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This Week in Bridge

(406) Control-Showing Bids

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

Having *control* of a suit (or control in a suit) means *not having two quick losers in that suit*. More specifically, we call it *First Round Control* if we have the Ace or a void in the suit – no quick losers. We call it *Second Round Control* if we have the King or a singleton in the suit – only one quick loser. An important part of bidding slam is to have control of all of the suits – if the opponents can take the first two tricks in a suit, then slam may not make. One way that we can communicate to partner that we have control in a suit is with a *Control-Showing Bid (CSB)*. Here we look at how we use them to work together with partner and explore slam.

Control-Showing Bids

When we are attempting to explore slam and we are considering how to exchange information about our hand we often have a choice in how to approach things.

- On some hands, it is most useful to have holistic information to help us judge what to do. We may choose to get the information about the *number* of Aces partner holds, and we discover that by bidding Blackwood (or Keycard).
- On other hands, more specific information is needed to make a good decision about slam. This specific information is not “how many” total Aces partner has, but “which” Ace partner has – this can be discovered by using *Control-Showing Bids (CSB)*.

These CSBs can be used to discover specific information - voids and singletons as well as Aces and Kings. This specific information can be valuable in helping us judge if slam is likely to be a good contract.

Note: Historically these bids were called “Cuebids”, but there has often been confusion with these CSB and the bidding of the opponent’s suit as a cuebid. That is why we have taken to calling these control-showing bids, instead of control-showing cuebids.



How to Make a Control-Showing Bid

To make a CSB, we need the following conditions to be satisfied:

- We have discovered a fit (8+ cards).
- We are in a forcing auction.
 - Examples -- 2/1 GF, Jacoby 2NT, Splinter, etc...
 - Some bids force to game as they start cuebidding: 1M- 3M - 4♣. (Usually not a jump.)

Under these conditions we usually make CSBs just below game.

- In a Major, a CSB will be other suits bid above 3-Major.
- In a minor, a CSB will usually be other suits bid between 4-minor and 5-minor. Sometimes we can make a cuebid in 4♣ when 4♦ is the suit, but this is not common.

Our “rule of thumb” is that CSBs start *one level below game*.

American Style Control-Showing Bids

Once we have the right conditions and are at the proper level (as above) then we make a CSB. We do this by bidding a new suit at the appropriate level. First, let’s examine *American Style Control-Showing Bids*. With this agreement, we bid our first round controls up the line. When we bid a new suit playing traditional American Style CSBs, this shows 1st round control – Ace or void.

Example 1

1♠ 3♠

4♣

1st round control in ♣ - ♣A or ♣ void.

Example 2

1♠ 3♠

4♦

When we bypass a suit, we deny 1st round control in the suit. 4♦ shows a 1st round control in ♦, but no 1st round control in ♣.

Example 3

1♥ 2NT*

3♥ 4♣

1st round control in ♣, no 1st round control in ♠, ♦ control is unknown.

Note: In American Style CSBs, after we have shown our 1st round controls, we proceed to show our 2nd round controls.



When and How to Use Control-Showing Bids Effectively

So now that we know a bit about when CSBs apply and what they mean, we want to discuss how to make use of them to make us better slam bidders.

Example 4

Imagine the following situation - we have a very good hand and a ♠ fit, but two small ♣. If we bid 4NT and ask for Aces (Keycards), we might find out we are missing one Ace. At that point we will still not know if it is safe to bid slam. We might know we have lots of tricks once we gain the lead, but the opponents might be able to take the first two ♣ tricks. If we knew that one of partner's Aces was the ♣A then we could more confidently bid the slam. CSBs can help accomplish this:

1♠ 2NT
3♠ 4♣
4NT 5♥
6♠

Knowing we are not off the first two tricks in ♣ allows us to confidently use 4NT Keycard and then bid slam. This is a common example of how we may use CSB - to help us know if it is OK to bid a slam even though we are off an Ace and have an uncontrolled suit.

There are many situations when knowing specifically which Ace(s) partner holds can be incredibly useful in helping us properly evaluate our hand. For example, if partner has the Ace opposite our KQTx we are very happy, whereas if partner has another Ace (say opposite our void or singleton), then that is not as good for us. Getting (or not getting) a CSB from partner can be what helps us make the decision to stop in 4-Major on hands where that is the last making spot. One of the situations where partner is most upset with us is when we bid to 5-Major and go down 1, so let's try to avoid that.

Most importantly, the process of using CSBs is a cooperative decision-making process – we show information about our hand and partner tells us information about their hand. Compare this with Keycard, which is a unilateral process -- only one player says anything about their hand. Often a cooperative process (CSB) is the best choice in helping us make a good decision about slam.



Other Control-Showing Bid Styles

Italian Style Control-Showing Bids

Some players choose to play a different style of control bidding, where they bid 1st or 2nd round controls the first time they make a CSB in a suit.

Example 5

1♠ 3♠

4♣

Playing Italian Style CSB, 4♣ shows singleton, void, ♣K, or ♣A.

This style of CSB is less specific about what it shows – notice the 4♣ bid above was ambiguous. But an Italian style CSB provides much stronger negative inferences. If partner bypasses a suit, we know they have two quick losers in that suit. This allows us to immediately stop investigating slam when we also have two quick losers there ourselves.

Note: The downside of this style of cuebidding is that we don't know exactly what partner's cuebid shows. CSB in this style is less specific than the American Style CSB.

Modern Style Control Showing Bids

A modern blend of CSB styles is probably superior to both more traditional styles (American or Italian Style). Some partnerships choose a blend of agreements:

- Show Aces or Voids in unbid suits.
- Show Aces in our own suits.
- Show Aces or Kings in partner's suits (of known 4-cards or longer)
- Do not show shortness in partner's suit.

This modern style of CSB is an excellent balance between communicating to partner our useful cards while not giving up the clarity of our CSB.

Conclusion

Control-Showing Bids are a complex addition to our slam bidding tool set. These bids allow you to express slam interest while keeping the auction low. You can use them to find out if partner is willing to cooperate with your slam try or wants to stop in game. These CSBs also allow you to get specific information that may help you better visualize partner's hand and determine if a slam will have excellent or poor play. Combining CSB with other tools like Keycard makes your slam bidding far more accurate. This is always our goal any time we develop a new slam bidding tool. You should learn to make use of these to help you become a better slam bidder!