

Help Suit Game Tries

What? When? With What? How?

By Mike Savage

What are Help-Suit Game Tries?

Help-suit game tries are made after a simple major suit raise by responder or after a major suit response to an opening bid and a raise to two by opener. Classically they are a try for game by bidding a 3 or 4-card side suit with at least one high honor, looking for a filling high honor or two from partner. Some partnerships play that “help-suit” game tries can also be made with side suits that have no honors at all—looking for primary strength or shortness and four trumps. Your partnership needs to decide whether to use strictly classic help-suit game tries or to also make help-suit game tries in suits with no honors—otherwise there will be times when you won’t know if you should accept your partner’s game try or not. My personal preference is to make help-suit game tries in suits with no honors at all up through having as much as AQx in the help-suit—but this requires delicate bidding judgment by my partners ☺.

When should you make one?

A help-suit game try by opener shows a strong hand, typically with a very good 15 to a poor 18 HCP or even less if you have a 5-5 two-suiter, looking for help in a particular suit. A help-suit game try by responder typically shows a hand of around 9-12 HCP with chances for game if opener has help in responder’s side suit. It should be used somewhat rarely—only when you want your partner to focus on his holding in a particular suit, using *that* as the primary factor in his decision to accept game or not.

Can opener make a help-suit game try in the other major with only a 3-card suit or should that be reserved for trying to find and play in a 4-4 fit rather than the 5-3 or 5-4 fit in opener’s major? Your partnership must make that decision, although the latter *might* be best. However with appropriate rebid agreements, opener *could* bid the other major with a 3 or 4-card suit and, if needed later, clarify which.

Here are examples of some hands that qualify for help-suit game tries by opener: AQ10xx x AKxx Kxx (1S-2S: 3C), xx A109xxx AJ9x A (1H-2H: 3D), AKQxx Ax x xxxxx (1S-2S: 3C), by responder: Kx QJ10xx Kxxx xx (1C-1H-2H: 3D), KQxxx QJxx Jxx x (1D-1S-2S: 3H) and KQxxx Kx x xxxxx (1D-1S-2S: 3C). Avoid making “help-suit” game tries with 0 or 1-loser suits unless it’s *really* a slam try.

With What should you accept one?

If your partnership plays classical help-suit game tries, showing a major honor third or better, then you should accept with A, K, Q or better as well as a hand with a singleton and four trumps, both with a hand you will not be embarrassed to put down as dummy. If you play omnibus help-suit game tries that include making one with three, four or 5 small in the suit, then you still will want to accept with a stiff (or doubleton?) and four trumps. But with honors, you may only want to accept with the ace, king or better. With Qxx in the suit, make a below game counter try if you can and if you can’t, accept with a maximum.

How should you accept one?

Most of the time it will be a close decision to accept partner’s game try or not—or it will be a routine acceptance and you will jump to four of the agreed-upon trump suit. However if your partner’s help-suit game try made you fall in love with your hand, cue-bid on your way to game. More specifically, your partnership might agree that a jump to game denies the ace of the help-suit or any other side suit as you would cue-bid any side-suit ace on the way to game if you are accepting partner’s game try.

This agreement would be of great help if it turned out that partner’s putative game try was actually a probe for slam! The advance cue-bid—or the lack thereof—will greatly help your partner in deciding to pursue his quest for slam or not (in the rare instances that he has such a hand). Hopefully these guidelines will be helpful to your partnership in getting to and avoiding close games and even slams!