

PROBING CUE BIDS

Probing Cue Bids (made by "Prober") apply when the opponents have bid only one suit, the cue bid is not a jump, and the logic of the auction suggests that Prober may only be groping for the best contract, which is probably not a slam, and perhaps not even a game. Probing Cue Bids (forcing to a limit situation--see section 10-1) are made at the two or three level only. Here are examples:

-- The partnership has previously made a total of three or more bids:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♦ | 1♥ | Pass |
| 1♠ | Pass | 2♦ | |

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | 1♠ | 2♥ | Pass |
| 3♣ | Pass | 3♠ | |

-- A non-jump new suit response has been made at a higher level than two of opener's suit (possibly giving opener a rebid problem).

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | 1♠ | 2♥ | Pass |
| 2♠ | | | |

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♠ | 2♦ | 3♣ | Pass |
| 3♦ | | | |

-- The partnership has raised a suit:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | 2♣ | Pass |
| 2♠ | | | |

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | 1♥ | 1♠ | Pass |
| 2♠ | Pass | 3♥ | |

-- The cue bid is an advance of an overcall after opener's partner has passed:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | Pass | 2♣ |

-- The partnership has overcalled in a minor suit and opener's partner has raised or bid a new suit:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♠ | 2♣ | 2♠ | 3♠ |

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♥ | 2♣ | 2♦ | 3♦ |

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|----------------------|
| 1♣ | 1♦ | 1♥ | 2♥ - Probing Cue Bid |
| | | | 2♣ - natural |

-- Prober previously made a takeout double, received a response, and is now cue bidding the suit doubled:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | Dbl | Pass | 2♣ |
| Pass | 2♦ | | |

-- Prober's partner ("Replier") opened the bidding and then passed on the second round (rather than make a free bid):

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | Pass | 1♥ | 1♠ |
| Pass | Pass | 2♠ | |

-- Both partners have previously bid, and an opponent has made a jump overcall during the auction:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♥ | 2♠ | 3♦ | Pass |
| 3♠ | | | |

The following are normal strong cue bids, not "Probing Cue Bids":

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | Pass | 1♥ | 1♠ |
| 2♠ | | | |

The partnership has bid only twice, and North's response was not higher than two of South's suit (i.e., higher than 2♣). If East had bid 2♠, a jump overcall, then 3♠ would be a Probing Cue Bid.

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | 1♠ | 2♣ | Pass |
| 2♠ | | | |

The partnership has bid only twice, and North's response is two of a suit that is lower than South's diamond suit. If North had bid 2♥ instead of 2♣, then 2♠ would be a Probing Cue Bid.

| | | |
|-------|------|-------|
| South | West | North |
| 1♣ | 1♥ | 2♥ |

A normal strong cue bid, probably with first round control of hearts.

Probing Cue Bids at the Two Level

Probing Cue Bids at the two level are not forcing to game, as are three-level probes, although Prober must have at least some interest in game, probably in a major suit or notrump. If it is a notrump game he is looking for, Prober must have one or both of the following:

-- "Solidity": Reason to believe that the combined hands of the partnership have nine fast tricks at notrump if entry can be gained in time (i.e., if the opposing suit is stopped by the partnership)

or:

-- Some sort of strength in the opposing suit--a partial stopper (K, Qx, Jxx, 10xxx) or a full stopper (usually Ax or Axx, wanting Replier to bid the notrump in case she has a holding that is more valuable in the declaring hand than in the dummy hand, e.g., Qx, J10x).

Replies to the Probing Cue Bid:

Replier makes the call that will best describe her hand, remembering that a simple bid of suit bid previously by the partnership may be passed. A 2NT bid may be passed if Prober has no strength in the cue bid suit and is willing to risk the loss of the first five tricks in that suit. Prober will not pass 2NT, however, if Replier has not previously limited her hand in some way (i.e., by a limit bid or a pass).

When a notrump game is the probable goal, there are two situations:

- 1) Prober is "Senior," sitting over the opposing suit.
- 2) Prober is "Junior," sitting under the opposing suit.

1) Senior is the better position:

| | | | |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| South | West | North | East |
| 1♥ | 1♠ | 2♣ | Pass |
| 2♥ | Pass | 2♠ | |

Cue bids are more frequent for a Senior, because any notrump bid should be played from the other side, making the opposing bidder lead away from his strength.

In the above auction, South (Replier) can now bid 2NT with any one of the following:

-- More solidity in the partnership's long suit(s) than Prober might expect. South could bid 2NT with ♠87 ♥AKQ1083 ♦QJ3 ♣92 or ♠642 ♥AQ1083 ♦Q103 ♣KQ

-- A sure stopper in the opposing suit (with solidity too, bid 3NT)

-- A partial stopper in the opposing suit (K, Qx, Jxx, 10xxx)

Replier doesn't *have* to bid notrump with any of these requirements, but she may do so if no other call describes her hand better. The primary aim is to describe the hand in general. Lacking any of the above requirements for a 2NT bid, or not wishing to bid notrump because of the nature of her hand, South makes the call that will best serve to further describe her hand. Any minimum bid in a suit previously bid by either partner may be passed.

Senior continues with one of the following actions:

-- He bids 3NT over 2NT if solidity or a partial stopper in Replier's hand is sufficient for chancing that game.

-- He bids a partnership (i.e., previously bid) suit if he doesn't mind being passed there.

-- He can make any other call that serves to describe his hand, including a (forcing) bid in a new suit.

-- He can repeat the cue bid when Replier has bid 2NT, warning her that she needs a sure stopper (vs a partial stopper or suit solidity) for a game in notrump.

-- He can pass 2NT with perhaps three small cards in the opposing suit, if Replier has previously made a limit bid and he has a hunch that 2NT is better than any other spot.

-- He can repeat the cue bid when Replier has refused to bid notrump, asking that she please do so regardless of her holding in the opposing suit:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | 1♥ | 1♠ | Pass |
| 2♦ | Pass | 2♥ | Pass |
| 3♣ | Pass | 3♥ | |

The 3♥ bid is equivalent to a 3NT bid, wanting South to play the hand. North has ♠A7632 ♥A8 ♦A93 ♣Q63. South has not *denied* holding something like Qx in hearts, despite his failure to bid 2NT. Besides, there is no reason for South to play the hand.

After Prober has made his follow-up call, it is Replier's turn to bid again:

-- If she had solidity plus a partial stopper for 2NT bid, she can bid 3NT even if Prober signs-off:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | Dbl | Pass | 2♣ |
| Pass | 2♦ | Pass | 2NT |
| Pass | 3♣ | Pass | 3NT |

East has ♠873 ♥642 ♦Q7 ♣A10873. She has both a partial stopper and more suit-running ability than West could expect. With two reasons for bidding 2NT, she now bids 3NT. West has ♠AK4 ♥AQ3 ♦J83 ♣KQ94. Without the partial stop in diamonds, West would have bid 3♣ (a strong bid in this situation) instead of 2♦.

-- She can pass a minimum bid in one of the partnership's suits if she sees no game. In the preceding auction, East would have passed 3♣ without the queen of diamonds.

-- She can repeat the cue bid herself to show a good hand that unfortunately has none of the requirements for a 2NT bid. In the preceding auction, East would have bid 3♦ instead of 2NT with ♠Q52 ♥K85 ♦7♣J87532, with the intention of driving to game somewhere.

-- She can make some other appropriate bid.

An implied assumption in all of the foregoing is that one sure stopper plus one partial stopper will provide a double stopper when the opponent must lead away from her suit. This is not always so, but is true often enough to justify the assumption. The other assumption is that two partial stoppers will produce one sure stopper, which is almost always true.

Here is an example from actual play:

South has ♠J53 ♥A1082 ♦A83 ♣A64, North ♠K ♥763 ♦KQJ1092 ♣K85

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | 2♦ | Pass |
| 2♥ | Pass | 2♠ | Pass |
| 2NT | Pass | 3♦ | Pass |
| 3NT | | | |

North would not have made the cue bid if the spade king and heart seven were exchanged. South knows that responder must have some spade strength, since he can see that her diamonds are not solid. He bids 3NT because he has *two* of the requirements for the 2NT bid: a partial stopper and solidifying strength (in diamonds). Lacking one, he would pass 3♦ with a minimum hand.

2) Junior has the adverse suit sitting over him. This is the worse position:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | 2♥ | Pass |
| 2♠ | | | |

Replier North cannot profitably bid notrump and have the opening lead come through Prober's possible spade strength. The bidding flexibility is considerably reduced by this factor. On the other hand, the person contemplating a cue bid can more readily bid notrump instead, since the lead will be coming up to his hand. Accordingly, with many hands that would call for a cue bid if the suit had been bid on the right, a player will bid notrump when the suit has been bid on the left. Senior tends to cue bid, Junior tends to bid notrump.

The following guidelines apply for a Junior cue bid:

-- Replier *raises* the cue bid instead of bidding notrump, holding one of the features supposedly being sought by Junior (solidity, stopper, partial stopper). With only a partial stopper and a doubtful hand, it may

be better to sign off rather than raise the cue bid. The purpose of raising the cue bid is to get the lead in the right place--making the opponent who bid the suit lead away from it.

-- Junior's repeat cue bid asks for a partial stopper, since he would seldom have any reason to insist that Replier play the notrump:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------------------------------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | 2♣ | Pass |
| 2♠ | Pass | 3♣ | Pass |
| 3♠ | - asks for a partial stopper | | |

East would not raise the first cue bid with a partial stopper and a weak raise, so South inquires about that possibility. South has ♠J64 ♥A65 ♦A ♣AK9876

Another: West has ♠Q3 ♥A8 ♦K96 ♣QJ9632, East ♠J54 ♥9642 ♦AQ8 ♣AK5:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♠ | 2♣ | Pass | 2♠ |
| Pass | 3♣ | Pass | 3♠ |
| Pass | 3NT | | |

West did not raise the cue bid even though she has a partial stopper, because her clubs are not very good. With the partial stopper and a normal hand, however, she is able to bid 3NT after the repeat cue bid.

-- Rather than raise the cue bid, Replier can just bid 2NT with a holding that can be safely led up to (e.g., doubleton A10, AJ). Bidding 2NT in this position implies a potential double stopper, and a jump to 3NT implies a double stopper.

-- If the cue bid gets doubled, Replier can redouble to show at least a partial stopper in the opposing suit. This is a weaker action than raising the cue bid.

When a major suit game is the probable goal -- If the partnership has not bid a minor suit before the cue bid, it can be assumed that Prober is pointing toward a major suit game rather than a notrump game. One of the most common cases is the cue bid response to a major suit overcall:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | Pass | 2♣ |

Chances are that East has spade support and is going to try for a spade game (a jump to 3♠ is not particularly invitational). However, he could have something else in mind. Perhaps he has a strong hand with little in spades, but has no readily available bid that would describe the hand adequately (unless the partnership is playing transfer responses to overcalls, a new suit bid, even a jump, is not forcing). He therefore seeks more information about West's hand with a cue bid.

In response to the cue bid, Replier makes the bid that will best serve to further describe her hand. With a minimum overcall and no other suit to show, she will probably just bid 2♠:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|--|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | Pass | 2♣ |
| Pass | 2♠ - minimum overcall, no second suit | | |
| | 2NT - club stopper, likes notrump okay | | |
| | 3♣ - good hand, club stopper | | |
| | 2♦/2♥ - second suit, forcing | | |
| | 3♠ - good suit, good overcall, forcing | | |
| | 4♠ - very good suit and hand | | |

The 2NT bid tends to show a short club holding (e.g., AQ, Kx). With a holding like Qxx, Kxx, or Axx, it is better to raise the cue bid in order to show a stopper and maybe get the lead coming up to Prober's hand (which may include Kx, Qx, or Jxx in clubs).

The 3♣ bid shows a club stopper, but Replier can make this bid with nothing but a partial stopper and solid spades. Prober won't dare bid 3NT with no partial stopper and no high card in spades (as the cue bid tends to imply).

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------------------------|
| 1♣ | 1♥ | Pass | 2♣ |
| Pass | 2♦ | Pass | 3♥/3♣/3♦ - not forcing |

Prober East must repeat the cue bid if he wants to force. The 3♥ bid is only a strong invitation to game, since 2♥ would be just mildly invitational. The 3♥ bid shows a hand too good for an original 3♥ advance, while a 2♥ bid would show a hand too good for an original 2♥ advance.

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♥ | 1♠ | Pass | 2♥ |
| Pass | 3♣ | | |

Going to the three level with 3♣ implies a little extra, either in distribution (5-5) or high cards. If West has weak spades, he no doubt has extra high cards to justify the overcall. With a minimum overcall (no doubt with good spades), he should just bid 2♠, not 3♣, with 5=4.

Probing Cue Bids at the Three Level

If both opponents have bid the same suit, a Probing Cue Bid at the three level requests a notrump bid from Replier if she has a sure stopper:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♠ | 2♣ | 2♠ | 3♠ |

East is suggesting that West bid 3NT with a sure spade stopper, but not with a partial stopper. The reasoning: Two partial stoppers, one in each hand, do not occur very often when both opponents have bid the same suit. It therefore makes more sense for a cue bid in this case to ask for a full stopper.

If only one opponent has bid the suit, however, the cue bid suggests that Replier bid 3NT with a partial stopper (K, Qx, Jxx, 10xxx) or better. There are occasions when Replier can bid 3NT opposite such a cue

bid when he has no strength whatsoever in the cue bid suit--when he is sure that Prober must have a stopper herself. For instance, when holding the ace of a suit in which Prober has shown good length--and she could not suppose that you have that ace--then you can bid 3NT without the partial stopper. Prober won't dare pass 3NT without a stopper, because she will suppose the partnership needs to have the opposing suit stopped twice.

Suppose South has ♠A4 ♥AJ ♦KQJ853 ♣Q107 and the bidding goes:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | Pass | 1♥ | 2♠ |
| 3♠ | Pass | ? | |

North has ♠106 ♥96432 ♦A976 ♣A8. Unless South has great heart support, she is probably looking for a notrump game with just such a hand as the one shown above. Holding the ace of diamonds, North can bid 3NT without a partial stopper. He knows that South, lacking that ace, will not dare pass without a sure spade stop. In actual play North missed this implication and bid 4♣ instead of 3NT. The final contract was 5♦, down one (I was North).

If the cue bid gets doubled, and both opponents have bid the suit, a redouble by either partner shows a partial stopper (bid 3NT with a sure stopper). If only one opponent has bid the suit, go ahead and bid 3NT with a partial stopper, as requested. A redouble in that case shows a "partial-partial" stopper (e.g., Q, Jx, 10xx). A redouble by Prober shows a sure stopper and asks partner to bid 3NT if he has the key card(s) that will provide solidity to the partnership's suit(s):

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | Pass | 1♥ | 2♠ |
| 3♠ | Dbl | Pass | Pass |

Rdbl - sure stopper, asking for solidity

Other examples of Probing Cue Bids at the three level:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 2♠ | 3♦ | Pass |

3♠ - asks for a partial spade stop

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------------------------------|
| 1♣ | 1♠ | 2♦ | 2♠ |
| Pass | Pass | 3♠ | - asks for a sure spade stop |

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♦ | 2♣ | 2♠ | Pass |

3♣ - asks for a partial club stop

Take the last auction: North is not *required* to bid 3NT with something in clubs if he thinks some other bid is more appropriate. In this case responder has ♠K10762 ♥AK3 ♦965 ♣Q5, so 3NT is the best bid. Opener has ♠A4 ♥Q7 ♦AKQJ87 ♣J42.

The following is *not* a Probing Cue Bid:

| South | West | North |
|-------|------|-------|
| 1♣ | 2♠ | 3♠ |

A jump overcall has been made, but both partners have not bid before the cue bid. This is a standard strong cue bid. Of course South will bid 3NT to show spade strength and a minimum hand.

A cue bid that sounds like a Probing Cue Bid may turn out to be a slam try cue bid. The logic of the auction usually reveals this fact plainly. Example:

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♦ | 1♠ | 2♦ |
| 3♦ | Pass | 3NT | Pass |
| 4♠ | | | |

North, assuming 3♦ was a Probing Cue Bid, bid 3NT with a diamond stopper. South's 4♠ bid makes it obvious he was going to raise spades, so 3♦ becomes a slam try cue bid, probably based on a void. Also see section 8-2, Responding to Simple Overcalls, and section 10-7, Cue Bid Responses to Overcalls.