have you defined what kind of hand is shown by an FA bid?

1S	2C
3C	3S
?	

(a) **Q8765 AJ A2 J987**

(b) **Q8765 Q4 A2 KJ87**

These are both awful hands. What would you bid with them?

Should you cuebid 4D with either hand? If so, how can P tell whether you have a 12 point hand, a hand with extras, or a 19+ hand?

For me, hand (b) is a FA 4S.

But hand (a) is different because, although it is a minimum hand, it has too many controls to bid 4S and shut down the auction. Your controls are gold.

What is too control rich?

I like Gavin Wolpert's definition:

"Rule" 2: you may jump to game so long as the hand you are showing is carefully defined: you have minimum values and do not have either
- 3 key cards, or
- 2 key cards and the Q of trump.

What about this hand?

KQ5 KQT74 7 QJ96

1H 1S
2C 2D
2H 3H
?

You are in a GF auction (4th Suit Forcing)

P's raise of your H suit shows 3c support.

If you had a minimum hand, FA rules would apply provided you do not have 3 keycards, or 2 keycards and the Q of trump, then you are permitted to rebid 4H.

But this is a 13 point hand, so doesn't qualify for FA (some 13 point hands might - hand evaluation is important, as we talked about last time - but I'm not going to explore that here - too much else to cover!)

You should bid 3S to show the S control.

"Rule" 3: Cue bidding at the 3 level *does not* show extra values, and may be the information P needs to judge whether slam is a

possibility.

What would you bid without a S control? 3N. Why? That's our next point of discussion! (3N would show "mild" Slam Interest. Basically, it denies a FA hand as well as a hand with extras.)

Let's go back to hand (a)

(a) **Q8765 AJ A2 J987**

After	1S	2C
	3C	3S
	?	

You have the AH, the AD and the QS - too many useful cards to shut the auction down.

So how do you show a hand that has mild SI ("Slam Interest")?

(ii) Non-Serious 3N (or Serious 3N)

The answer is to use 3N to distinguish between a hand with mild SI and a hand with strong SI.

There are 2 versions - both work just fine. I can guarantee your preference will be dictated by which version you're introduced to first :)

This is a Meckwell invention, and they use Serious 3N.

I use non-serious - so that's the one I'll explain.

If you have suit agreement, and you don't have a FA hand then, as discussed, the usual agreement is that cue bidding at the 3 level doesn't promise extras, or SI, it's just a courtesy bid.

What about cue bidding at the 4 level?

"Rule" 4: a cue bid at the 4 level or higher shows serious SI - you have a control in the bid suit, and a hand that has extras. (Extras in this context means: more than an average opening, so 15+ - but remember, hand evaluation is important and not all 15 point hands are equal!) Slams are easy to bid when one partner opens, and the other has 19+ points. The agreement we are discussing caters to finding slam when both partners have 15+.

So what does 3N show?

"Rule" 5: bidding 3N shows mild SI - too much to bid FA, not enough to cuebid at the 4 level.

"Rule" 6: Where you have a major suit fit, 3N is not a proposal to play!

Let's go back to hand (a)

(a) Q8765 AJ A2 J987

1S	2C
3C	3S
?	bid 3N

This hand bids 3N, after P's 3S. This bid confirms a fit in a GF auction, to show mild SI.

Change Hand (a) so that you have a K better in values, and you instead cue bid at the 4 level so P knows you have the better hand:

Q8765 AJ A2 KJ87

1S	2C
3C	3S
?	now you have "extras" and can show that, as well as a control in C's, by bidding 4C.

4. Cue bids after major suit agreement?

If P raises your 1st bid suit after finding a fit in a Major suit: is it a cue bid or natural?

AKQJ8 654 Q754 6

1S	2H
3H	3S
?	

What does P's 3S bid show?

It's possible to play 3S as still exploring which major suit is the better strain. (Karen Walker, a columnist in the BB would play it this way).

Where I am right now, the agreement I like is that, after major suit agreement, 3S is always a cuebid.

"Rule" 7: any bid after suit agreement in a major is a cue bid, even a raise of P's first bid suit.

This agreement tends to simplify cue bidding auctions, and keeps bidding lower, while you try to figure out whether you have enough for slam. Perhaps, as part of my bridge journey, I will eventually decide that the ambiguity from the KW approach is justifiable. But I'm not there yet :)

5. Bids after minor suit agreement?

What about bids after minor suit agreement? Are further bids showing: fit? cue bids? or promising (or asking about) stoppers?

"Rule" 8: cue bids are on after you are no longer searching for strain (searching for the best contract, whether no trump or in a suit). The search ends if you have agreement in a major suit.

"Rule" 9: in contrast, the search for NT or a major suit fit continues even after minor suit agreement below the 4 level. (So other bids in this case are not cue bids. They are fit showing or stopper showing)

1S	2D	
3D	3S	
?		P has 3 card S support

1S	2D	
2H	3C	
3D	3S	
?		P has 2 card S support and some concern about 3N

Always think game before slam. Agreeing on a minor below 3NT in no way SETS trump, and in no way prevents you from further probing for 3NT or a major suit fit.

AQJ43 Q Q972 Q54

1S	2C	
2D	3D	
?		bid 3H.

The *initial assumption* by partner is that, in this sequence, the bid of 3H (the fourth suit in a 2/1 auction) asks for a H stopper, and is not a cue bid in support of a possible D slam.

If P bids 3N on the assumption you are showing a stopper (or asking for a stopper) and you decide to move past 3N, you are confirming for Partner that your 3 H bid was actually a cuebid.

1S	2C	
2D	3D	
3H		at this point, P thinks you are asking for a H stopper
	3N	
4D	?	now P knows your 3H bid showed a control

Bids after agreement in a minor are aimed at strain, not slam.

Q42 AKJ7 AKT54 8

1D	1S	
2H	3D	
?		bid 3S.

Showing your three card S support provides P with a pattern of your hand (patterning out). Maybe the best contract is a Moyesian fit in 4S. In any event, patterning out will provide P with additional information. 3S suggests C shortness. Let's see what P does. With S controls, they may continue exploring slam.

But you have so much; is it possible you will be missing slam?

When this hand came up, I just hoped that P's initial 1S bid meant that S's were covered and so asked for key cards in D's, then went down when the opp's cashed 2 S's off the top.

These agreements are essential for exploring whether 3N is a viable option, but they don't mean that you can't explore slam at the 3 level.

This is a tough concept to get, so don't worry if it takes a while to wrap your brain around it.

6. Cue bidding If partner skips over a suit?

This is why bidding controls up the line works so well! Here's a hand we started with at the beginning:

AT54 AK8 AQ95 J8

1D	1S	
3S	4D	P is showing serious Slam Interest
?		bid 4S.

Why? P's 4D shows serious Sl, so 15+. And you have 18 HCP, so 33 seems enough for slam.

But, P's 4D bid denies a C control and you lack one as well. So it doesn't matter how much

combined power you have. You have 2 quick Club losers and must sign off in 4H.

"Rule" 10: if P's cue bid skips over a suit, then you can only continue exploring slam if you have a control in the skipped suit.

What about the situation where you have the C control, but need a H control. How do you show that?

AT54 J8 AQ95 AK8

1D	1S	
3S	4D	
?		bid 4H.

4H in this sequence confirms a C control, and suggests P go on if P has a H control.

Why? This works only if you have agreed that you cue bid up the line, and P can't continue exploring slam unless P has a control in a suit you have skipped.

But why doesn't it show both a H control and a C control? It could, but how useful is that agreement? If you still have SI and know you have controls in all the side suits, it's time to ask for keycards!

This is the way this works: you have a way to deal with the bidding if you have both H and C controls. You can key card.

If you lack a C control sign off! There's no point in telling P you have a H control if neither of you has a C control.

But you don't have a way of confirming a C control and asking about H's, unless the sequence above gives this message: don't worry about C's, and please explore slam if you have a H control.

AKQJT AK32 QJ 54

1S	2N
3S	4D
?	

This is basically the same as the last situation. Bidding Jacoby 2N doesn't change anything. Bid 4S. You have 2 quick C losers.

What does this next sequence show? It is based on the agreement that further slam exploration promises a control in a suit P skips.

1S	2N	*Jacoby
3C		C shortness
	3H	H control, no D control

3N** ? ** 3N is non-serious...never to play

P has 12-14 points, too much for Fast Arrival but not enough for serious Slam Interest

And P has a D control!

Why? Since your 3H denied a D control, opener can't bid non-serious 3N, expressing 'mild' SI, without a D control.

If he lacks a D control, he must bid 4S.

7. Bids that request cue bidding:

"Rule" 11: when P requests cue bidding, the non-serious 3N agreement is OFF

(i) Requesting cue bidding in an auction that begins with 2C:

AT AKQT762 A87 A

2C	2D
3H	3N
?	

Many use this jump sequence to show a self-sufficient suit, 8.5 tricks or better, and to request P to cuebid.

After a request to cue bid, 3N denies any controls (it is not Non-Serious 3N).

(ii) Requesting cue bidding in a 2/1 auction

K6 AKQT95 Q4 J84

1H	2D	
3H	4C	
?		bid 4D

A jump to 3H, in a 2/1 sequence, shows a solid suit and requests cue bidding, but it does not promise extras. This bid can be made with any points.

4C denies a S control.

What does 4D show? We covered this earlier. It doesn't say anything about a D control. 4D promises a control in the suit P skipped: S's. And it suggests that if P has a D control, P should explore slam.

(iii) Requesting cue bidding after XYZ or 2WayNMF.

QJ5 KQ4 Q8 AJT98

1C	1H	
1N	2D	artificial GF
2H*		3 card H's, denies 4 card S suit
	3H	Please cue-bid (Your 1N bid limited your hand, so P isn't asking about extras, so 3N would deny side controls)
4C		promises a C control, denies a S control, and doesn't say anything about extras
	4D	promises a S control
4H		no D control.

Opener's 4C bid promises a control in C's, but doesn't say anything about extras or SI. Why? Just as with the sequence that began with 2C, Responder's 3H bid, requesting cuebids, overrides the non-serious 3N agreement.

8. Special Agreements.

(i) Cue bidding your first bid suit?

1S	2C
2H	3H
3S	?

What does this show? Since the 1S opening usually promises values in the suit, cuebidding your first bid suit should show 2 of the top 3.

Similarly:

1S	2D
2H	3H
3S	4D
?	4D should show 2 of the top 3.

This is not a standard agreement, but it's one I like and has proved to be very useful. For example, if P bids 4D to show 2 of the top 3, and you have the A, K or Q of that suit, you know you have a pretty certain source of tricks for slam.

(ii) Cue bids at the 5 level show 1st round control...or do they?

I read this 'rule' frequently. But examples we've discussed above show that it's often necessary to cuebid a K at the 5 level.

(iii) Cue bidding shortness

4 AKQT7 AK43 Q86

1H	2D	
3D	3H	agrees H's, not a cue bid in support of D's
?		

Another 'rule' is not to cuebid shortness first round, and this seems to be a common expert agreement. But what else are you supposed to do in this situation?

Skipping over shortness to cuebid 4D may make it impossible to figure out whether we have the necessary controls in C's and S's (this happened to me).

My current working approach is:

"Rule" 12: do not show shortness if there's room at the 3 level to show HC controls. But once we reach 3S or the 4 level, skipping over shortness doesn't make any sense.

I'm prepared to be told I'm wrong about this :)

There are so many more SI cue bidding topics that could be discussed. But I'm stopping here in the hopes that this can be covered in the time we have available (and doesn't represent too much information all at once).

9. *Summary of basic ideas for effective cue bidding.*

1. Define your Fast Arrival agreement
2. Use Italian cue bidding
3. Use non-serious 3N (or serious 3N) so you can distinguish between various hand strengths
4. If P skips over a control and you don't have a control in that suit - STOP exploring slam!
5. Any bid (other than a Fast Arrival), after P skips over a control, promises a control in the skipped suit.

I hope some of these ideas are new to you, and that you will give them a try. Even if everything is familiar, I hope pulling these themes together in a relatively coherent whole is helpful!

(And also, I'm only too happy to respond to any questions about these materials.)