

# ChRONicles of Cardplay

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## The Most Important Bid in Bridge

When I started writing this column, I promised I wouldn't write any articles on bidding. Well I've decided not to write any columns on *conventions*, but I *am* going to write some articles on basic bidding, which I hope are independent of whichever bidding system you use.

First off, this article is already misnamed. The most important bid in bridge is PASS, but that's a different article!

Everyone has two bidding systems: the one they use when the opponents are silent, and a second, less accurate one, that they use when the opponents are in the auction too. This is why modern bidding is so aggressive. Making light-as-air opening bids and overcalls can get you into trouble, but more often than not they create bidding and accuracy problems for your opponents. This article discusses a bidding device that can help you tremendously in competitive auctions.

The bid I'm referring to is cue-bidding the opponents' suit. Historically, cue-bidding the opponents' suit simply showed *any* good hand. However, over the years, this cue-bid's meaning has been refined so that most players now use it to show a good hand *with support for partner's suit*. Here's an example. Your partner opens 1♥ and your RHO overcalls 1♠. You hold:

♠Kxx ♥QJx ♦Axxxx ♣xx

Actually, a pretty nice hand. You have 10 HCP and 3-card heart support with honors, not to mention the well positioned ♠K. Bidding only 2♥ is an underbid and doesn't do this hand justice. Most modern players consider 3♥ at this stage as preemptive – a bad hand with 4-card support. 2♦ would be forcing by an unpassed hand, but only constructive by a passed hand and also doesn't get your heart support on the table. Why not just bid 4♥? Most modern bidders treat 4♥ here as a preemptive shutout bid with 5-card support. In any case, bidding 4♥ is no better than a guess. It may make, it may not. If partner has a bare minimum, 4♥ is probably already too high. If partner has a great hand, he'll pass and you may miss a slam.

Since a 2♠ bid at this juncture by your side is an idle bid (your side would never realistically want to play in 2♠ after the 1♠ overcall), we can assign the 2♠ bid to something meaningful. Let's make it mean "I have a limit raise or better" - 10+HCP and 3+card support for partner's suit (note that in this context, a "limit raise" may be only 3-card support. Normally a limit raise shows 4-card support). This is how many players today deal with competition. To recap, after the auction starts 1♥ - 1♠ - ??, if you bid:

2♥ you show 6-9 HCP with 3+ card support

3♥ you show 0-5 HCP with 4 card support (be a little careful using this bid VUL vs Non-VUL)

4♥ you show 0-5 HCP with 5 card support

2♠ you show 10+HCP with 3+ card support (this is your WORST hand – you may have MUCH more).

Of course the above example is specific. It doesn't matter which suits are being bid. **RULE:** If you cue-bid the opponents' suit, you ALWAYS show a good hand (10+HCP) with 3-card or better trump support.

So, how does opener respond to the cue-bid? Well if he's willing to play game opposite the WORST hand you've promised (10 HCP and 3-card support), opener must bid 4♥. Obviously, opener is promising something like a good 15+HCP. If opener *isn't* willing to play game opposite 10 HCP and 3-card support, he rebids 3♥. Neither of these bids are shutouts though. Remember, the 2♠ bid was a limit raise *or better*. After opener makes a minimum 3♥ rebid, if responder has *more* than the minimum he promised (10 HCP and 3-card support), responder is free to bid on. With the hand above, responder would simply pass a 3♥ rebid. But, give responder one more good card (say the ♦K) and now responder holds 13 HCP himself. Given that opener has at least 12 HCP for his opening bid, responder should start with a cue-bid, but shouldn't settle for playing only 3♥ and should carry on to 4♥. If opener bids 4♥ and responder has a really good hand, responder can make a move towards slam knowing opener has 15+HCP.

Why is this the most important bid in bridge? The most significant implication of adding this bit of science to your bidding arsenal is to remember that when partner DOESN'T cue-bid, he DOESN'T have a good hand! This negative inference eliminates a lot of guesswork at the table.

Another use of this cue-bid occurs when your LHO opens the bidding, your partner overcalls, and RHO passes. If you hold a good hand, your side may belong in game. After all, the overcaller may hold as much as 16 HCP. Give LHO 12 HCP and RHO zero means your side has a combined 28 HCP and you belong in game. After the auction starts 1♥ - 1♠ (by your partner) - PASS, let's say you hold:

♠AJx ♥xx ♦KQx ♣Qxxxx

You have 12 HCP with 3-card spade support for partner. Tell her the good news by cue-bidding 2♥. Now the overcaller can make an intelligent decision as to how high your side should play. If all the overcaller can do is rebid 2♠, you're happy to pass since you've told your whole story. Having this agreement, when you bid 2♠, 3♠ or 4♠, the overcaller knows you DO NOT have a good hand.

If you've followed along this far, there's one more interesting tweak to this. Sometimes, you have TWO cue-bids available to you. Say it goes 1♣ - 1♥ (by your partner) - 1♠ to you. Now you have two cue-bids available to you, 2♣ and 2♠. What I like to do is cue-bid 2♣ (the lower of their suits) to show a good hand with **3-card** heart support and cue-bid 2♠ (the higher of their two suits) to show a good hand with **4-card** support. The logic behind this is that when you force partner to the 3-level, you're promising a 9-card fit.

It may not be obvious, but this method also applies to the minors. Let's say your partner opens 1♣ and RHO overcalls 1♠. You hold:

♠xx ♥Axx ♦KJx ♣QJxxx

Holding 11 HCP opposite an opening hand, you want to compete. Of course, if you held four hearts, you'd make a negative double. With a spade stopper, you could bid 1NT. 3♣ is preemptive with 5-card support and 2♣ is a simple 6-9 HCP raise with 4-card support. So, what's the solution? Bid 2♠ - limit raise or better in clubs. This shows a good hand, less than four hearts, no spade stopper and club support. Hopefully partner will "do the right thing". Maybe *he* can bid NT with a spade stopper.

Note that this cue-bidding is **NOT** a "Western Cue" asking for a stopper in the opponents' suit. Although if the cue-bid shows support for a minor, opener can certainly choose to rebid NT with a stopper. Also remember that the cue-bid is a raise of partner's bid suit. Since you have suit agreement, if partner now bids a different suit, this is some sort of game or slam try.

Finally, I've found that many people have a great deal of difficulty integrating this method into their day-to-day bidding. The only advice I can offer is when you encounter a situation where you have a good hand and don't quite know what to bid, try to remember to cue-bid. During post-mortems with your partner, look for situations where a cue-bid would have gotten you to a better contract.