

What's Standard?

by David Lindop

This series is based on *Grant Standard*, a set of conventions and agreements that are in popular use today, such as 15-17 INT openings, five-card majors, and weak two-bids. A summary chart of *Grant Standard* and the corresponding convention card can be found at www.AudreyGrant.com. The site also has *Grant Basic*, a simpler set of agreements.

Earlier articles in this series appeared in the *Bridge Bulletin* and can also be found under 'Articles' at www.AudreyGrant.com.

When the partnership has decided WHERE it wants to play and there is enough combined strength to go to the slam level, the last consideration is whether there are enough controls—aces and kings, or singletons and voids. We don't want the opponents taking the first two tricks against our small slam, or the first trick against our grand slam.

Once a suit has been agreed, Blackwood is typically used to find out whether the partnership is missing any aces. However, Blackwood tells us *how many* aces the partnership holds, not *which* aces. If we want to find out about specific controls, we need a different approach.

Cuebidding

Suppose we are in the East position with this hand and the auction begins:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
3♥	Pass	?	

We have certainly agreed on WHERE we want to play the contract, hearts. Since partner's jump to 3♥ shows about 17-18 points and we have 15 high-card points plus 1 length point for the five-card heart suit, we also know that there is enough combined strength to consider a small slam.

Slam Bidding — Part III

Suppose we use Blackwood to make sure we aren't missing two aces. All is well if partner responds 5♠, showing three. We confidently bid 6♥ knowing we have all the aces. We're also fine if partner responds 5♦, showing one ace. We can stop in 5♥ knowing the opponents have two aces to take. But what if the auction continues this way:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
3♥	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♥	Pass	?	

West's 5♥ bid shows two aces. Since we're only missing one ace, we might bid 6♥ and find that these are the combined hands:

WEST	EAST
♠ K Q	♠ A J 4
♥ A J 10 3	♥ K Q 9 6 5
♦ A J 10 5 2	♦ K Q 7
♣ Q 8	♣ 5 2

If the opponents don't lead a club, we'll take thirteen tricks: three spades, five hearts, and five diamonds. If they do lead a club—which is a distinct possibility when we have so much in the other three suits—we'll lose the first two tricks.

What if we take the cautious approach when partner bids 5♥ and we pass? Now we'll find that these are the combined hands:

WEST	EAST
♠ Q 5	♠ A J 4
♥ A J 10 3	♥ K Q 9 6 5
♦ A J 10 5 2	♦ K Q 7
♣ K Q	♣ 5 2

An easy slam. The only trick we'll lose is the ♣A. East's spade losers can be discarded on West's diamonds.

Or these might turn out to be the combined hands:

WEST	EAST
♠ K 5	♠ A J 4
♥ A J 10 3	♥ K Q 9 6 5
♦ J 10 5 4 2	♦ K Q 7
♣ A K	♣ 5 2

Another easy slam, with the only loser being the ♦A.

The point is that **Blackwood may not help us when we have two or more cards in a suit that does not include the ace or king**. We need to be sure partner has a control in that suit. With our East hand, for example, we want to be sure partner holds the ♣A or ♣K—or a void or singleton.

We can do this through *cuebidding*. Instead of asking how many aces partner holds, we show an ace that we hold and partner is expected to show an ace in return. How does partner recognize that we are cuebidding and not just bidding a new suit? We use the following guideline:

RECOGNIZING A SLAM CUEBID

If the partnership is already committed to game, the bid of a suit in which the partnership can't want to play is a cuebid, showing interest in reaching slam.

Let's see how this would work on our first hand:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
3♥	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♦	Pass	?	

WEST	EAST
♠ K Q	♠ A J 4
♥ A J 10 3	♥ K Q 9 6 5
♦ A J 10 5 2	♦ K Q 7
♣ Q 8	♣ 5 2

If East wanted to stop in partscore, East would have passed 3♥. Once East bids 3♠, the partnership is committed to at least a game. Since hearts has already been agreed as the trump suit, East's 3♠ bid can't be a suggestion to play there, so it must be a cuebid, showing slam interest. Recognizing this, West cooperates by cuebidding 4♦, showing the ♦A.

What happens once we start a cuebidding sequence? How do we stop, for example? Cuebidding is a challenging concept, even for very experienced partnerships. Here are some standard guidelines we need:

- GUIDELINES FOR CUEBIDDING**
- Cuebids are typically made ‘up the line’—cheapest suit first.
 - First round controls—aces and voids—are typically shown before second round controls—kings and singletons.
 - Only controls *outside* the agreed trump suit are shown; a bid of the trump suit can be passed.
 - Blackwood can later be used to find out about the ace, or king, of the trump suit.

Even following these guidelines, both partners have a lot of thinking to do. In the auction we have so far, when West cuebids 4♦, East can draw the inference that West doesn’t hold the ♣A. With both the ♣A and ♦A, West would have bid 4♣, cuebidding up the line. Since West bypassed clubs, West holds the ♦A but not the ♣A.

East now knows there is a danger that the first two club tricks could be lost. So, East bids 4♥. This isn’t a cuebid since it is the agreed trump suit. It says that East is unwilling to venture any higher than game. West is still free to bid again. After all East has shown interest in reaching slam. The auction might continue:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
3♥	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♦	Pass	4♥	Pass
4♠	Pass	5♦	Pass
5♥	Pass	Pass	Pass

Since East’s 3♠ bid has shown first round control of spades, West can now bid 4♠ to show second round control of spades, the ♠K. East could bid 5♦ to show second round control of diamonds, but West would go back to the agreed trump suit, 5♥, and East would pass. Neither partner has been able to show first or second round control of clubs.

Let’s see how the auction might go when we change the West hand:

WEST		EAST	
♠ Q 5		♠ A J 4	
♥ A J 10 3		♥ K Q 9 6 5	
♦ A J 10 5 2		♦ K Q 7	
♣ K Q		♣ 5 2	

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
3♥	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♦	Pass	4♥	Pass
5♣	Pass	5♦	Pass
6♥	Pass	Pass	Pass

It starts the same way with East showing the ♠A and West the ♦A. After East settles for game in hearts, West makes one more try by showing the second round control in clubs. East can infer that it is second round control, not first round control since West denied the ♣A when West bid 4♦, bypassing 4♣. East can show the second round control in diamonds, and that’s enough for West to decide to bid the slam.

Here’s our third variation:

WEST		EAST	
♠ K 5		♠ A J 4	
♥ A J 10 3		♥ K Q 9 6 5	
♦ J 10 5 4 2		♦ K Q 7	
♣ A K		♣ 5 2	

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
3♥	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♣	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♥	Pass	6♥	All Pass

After East makes a slam try cuebid of 3♠, West cuebids 4♣, showing the ♣A. Knowing the partnership won’t immediately lose two club tricks, East can now safely use Blackwood to check on how many aces are missing. West’s 5♥ response shows two aces, so East confidently bids the slam knowing the partnership is missing only one ace.

Cuebidding Voids

In a trump contract, a void has the same effect as an ace; it controls the first round of the suit since we can ruff the ace if the opponents lead it. It may even be more powerful than an ace since we’ll probably lose no tricks in the suit. Similarly, a singleton has the same effect as a king; it gives us control of the second round of the suit.

Blackwood may not be helpful when we have a void. We may have to use cuebidding instead.

WEST		EAST	
♠ A K Q 7 6 3		♠ J 8 4 2	
♥ Q 7 3		♥ 6 4 2	
♦ —		♦ A K 6	
♣ A K Q J		♣ 7 5 2	

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2♣	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♠	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♣	Pass	4♦	Pass
4♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

If West were to bid 4NT at this point, East would respond 5♦ to show one ace but it wouldn’t help West decide whether to bid slam. In fact, the partnership may already be too high since there is a danger of losing the first three heart tricks. Instead, West needs to resort to cuebidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2♣	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♠	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♣	Pass	4♦	Pass
4♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

The partnership stops safely in game when East shows the ‘wrong’ ace. Now let’s suppose these are the hands:

WEST		EAST	
♠ A K Q 7 6 3		♠ J 8 4 2	
♥ Q 7 3		♥ A K 6	
♦ —		♦ 6 4 2	
♣ A K Q J		♣ 7 5 2	

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2♣	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♠	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♣	Pass	4♥	Pass
5♣	Pass	5♥	Pass
7♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

When West cuebids 4♣, East cuebids the ‘right’ ace. This encourages West to look for a grand slam. West shows the ♣K and East then shows the ♥K. That’s enough information for West to confidently bid a grand slam.

Obviously, cuebidding is a very powerful tool that can overcome some of the problems with Blackwood. However, it also requires a considerable effort from both partners and is not easy to master. For some partnerships, it may be better to ignore all this complexity, stick with Blackwood, and hope for the best. We’ll probably come out okay most of the time. 