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Newer Players

Ask Jerry

Dear Jerry,
My partner and I are having some problems with our slam bidding. In particular, we need help with asking for aces versus cuebidding. Help!

Jason

Hi Jason,

As a general rule, ask for aces when the number held is the only relative issue. Use cuebidding when your needs are for specific controls.

In 1933, Easley Blackwood invented the 4NT ace-asking convention that still bears his name. The intent of this convention was to allow a partnership to ask about the quantity of aces and kings held after establishing both the power and fit for possible slam. In reality it was almost a failsafe to stop short of slam when an adequate number of aces were not available and not as a vehicle to propel into slam prematurely. A perfect example of the use of Blackwood:

Partner opens 1♠ and you hold:

♠K 8 7 6 3 2 ♥A K Q J 10 ♦4 ♣A.

The only relevant issue is the number of aces partner holds. Using standard responses, 5♣ would show zero or four aces, 5♦ one ace, 5♥ two aces, 5♠ three aces. If partner admits to one ace, you can easily bid 6♠. If partner admits to two aces, you can count 13 tricks – you should bid 7NT!

Cuebids to investigate a possible slam should more accurately be called “control bids.” A cuebid by definition is a bid in an opponent’s suit for any of a variety of reasons. A “control bid” is an action taken once game has been forced and trumps are established, where a bid in a new suit cannot possibly be an attempt to play that strain.

There are two times where it is virtually never correct to launch into any form of Blackwood.

① When holding a void in a side suit.

♠A K Q 5 ♥A K 9 7 5 3 2 ♦7 3 ♣—

You open 1♥ and partner makes a limit raise. Clearly the power and fit for slam are there. What good would it do to ask for aces? If partner held:

♠J 4 3 ♥J 8 6 4 ♦Q 6 2 ♣A Q 5,

a one ace response would not really help since you are off the first two diamond tricks. If, however, partner’s hand was:

♠J 4 3 ♥J 8 6 4 ♦A Q 5 ♣Q 6 2,

still another one-ace response, but this time 12 tricks are easily available.

This solution – make a control bid in clubs, reflecting slam interest and a club control, asking partner to co-operate with a control of his own.

You	Partner
1♥	3♥
4♣	?

Usually you control bid the cheapest control you hold. In this case, because all you’re really interested in is a diamond control, by bidding 4♣, it makes it easy for responder to show you what you need if he holds it.

With the first example hand, partner should return to 4♥ since his club control is duplicated by yours. On the second example, responder should make a 4♦ control bid. After that, opener can confidently bid a slam.

② When holding fast losers in an unbid side suit. As responder, holding:

♠A Q ♥K Q J 7 4 3 ♦J 4 ♣8 5 3.

The auction starts:

Partner	You
1♣	1♥
4♥	?

The leap to 4♥ describes a hand with four-card support and around 19 support points. With your 13 HCP and strong hearts, slam potential is clear. Looking at those fast diamond losers, using Blackwood to determine the quantity of aces would not provide the right information.

Opener’s hand might be:

♠K J ♥A 9 5 2 ♦10 5 ♣A K Q J 4.

Or it could be:

♠K 3 ♥A 9 5 2 ♦K Q 5 ♣A K 6 4.

On the first, despite 31 HCP, you are facing two fast diamond losers. On the second, you can make a slam.

Far better would be a control bid sequence. With either hand, the auction might start:

Partner	You
1♣	1♥
4♥	4♠
5♣	5♥
?	

Lacking a diamond control, opener would pass 5♥ with the first hand but bid slam with the second hand.

Control bids generally start with the cheapest suit you control, with the exceptions noted above. On this auction, responder shows a spade control, opener a club control, and responder signs off, pinpointing the diamond problem. Opener should recognize responder’s diamond problem and bid a slam. Note that on both examples, Blackwood by responder would receive the same response with vastly different consequences! ☹