

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of yellow playing card suits: spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs, arranged in a grid-like fashion. The suits are rendered in a light yellow color against a slightly darker yellow background.

MARC SMITH

Improve Your Slam Bidding

An Honors eBook from Master Point Press

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Master Point Press
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www.masterpointpress.com
www.bridgeblogging.com
www.ebooksbridge.com

ISBN: 978-1-77140-382-5

Cover Design: Francesca Canali

1 2 3 4 5 6 29 28 27 26

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Introduction

Whether you learned to play last year or half a century ago, successfully bidding and making a slam is still one of the most thrilling things that happens at the bridge table.

When you pick up a balanced 17-count and partner opens 1NT, you jump to 6NT just like everyone else. However, most slam bidding is much more difficult, as there are numerous factors to consider. Are you sure that the opponents cannot cash two tricks off the top? Is your trump suit sufficiently robust? Do you have enough ‘stuff’ to actually make twelve tricks?

In this book, we will examine how to judge when to investigate slam possibilities and when you should stop safely in game. How do you find out whether partner has the right 12 points? How do you choose which suit to play in? How do you cope with pre-emptive bidding by the opponents? Or, indeed, by partner? When is it right to stop to double the opponents at the five- or six-level, and when should you bid on?

Going down in a bad slam is even more expensive than missing a slam that would have made. By the time you’ve read this book, I hope you’ll have a better understanding of how to avoid those costly minus scores at the six-level and higher.

This book will provide you with many of the tools you need to improve your slam bidding. After all, we all enjoy writing large plus scores on our scorecard.

Marc

Acknowledgement

Once again, I am indebted to my exceptional proofreader, Bill Lide from Vancouver, Washington. Bill found more mistakes in my original manuscript than I care to recall. I am also grateful to him for identifying all those grammatical errors of which my high school English teacher thought he had cured me.

For ease of reading, hands taken from real life play may have been rotated to make South the declarer.



1

General Concepts

A number of factors must fall into place to successfully bid and make a slam. Two criteria are common to all auctions, not just slams. Firstly, establish which suit should be trumps (or that it is a no-trump hand). Then, assess the value of your combined partnership assets and determine the approximate level at which you should play (partscore, game or slam).

Other requirements are specific to slam auctions. The first of these is possession of an adequate trump suit. You may be able to play a major-suit game with Q-x-x-x facing K-x-x-x, but you do not want to reach slam with such a tenuous trump holding. What a difference it makes when that suit looks more like Q-10-x-x opposite K-J-x-x! A ninth (or more) trump is also preferable.

If your slam contract is to be successful, you also need the material to actually make twelve tricks. You may have all four aces and kings, but if you have a pair of 4333 shapes with no other honours, you will be lucky to make game, let alone slam. Side suits that provide a source of tricks, or can be established to produce long-suit tricks, may compensate for the lack of subsidiary honours.

The final requirement is that the opponents cannot cash the first two tricks in any side suit, or cash an ace and wait for a trump trick.

Inexperienced players automatically assume that you need to use Blackwood to bid a slam. The truth, though, is that Blackwood is not a slam-bidding tool at all. Having already answered all of the questions posed above, Blackwood is what you use as a final check, to keep you out of bad slams. RKCB will tell you that two key cards are missing, or a cashing ace and Q-x-x-x-x trumps, so you can stop safely at the five-level.

Let's start with a deal that illustrates some of these factors...

Both Vul ♠ Q 10 9 4
Dlr: South ♥ K Q J 7 3
 ♦ 8 3
 ♣ A 7

♠ A 7 ♥ 10 2 ♦ J 10 9 7 5 ♣ 9 8 6 4	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> N </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> W E </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; width: 100%;"> S </div> </div>	♠ 6 2 ♥ 9 6 5 4 ♦ A 6 4 ♣ J 5 3 2
--	---	--

♠ K J 8 5 3
 ♥ A 8
 ♦ K Q 2
 ♣ K Q 10

West	North	East	South
			1♠
pass	2NT*	pass	3♠
pass	4♣	pass	4♦
pass	4♥	pass	4NT
pass	5♣	pass	5♠
all pass			

North has the values for game facing an opening bid and, with four-card support for his partner's major, he immediately confirms the trump suit with a game-forcing Jacoby 2NT. South shows extra values with 3♠, which also denies either a shortage or good side suit.

Encouraged by his potential source of tricks in hearts, North is more than happy to co-operate in the slam investigation. What is the first thing he needs to find out?

If you are to make slam, it is imperative that the opponents cannot take the first two tricks in diamonds. North advances with 4♣, a cue bid showing a control (ace, king, singleton or void) in that suit. If South cannot show a diamond control, North will know immediately that there is no slam.

When South obliges with a 4♦ cue bid, North continues by showing his heart control. With all side suits controlled, there is only one more question to be answered, so South checks with Blackwood. North's 5♣ response shows one or four key cards (four aces plus the trump king).

Holding only two key cards himself, South knows there are two aces missing and he puts the brakes on just in time. 5♠ is an easy make, losing just two aces. N/S +650.

- **Blackwood is the final check, this time identifying that two aces are missing.**
- **Almost everyone now plays the Roman Key Card version of Blackwood (RKCB for short). This is a significant improvement as it allows you to find out about the king and queen of trumps as well as the four aces.**

Sitting South on the next deal, you pick up a great hand. When partner opens the bidding, your first thought is that you are likely to be heading for slam.

<p>Nil Vul</p> <p>Dlr: North</p>	<p>♠ K J 6 4</p> <p>♥ K Q 5</p> <p>♦ Q 5 4 2</p> <p>♣ J 10</p>	<p>♠ 8 2</p> <p>♥ J 9 7 6 2</p> <p>♦ A K 9 6</p> <p>♣ 8 5</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> N </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; width: 100%;"> W E </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; width: 100%;"> S </div> </div>
	<p>♠ A Q 10 9 5</p> <p>♥ A</p> <p>♦ J 7 3</p> <p>♣ A K Q 7</p>	<p>♠ 7 3</p> <p>♥ 10 8 4</p> <p>♦ 10 8</p> <p>♣ 9 6 4 3 2</p>	

West	North	East	South
	1♦	pass	1♠
pass	2♠	pass	4♣
pass	4♥	pass	4♠
all pass			

Partner raises your 1♠ response, immediately solving the question of which suit will be trumps. What should you do now?

You cannot use RKCB when you have a suit in which you have no control (diamonds here). Your first priority is to make sure that the opponents cannot cash two quick tricks in that suit. Your jump to 4♣ tells partner both that you are interested in slam and that you have a

club control. Partner's 4♥ not only shows a heart control but, even more important, denies a control in the suit he bypassed, diamonds.

Reluctantly, no doubt, you sign off in 4♠. This is just as well, as the defenders start with the ♦A-K and a diamond ruff. Even the five-level was not safe. N/S +420 was the limit of the hand.

- **Control-showing cue bids perform two roles. They show a control in the suit bid. The first cue bid also shows slam interest.**
- **When a suit is bypassed during cue-bidding (here, 4♥ rather than 4♦), that denies a control in the bypassed suit.**
- **A control may be the ace, king, singleton or void – anything that stops the opponents cashing two fast winners in the suit.**
- **On this deal, partner had opened 1♦. Had he shown a diamond control, you would immediately have known it was a high-card control (ie the ace or king).**

We all learned very early that you need around 32-33 HCP to make a slam. High-card points are an effective way of evaluating balanced hands, particularly when bidding or raising no-trumps. Judging how good your hand is for suit play is far more nuanced. Indeed, good trumps and a source of tricks in a side suit will often allow you to make a slam with considerably fewer high-card values. This is the type of deal I have in mind.

Nil Vul			♠ A K 5 3
Dlr: North			♥ 5
			♦ 8 6 2
			♣ A K Q J 5
♠ 8			♠ 9 7 2
♥ Q 10 7 6 3 2			♥ A K J
♦ Q J 10 5			♦ K 4 3
♣ 8 4			♣ 9 7 3 2
			♠ Q J 10 6 4
			♥ 9 8 4
			♦ A 9 7
			♣ 10 6

West	North	East	South
	1♣	pass	1♠
pass	4♣	pass	4♦
pass	4NT	pass	5♣
pass	5♦	pass	6♣
all pass			

North could have used a splinter bid to show his spade support and extra values, but his jump to 4♣ is more descriptive. It shows a strong hand with four-card spade support and a source of tricks in clubs – what is known as a ‘picture bid’.

Although he has only 7 HCP, South can see that his hand, with a fifth trump and an ace, is not without potential. So, he cooperates with a 4♦ cue bid. That is music to North’s ears. If his partner’s diamond control is the ace, North can see that slam will be a good proposition as long as his partner also holds the ♠Q. Blackwood quickly confirms that South has what is needed.

West leads the ♦Q. Declarer wins with the ♦A and draws trumps in three rounds. He then pitches two diamonds and a heart on dummy’s clubs. He has to lose one heart trick, but that’s it. N/S +1430 despite holding only a combined 24 HCP.

- **A jump rebid at the four-level in the minor you have opened shows game values, four-card support for responder’s major, and a good five-card or longer holding in your minor.**
- **Holding a source of tricks in a side-suit will often enable you to make slam on fewer high-card values than would normally be expected.**

Playing a two-level response as game-forcing (as in a 2/1 system) has its advantages. However, judging whether your side has the values for slam can be problematic. No one has to jump to show extra values, so it is easy to see how the bidding might get to the four-level with both players still unlimited. Does your side have 12 HCP opposite 12, or does one or both of you hold significant extra values?

Let’s see an example of a 2/1 auction, and a useful tool to discover whether you should look for slam or settle for game.

Both Vul ♠ Q J 6 2
Dlr: North ♥ K Q 6 5 3 2
 ♦ A 6
 ♣ 7

♠ 10 8 5
 ♥ 9
 ♦ Q J 9 4 3
 ♣ K 9 6 3



♠ 9 3
 ♥ J 10 8 7
 ♦ 10
 ♣ Q J 10 5 4 2

♠ A K 7 4
 ♥ A 4
 ♦ K 8 7 5 2
 ♣ A 6

West	North	East	South
	1♥	pass	2♦
pass	2♥	pass	2♠
pass	3♠	pass	3NT*
pass	4♣	pass	4♦
pass	4NT	pass	5♣
pass	7♠	all pass	

South's 2♦ response establishes a game-force, and the auction can then continue naturally. Space is conserved so that the best fit can be explored. North's 2♥ rebid says nothing about his strength, but just shows a six-card suit. When South then shows at least 4-5 in the pointed suits, North raises spades to show four-card support.

A trump suit has been established but, with no one needing to jump to show extra values, both hands are still unlimited. The partnership could have 12 HCP opposite 12, and just barely enough to make game, or 18 facing 18, and plenty to make at least a small slam.

To solve this problem, many pairs use a method known as 'Serious' in this type of auction. One bid (often 3NT, but sometimes just the lowest available step) is used as artificial, promising extra values and showing serious slam interest. Any other action would show a control in the bid suit, but deny extra values. This is a non-serious cue bid. It says, "I have a minimum, but I am showing a control in case you are still interested." (Note that you can also play it the other way around, with the economical bid showing a minimum and anything else showing extras.)

On this deal, South has significant extra values, so he starts with a ‘Serious 3NT’. North shows his lowest control, clubs, and South makes a return cue-bid in diamonds. North knows his partner holds extra values and the $\heartsuit K$ (his control cannot be a shortage because of his initial $2\heartsuit$ response). All North now needs to know is how many of the missing key cards his partner holds.

South’s $5\clubsuit$ response shows one or four key cards, but he showed slam interest, so he cannot hold only one. South must have the high trumps and both round-suit aces. North can jump confidently to $7\spadesuit$.

Note that although you will often make 13 tricks, it would be foolish to play this combination in 7NT, as hearts might split 4-1. That speedbump can be overcome playing in spades, as long as trumps break. A 4-1 trump break playing in spades will not inconvenience declarer as long as the hearts behave. N/S +2210.

- **A game-forcing 2/1 response allows you to bid out your shape without having to jump to show extra values.**
- **‘Serious 3NT’ solves the problem of two unlimited hands cue-bidding their way to the stratosphere only to find they have plenty of controls but not enough stuffing to generate 12 tricks.**
- **Describing your hand and asking “What do I need to know?” are essential components of accurate slam bidding. We will delve deeper into both concepts in the coming chapters.**

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Learn when to investigate slam and when to stop safely in game. How do you find out whether partner has the right 12 points? How do you choose which suit to play in? How do you cope with pre-emptive bidding by the opponents? Or, indeed, by partner? When is it right to stop to double the opponents at the five- or six-level, and when should you bid on?

This book provides you with the tools you need to improve your slam bidding. After all, we all enjoy writing large plus scores on our scorecard.



MARC SMITH (Southampton, UK) is co-author, with Barbara Seagram, of the world's best-selling bridge book, *25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know*. He has written many other bridge books and enjoyed countless tournament wins, ranging from the 1984 Junior European Union Championship to the 2025 Premier Grandmaster Pairs. He is a popular bridge teacher on the internet, conducting classes at all levels of play.

