

KEN REXFORD

CUEBIDDING

AT BRIDGE

A MODERN APPROACH



FOREWORD BY BRENT MANLEY

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FOREWORD

In the nearly 17 years that I have been employed by the ACBL, I have spent considerable time reading bridge books. Until now, it was work — I read the books for the purpose of reviewing them in the *Bridge Bulletin*, the magazine of which I am editor. It feels strange to be writing about a book without that critical eye, but here goes.

Not long ago, I had occasion to review some old copies of the television show, *Championship Bridge*. The best and brightest of the bridge world at the time — the early Sixties — were featured. What sticks with me as I reflect on those shows is the lousy bidding. The rankest of today's newcomers would bid rings around the experts who appeared on *Championship Bridge*.

Anyone who plays tournament bridge today has benefited from all the advances in bidding that have taken place in the 40-plus years since that show first aired. Many outstanding bidding theorists have produced huge improvements in the language of partner communication.

The book you are about to read may not advance bidding theory in quantum leaps, but the topic of cuebids is as important as it is misunderstood. If your partnership's slam explorations consist of Blackwood only and you're happy with that, this might not be the book for you. On the other hand, if you're not satisfied with your results in that area, I encourage you to have a closer look.

This is an exhaustive work, covering a lot of territory. You might not agree with everything you read — and it would be a mammoth undertaking to try to adopt it all — but it will get you thinking about your bidding and offer many ways to improve it. After all, bridge is the ultimate game for thinkers.

Brent Manley
March 2006

INTRODUCTION

At the 2005 Pittsburgh Nationals, I had the honor of playing against the Pavlicek team in the first round of the Vanderbilt. Although my team lost miserably, one deal piqued my interest. Our opponents missed a grand slam in a cuebidding sequence that featured a rather interesting post-auction alert. Apparently a bid of 5♠ during the auction had been meant as a desperate attempt to get out at 5NT, and further to imply, ‘Partner, I am lost in the auction.’

Later that week, I witnessed Zia Mahmood and Michael Rosenberg miss another grand slam, also as a result of what appeared to be either a cuebidding sequence that had gone off the rails or an auction where the pair lacked the specific tools to explore for this particular slam.

The fact that expert pairs were having trouble communicating in certain slam sequences intrigued me, and I began asking around about the meaning of certain cuebids in the specific sequences faced by these players. I received varying answers, but no one seemed to know for sure.

When I set out to write this book, the motivation was not truly to reinvent the wheel, but perhaps that was, in a sense, the result. I researched multiple sources for clues as to what ‘Italian-Style Cuebidding’ means. (By ‘Italian’, I mean that approach to cuebidding that has its origins in the theory of the Italian Blue Teams of World Championship fame.) The works of Giorgio Belladonna, including *Cuebidding to Slam*, coauthored by Claudio

Petroncini, published in 1990 and translated by Daniel Neill of Kentucky in 2004, served as a starting point, perhaps reflecting the ‘old school’ theories of the originators. For the ‘modern’ perspective, I reviewed a series of three articles by Fred Gitelman, “Improving 2/1 Game Force”, published originally in *Canadian Master Point* magazine.

Neither of these two texts showed me a functional wheel and the theories were at points inconsistent with each other. In short, it was a mess. Just look over Vugraph Archives to see for yourself. The professionals might all agree what to open, what to respond and what to rebid, but their cuebidding sequences diverge on to all sorts of strange paths.

I delved deeper, reading brief notes in bridge books, reviewing system notes for many of the great players and conducting online research. My online studies referenced numerous lesson notes, commentaries and the like. I even posed questions on bridge forums for the masses to respond to. Finally, I turned to professional friends of mine, discussing the issue between rounds over cigarettes. My major source here was my friend Kenneth Eichenbaum of Columbus, Ohio.

The result was a mismatched collection of majority views, minority views, insane views and sometimes no opinions or views at all. Next I used logic, and sometimes personal preference, to produce a perspective that seemed consistent with the rest of the theory.

After much study, I started to recognize three critical concepts:

1. There are some hand types that can be specifically categorized as lending themselves to certain ‘follow-up’ cuebidding sequences.
2. Even expert pairs lack agreements on the meaning of some cuebidding sequences. They rely on ‘inspired’ inferential cuebids and the hope that partner is on the same page. Without agreed principles to ensure that the partnership is at least working from the same book, this is unacceptable.
3. Although there is no complete set of cuebidding rules available, some sort of handbook must, in theory, exist. (A good friend and partner calls this the ‘black hole’ theory: ‘I cannot see it, but I know it is there.’)

With all this in mind, I decided to put together a disciplined approach, admittedly incorporating some new ideas. I decided to boldly go where no human had gone before. What I have attempted in this book is, in part, to isolate certain hand types and to set up predetermined meanings for cuebids in the context of a given auction. I have also tried to establish consistent

principles to enable partnerships actually to be on the same page, and to know that they are supported when heading into uncharted waters.

I understand in advance that some of my theories may have flaws. I also understand in advance that, although many of my applications are practical and fairly easy to use, some of them will seem esoteric to many players. Furthermore, even if one was to assume that my applications are all sound, there is a tremendous amount of memory work and thought involved. Many of these bids are not for the casual partnership.

However, my main goal in writing this book is to enlighten, not necessarily to pronounce the definitive answer to cuebidding in slam auctions. I hope to lay the groundwork for things to come. With any luck, my ideas will inspire others to discuss, modify and change our concepts of cuebidding.

The theories I put forward, then, are a melting pot, based on logic and consistency, and unified by my personal perspective. That may frighten some who know me, but I believe that with a great deal of guidance I may have approached the Tao of cuebidding.

My approach to writing this book was to start with a simple auction: a major is agreed as trumps, in a 2/1 game-forcing auction, at the two-level. A whole world of space exists in which to describe one's hand. Conventional wisdom seemed to support treating calls below three of an agreed major as shape bids. I rejected this approach; it seemed unnecessary and redundant, especially when I thought through the alternative I ended up adopting.

Next, I assumed a principle: jumps, which consume space, should be well defined. At the same time, failing to jump should rule out possession of a hand appropriate for a jump. This concept leads to interesting inferences, which to my knowledge have never been truly explored before now. I also developed methods for handling the next call after a jump in a cuebidding sequence.

Finally, I examined how the structure is affected if suit agreement occurs at the three-level, or if the opponents intervene, and investigated the special requirements of auctions involving minor suits.

It occurred to me as I wrote all of this down that many people do not grasp the whole concept of cuebidding. The extreme cuebidding novice thinks that cuebidding is merely an alternative to Blackwood and hence useless. Admittedly, if cuebidding were only a means of asking for aces, it would be of rare utility. Traditional American cuebidding suffers from this misconception, at least as practiced by most.

You have advanced a tad in cuebidding sophistication if you realize that one of the key purposes of cuebidding is to avoid bidding a slam off two

quick losers in the same suit. Cuebidding, especially Italian-style, where first- and second-round controls are bid without priority, eliminates the unfortunate situation where we hold 33 HCP but are missing a cashing ace-king. But this is just one example of its usefulness.

Cuebidding is also a tool to spot the fit of the hand, as opposed to the fit of the trump suit only. To illustrate, consider this hand:

♠ A J 9 5 4 ♥ A Q J 4 2 ♦ 10 9 ♣ 8

If partner holds the K-Q-10-2 of spades, you have a great spade fit. Give him about 20 HCP and slam should be laydown, right?

Well, consider two possible hands for partner, each with the same spade holding. Opposite

♠ K Q 10 2 ♥ K 9 ♦ A K 5 4 3 ♣ A J

a 20-point hand, a grand slam is just about laydown. However, opposite

♠ K Q 10 2 ♥ K 9 ♦ Q J 5 ♣ A K Q J

a 21-HCP hand, the small slam will probably be set at Trick 2.

Taking this a step further, imagine partner has a hand like:

♠ K Q 10 2 ♥ K 9 ♦ A 3 ♣ 6 5 4 3 2

With that 'mere' 12-count, the small slam is easy, despite 'only' 24 HCP combined. Cuebidding, properly handled, should make it easy for a pair to bid to slam on these hands or to stop safely before getting there. This is what cuebidding is all about.

THE BASIC RULES OF ITALIAN-STYLE CUEBIDDING

The art of cuebidding is best explored in the context of ideal situations. When the auction is contested, or the cuebidding starts at a higher level, general rules from the ideal situation still apply. However, both the limitations of the auction and the special concerns of competitive auctions each create exceptions to those rules. Therefore, it seems logical to start a discussion of cuebidding theory from the point of view of an ideal auction.

One of the difficulties that I faced while writing this book was that cuebidding theory is so strongly contextual. As a simple example of what I mean, consider a bid of 4♣. If you were to ask someone what 4♣ means, they would assume that 4♣ was the opening bid. If you then said, “No, a 4♣ bid in the middle of a complicated and contested auction,” no answer would be possible. Context is required.

The context of any bid depends upon several factors. First, the context is defined by the general systemic approach. Second, context is defined by the calls within that general systemic approach that preceded the 4♣ bid. Third, context includes, necessarily, partnership agreements and definitions. Context may even include opposition bidding and the varying definitions provided for their bidding. Thus, the meaning of a 4♣ bid is dependent upon all of these factors.

If, after review of all of these factors, 4♣ happens to be a cuebid, then it says something about clubs — probably. However, what message that bid sends depends on not only the context, but also the necessities of the predicted auction. In other words, 4♣ sends a message relevant to a hypothetical slam that we are exploring and describes a holding that is in some way helpful to achieving that goal.

Throughout this book, I'm going to assume in many places that the contextual system is one where a two-level response to a one-level opening is forcing to game. This would typically be part of the 2/1 Game Force system, although several other systems feature a similar approach. One of the benefits to this is that it facilitates cuebidding sequences at low levels in many auctions. Additionally, I have assumed a general set of conventions that are fairly typical, although I do propose the use of a few that are rarely seen.

I have done this because I need a context within which to discuss the principles and theory of cuebidding. Without the context of a systemic approach and assumed conventions, defining a specific cuebid in my approach is as impossible as defining what 4♣ means without an auction. This reality may explain why so few prior attempts have been made to discuss cuebidding theory as a whole.

This overall context is going to generate some extra work for those readers who use different systemic approaches. You will be assumed to understand the general 2/1 Game Force system. You will then read about cuebidding in that context. From that study, you will learn principles. Then, the hard part! You will need to discuss with your partner whatever adjustments to the proposed approach are necessary if the structure is to fit within your own system.

The challenge, however, will not be as difficult as you may initially expect. The style of cuebidding I describe is not truly a set of defined bids. This is not like learning the various responses to Roman Keycard Blackwood and the possible continuations. Rather, cuebidding has basic rules that are applied logically to each unique situation. If you understand the principles, you can figure out the meaning of cuebids at the table in a completely undiscussed auction.

Even if your systemic approach is identical to mine, the pages that follow will not cover every conceivable auction. However, I believe that if you use the tools provided, you and your partner will end up on the same page if one of you tosses out a strange, undiscussed call. The idea is not that our hypothetical 4♣ call be defined for all possible auctions; rather, the meaning of 4♣ should be clear so long as the principles are mutually understood

and applied in the new auction — your own auction, not one defined by my systemic preference.

The most economical auction for cuebidding purposes is one where the partnership, unimpeded, using 2/1 GF as the general approach, agrees a major at the two-level, after each partner has shown a second side suit. For example:

WEST	EAST
1♥	2♣
2♦	2♥
?	

As this is the ideal auction type, this is where I propose to start. We have agreed our suit at the two-level, and the opponents have been kind enough to stay out of our way. We have forced to game, and everything we bid from here on will be regarded as some kind of move towards slam, if it is not recognizably a sign-off. We can discuss the cuebidding structure from here and later introduce modifications for the difficult scenarios — for example, where suit agreement takes more space or the opponents intervene.

Italian-style cuebidding can be described simplistically as cuebidding ‘values’, with each bid described by a general set of principles. Exactly what values are shown will depend on whether or not the suit is one we have bid, and which of us bid it. Bypassing a cuebid usually denies the ability to make that bid, while a jump to game says that a hole shown by partner cannot be filled. These principles will be explained in more detail in the next chapter.

In addition, there are certain treatments that I recommend incorporating in the slam approach structure, including Serious 3NT, Last Train, and using 2NT where available as a way to distinguish between hands with and without strong trumps.

Finally, I have assigned very specific meanings to jumps in a cuebidding sequence (‘Picture Jumps’); these too will be described later in the book. I am going to explain how one should think about these auctions and I will even suggest a few more useful agreements and treatments.

How all these ideas fit together into a coherent package is my main theme. It is, however, important to recognize that everything does fit together. It is critical that the partnership adopt an inclusive approach to cuebidding. All facets of cuebidding play off one another. If the partnership adopts Serious 3NT, then a 4♣ cuebid made instead of and bypassing 3NT takes on new meaning: it now shows weakness. If one adopts Last Train, the last cuebid below game is not necessarily legitimate. If one uses

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Everyone knows that control-showing bids are the expert route to slam, but it is remarkably hard to find a comprehensive treatment of this vital area of the game. Until now. Covering the subtleties of Jump Cuebids, Asking Bid methods, cuebids in the trump suit, Serious 3NT and much more, this book fills an important gap in the modern literature of bridge.

“This is an exhaustive work, covering a lot of territory. You might not agree with everything you read -- and it would be a mammoth undertaking to try to adopt it all -- but it will get you thinking about your bidding and offer many ways to improve it. After all, bridge is the ultimate game for thinkers.”

– Brent Manley, Editor, ACBL Bulletin



KEN REXFORD lives in Lima, Ohio. He is a regular tournament player with a keen interest in the theory of the game. This is his first book.



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