

Control-Bids

Let's begin a more in-depth discussion of control-bids. Take a look at this uncontested auction:

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♦	1♥
3♥	3♠

Regardless of whether you call it a control-bid or a cue-bid, everyone agrees that 3♠:

- does not indicate length in spades;
- shows interest in a heart slam;
- promises a control in spades.

What kind of control does 3♠ show? There are two distinct points of view. Some players answer, "it shows first-round control," meaning the ace (or a void). Others would answer, "first-round control or second-round control," which means *either* the ace or king (or void or singleton).

Both groups agree that the control-bid is much more likely to be based on the high card rather than the short suit. The intensity of their feelings towards each other sometimes resembles "the Hatfields vs. the McCoys."

Do I have a decided preference on this topic? YES, and I will express it loud and clear. Before I do, I'd like to ask you about the hand on the next page. As always, I recommend that when partner raises your suit, you first add up your Bergen Points.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♦	1♥
3♥	???

Hand A. ♠ K Q 6 ♥ A K Q 9 8 7 ♦ 9 ♣ 7 6 2

Counting Bergen Points:

14 HCP +2 (singleton) +3 (length-points) = 19.

Once opener showed 17-19 dummy points, you have points galore. Even a grand slam is possible.

Before reading on, what would you bid?

I know that many players would bid 4NT. Suppose partner bids 5♥. Then what? If you bid 6♥ because your side has a lot of points and you're only missing one ace, you won't be a happy camper when your LHO leads a club, and partner tables:

♠ A ♥ J 6 3 2 ♦ A K 8 7 6 ♣ Q J 4

But if you smelled a rat and passed 5♥, you deserve a dummy where 6♥ is cold, such as:

♠ 8 7 2 ♥ J 6 3 2 ♦ A K Q 8 6 ♣ A

What would I have done? I would control-bid 3♠, promising a control in spades, and interest in a heart slam. Easy as 1-2-3.

I know some experts who make control-bids only with first-round control. They couldn't bid 3♠, but definitely wouldn't be guilty of bidding 4NT on Hand A without a club control. Frankly, I have no idea what they *would* bid with this hand, and I can't even imagine how they or anyone else could play that way!

Although that may have come across as intolerant, that was not my intent. Ever since I began playing, I thought that when you wanted to make a slam try, you showed a control. It didn't matter whether the control was an ace or a king. If/when partner wanted to know what you have, that's what Blackwood is for.

This approach seems as logical to me as the fact that opening 2NT promises a stronger hand than opening 1NT. When I began teaching, obviously, I taught that second-round controls were okay to show. When I formed partnerships with other experts, of course that's what we did – what else was there?

Over the years, some of my students reported that they were told to “only cue-bid aces.” Of course, I heard that. But I also heard many other incorrect statements, such as, “Always draw trumps ASAP,” “Never open 1NT with a 5-card major,” etc. So, after trying to straighten out the student, I chalked up their cue-bid statement as nothing more than another popular misconception.

Until recently, I confess that it NEVER occurred to me that quite a few knowledgeable players, teachers, and writers do believe in making the first control-bid of the auction only with first-round controls. And I still don't know what they do when they want to make a control-bid but don't have an outside ace.

Bravo!

A control-bid promises a control in that suit – whether first-round OR second-round.

This style is often referred to as “Italian control-bids.”

In a game-forcing auction, after a major is agreed, a bid in another suit shows a control in that suit.*

The control is usually a king or ace, but could be a singleton or void.** Controls are bid up-the-line.

If a player bypasses a suit, he denies a control in that suit. This allows us to always *know*: do we have controls in all three side suits? If not, then we don’t want to be in slam, so stay in game. Avoiding the five level is often crucial. We hate to miss *the joy of slams*, but we love to go plus.

Let’s continue with the hand in question:

<i>Opener</i>	<i>You</i>
1♦	1♥
3♥	3♠

Hand A. ♠ K Q 6 ♥ A K Q 9 8 7 ♦ 9 ♣ 7 6 2

After you bid 3♠, you will listen carefully to what partner has to say. You are dying to learn if he has a control in clubs. If opener bids 4♦, he denies a club control. You’ll be disappointed, but when you sign off in 4♥, you will do so with the knowledge that a club lead would have been fatal in six.

*After Jacoby 2NT, a new suit by opener shows shortness at the 3 level or a great suit at the 4 level.

**A control bid at the 5 level shows first-round control.

Because you already determined that you have enough points for slam, if partner bids 4♣ you'll bid 4NT. If he has one ace, you'll sign off in 5♥. Opposite two aces, you'll bid 6♥. If opener has three aces, you'll bid 5NT and try for seven.

For all the dyed-in-the-wool *first-round control only* advocates in the audience, I can hear the wheels in motion. "Marty, this is why I make control-bids only with first-round controls. If partner has a hand like:

♠ A x ♥ J 10 x x ♦ A K x x x ♣ K x

you'll end up in 6♥. If you get a club lead and the ace is behind the king, you'll go down. Aha – Gotcha!"

Perhaps. Did that shut me up? Not even close.

I have *no* regrets about playing in 6♥. After all:

- on a spade, diamond or heart lead, 6♥ is cold;
- if clubs are led, 6♥ will make if LHO has the ace;
- when RHO has the ♣A, he will often double 4♣ for the lead. If that happens, we will have a chance to reconsider the situation.

In conclusion, declaring 6♥ with this hand is *at worst* a 50% slam. Those are excellent odds, as opposed to a slam that is *at best* 50% or *exactly* 50%. Some would call that an insignificant difference. NOT true.

P.S. Regarding your Devil's Advocate hand, if you hold: ♠ A x ♥ J 10 x x ♦ A K x x x ♣ K x you should open 1NT. With partner's actual Hand A:

♠ K Q 6 ♥ A K Q 9 8 7 ♦ 9 ♣ 7 6 2

he will transfer. Once you make the correct opening bid, *your hand* will declare 6♥. That contract is cold.

Resolving Unanswered Questions

Now that we have gotten our feet wet with up-the-line *Italian control-bidding*, I'm ready to discuss the three hands from the front of the book. The auction was:

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>
1♥	1♠
3♠	???

1. ♠ A 9 7 6 5 2 ♥ K 4 ♦ 7 4 ♣ K J 9

When partner raises your suit, your first step should be to count your Bergen Points. Reminder: declarer shouldn't count anything for his first doubleton.

Bergen Points:

11 HCP +2 (6-card suit) = 13 *starting points*

13 +1 (doubleton) +1 (6 trumps) = 15 Bergen Points

Because 3♠ showed 17-19 dummy points, slam is possible. Bid 4♣ to show your slam interest and club control. If partner control-bids 4♥ over 4♣, he is denying a diamond control. That would tell you to forget about slam and you would sign off in 4♠.

If partner bids 4♦, you'll control-bid 4♥. Your king in partner's 5-card heart suit could be the key to slam. Should you do the same with a singleton or void in hearts? I'd answer "no." **I recommend that a control-bid in partner's long suit promises the ace or king.**

2. ♠ 8 6 5 3 2 ♥ K 9 ♦ K Q 8 ♣ K J 3

12 HCP +1 (5 trumps) = 13 Bergen Points

Your side definitely does not have 33 total points. In addition, having a weak trump suit and an aceless hand strongly suggests that you have the *wrong* cards for slam. Take the low road and bid 4♠.

3. ♠ A 8 6 5 4 3 2 ♥ 7 ♦ A 10 9 ♣ 6 2

8 HCP +1 Adjust-3 (3 upgrades, no downgrades)

+3 (7-card suit) = 12 *starting points*

12 +2 (singleton) +2 (7 trumps) = 16 Bergen Points

This hand does have fewer HCP than the other two. So what? The key to good slam bidding and good slams is NOT HCP. Because of your two aces and trump length, this hand is everything that the previous one is not. Slam prospects are excellent. The fact that it has more Bergen Points than the other two only reinforces how much stronger this hand became after partner's jump raise.

You want to let partner know that you are interested in slam, so you should control-bid 4♦. Because control-bids are made up-the-line, this bid also tells partner that you don't have a club control.

If he also lacks a club control, he will sign off in 4♠. If he does anything else, then he promises a club control, and you are probably on your way to slam.

Here are some other auctions featuring control-bids.

4.	<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
	♠ 6	♠ A 3 2
	♥ A 8 6 4 3 2	♥ K Q 9 7
	♦ K 9 2	♦ Q J
	♣ A 8 4	♣ K Q 9 3
	<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
	1♥	2NT
	3♠*	4♣
	4♦	4NT
	5♥	6♥

*3♠ = 0-1 spade

West's Bergen Points:

11 HCP +2 (6-card suit) = 13 *starting points*.

13 +2 (singleton) +1 (6 trumps) = 16 Bergen Points.

East's Dummy Points:

17 HCP –1 (doubleton Q J) + 1 (doubleton) = 17

From East's point of view, the auction kept getting better and better. First West opened 1♥. Then West said he was short in spades, which meant that E-W had no spade loser. East wanted to bid 4NT, but it was possible that West lacked a diamond control. Therefore, rather than bid 4NT, East control-bid 4♣.

West had only 11 HCP, but it was easy to show his diamond control. **If slam is possible and partner could have extra values, show your control below the level of game.** Once East knew that diamonds were not a problem, he was delighted to bid 4NT.

5. <i>West</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>East</i>
♠ K J 8 7 6 4 2	1♠	3♠	♠ A 10 5 3
♥ A	4♣	4♥	♥ K Q 7 3
♦ 6 4	4♠	Pass	♦ J 10 2
♣ A K Q			♣ 8 5

West's Bergen Points:

17 HCP +3 (7-card suit) = 20 *starting points*.

20 +2 (singleton) +2 (7 trumps) = 24 Bergen Points.

Remember, if declarer has one doubleton, he should not add any points for it.

East's Dummy Points:

10 HCP. No additions, so 10 *starting points*.

Add 1 point for the doubleton, so 11 dummy points.

With a long trump suit and good distribution, opener has the type of hand that increases dramatically when partner raises. However, when responder bypasses 4♦, he denies a diamond control, so opener has no choice but to stop in 4♠.

6. <i>West</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>East</i>
♠ K J 8 7 6 4 2	1♠	3♠	♠ A 10 5 3
♥ A	4♣	4♦	♥ J 10 2
♦ 6 4	4NT	5♣*	♦ K Q 7 3
♣ A K Q	6♠		♣ 8 5

*5♣ = 1 keycard

Location, location, location.

7.	<i>West</i>		<i>East</i>
	♠ K Q 8 7 5 4		♠ A 10 6 3
	♥ A Q 3		♥ 9
	♦ K 2		♦ A J 9 6 4
	♣ 9 8		♣ K Q 2
		<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
		—	1♦
		1♠	3♠
		4♦	4♥
		4NT	5♥
		6♠	

West's Bergen Points:

14 HCP +2 (6-card suit) = 16 *starting points*.

16 +1 (doubleton) +1 (6 trumps) = 18 Bergen Points.

East's Dummy Points:

14 HCP +3 (singleton with 4 trumps) = 17

Note: The paragraph that follows is logical, but for those readers who aren't used to control-bidding, it is far from obvious. Let me explain.

West's 4♦ control-bid denies a control in clubs – the suit he bypassed. So, **if East does not have a club control, he is obligated to sign off in 4♠.** Therefore, once East *didn't* sign off, he has to have a club control. That's all West needs to hear to use Blackwood to reach the laydown slam.

By the Way: For those who are still not sold on *Italian control-bids*, guess which country, other than the US, has dominated the World Championships?

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt.

If interested in Marty's very special May, 2021 discount offer for the book, email him at mbergen@mindspring.com