Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

When my partner opens in a major suit, I know the point-count ranges I need to raise, but I am not sure about how many trumps I need.

Partner opened 1♠, and I raised to 3♠ with:

♠A Q 8 ♥K 6 ♦9 7 2 ♣J 7 6 5 3.

Partner bid 4♠, which made, but was my bid correct?

Limit Raise Nancy

Dear LRN,

I don't think there is anything wrong with your raise to 3♠. You had 10 high-card points and 1 dummy point for the doubleton heart. That is too much for a raise to 2♠, so you had to find an invitational bid. Your choice of a limit raise to 3♠ was a practical bid that got your side to a good game contract.

Having said that, many players prefer that a limit raise of a major suit promises four-card support and around 11 to 12 points. If that is your partnership agreement, then consider the alternatives.

Bidding theories change over time and it is rare to find a consensus on any given deal. At one time, it would be popular to respond 2♣ with this type of hand. A new-suit response at the two level shows about 10 or more points and is forcing. If opener rebids 2♠, you could invite to game by raising to 3♠. You did not make a limit raise right away, so you are not promising four-card support.

A popular modern style (Two Over One Game Forcing) is to treat a new-suit response at the two level as forcing to game. If that is your partnership style, you don't have enough to respond 2♣ with this hand and commit the partnership to game. To avoid making a limit raise with three-card support in this system, you need to adjust the meaning of a 1NT response to an opening major-suit bid. Instead of using 1NT to show 6–10 points without support for the major suit, you agree that a 1NT response is forcing, showing around 6 or more points that may or may not include support for opener's major.

This solves the dilemma with this type hand. The auction might now continue like this:

Partner	*You*
1♠	1NT
2♦	3♠

Your 1NT response is forcing. When partner rebids 2♦, you now make an invitational jump to 3♠, showing 11–12 points but only three-card support. With four-card support, you could have made the limit raise to 3♠ directly over 1♠. Similarly, if partner rebids 2♠, you would raise to 3♠ to show an invitational hand. With 6–10 points, you would simply pass 2♠.

It is important to distinguish between three- and four-card support when making an invitational raise. Obviously it didn't matter in your case: Partner made 4♠ despite only three-card support. When opener has a close decision, however, knowing there will be four trumps in dummy can make a difference. Consider the following hands:

Partner	*You*
♠ K 7 5 4 2	♠ A Q 8
♥ A 9 7 4	♥ K 6
♦ A J 5	♦ 9 7 2
♣ 10	♣ J 7 6 5 3

Partner has a close decision after you make an invitational raise to 3♠. If partner bids 4♠, it is unlikely to make. But if we give dummy a fourth trump:

Partner	*You*
♠ K 7 5 4 2	♠ A Q 8 3
♥ A 9 7 4	♥ K 6
♦ A J 5	♦ 9 7 2
♣ 10	♣ J 7 6 5

the possibility of making 10 tricks is much better. If trumps divide 2–2, 4♠ is cold. Partner can draw trumps and still have two spades left to ruff heart losers. Even if trumps divide 3–1, there is a good chance to make game, so the fourth trump can make a big difference.

The knowledge that the limit raiser definitely has four-card support will help opener in his decision to bid or reject game. If your limit raise can contain only three-card support, opener will have to have a stronger hand to bid game. ❐