

Terry Bossomaier

# GETTING TO GOOD SLAMS

30 Key Ideas

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Bidding slams is fun. It is also lucrative, especially at teams, and, surprisingly, slams are quite common. Take a recent 36 board hand set from a club game, where there were two grand slams and two small. In the 2016 Orange Congress<sup>1</sup>, a somewhat bigger sample of 108 boards, there were 6 grand and 5 small. On nine board rounds this was almost one slam per round.

There are many good books on bidding, including some specializing in slam bidding. Usually the approach is through a system or method or set of conventions, with hands chosen to illustrate how everything works. One of the difficulties of this approach is that to the average player wanting to move to expert level, it's not always obvious what is the most important. How much effort should go into finding slams after partner opens with a three-level preempt? Are void showing jumps better than splinter bids? To try to answer questions such as these, we take a different approach in this book.

We look at 100 hands, taken from a series of events. We don't just select the interesting or difficult hands, but look at **all** the hands which made 12 or 13 tricks, to get an overarching perspective on what really matters. Part of the reason for this arises from the way tournament hands are now dealt. Many of the classic books on bidding were written before computer dealing came along. Once hands were being regularly dealt by computer, everybody realized that wild distributions were actually much

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<sup>1</sup>Orange is a popular town in regional NSW in Australia.

more common than occurred when hands were shuffled and dealt at the table—shuffling was imperfect.

From these sets of tournament hands, key ideas emerge, which transcend any given system or convention. One thing, which emerges very early on, is that *almost all* slams require less than the 33 HCP, which most elementary books suggest for a small slam. No amount of counting points for distribution gets anywhere near close. We call slams with less than the usual number of points, *skinny*: 30 HCP or less for a small and 34 or less for a grand. Super skinny slams require 26 HCP or less for a small and 30 or less for a grand. Finally, just as in music we go from ppp through to fff, we have the SSS, Seriously Super Skinny slams: 21 HCP or less for a small and 25 HCP or less for a grand.

Grands on 37HCP are extremely rare. Many slams, grands included, here have fewer than 30. Of the hands which Dealmaster Pro claims will make 12 or 13 tricks, some are bad or even terrible contracts. We include those, because staying out of bad slams is as important as getting into good ones. There is a little subjectivity here. Sometimes a slam is bad because dummy has the wrong, unlikely cards. In others the duplication or other weakness can be identified in the bidding and we mark those with a question mark in the summary statistics at the end of each chapter.

The situation with grands is a bit different. In most fields missing a tight grand will not be that harmful, but going off in one will usually be very bad. Thus the view we take here is that for a skinny grand one has to be able to count the tricks. Thus the argument that dummy has the wrong cards should be less applicable.

One could argue that one should also look at hands which make only 11 tricks, but where a slam is a good contract. We've elected not to do this. There are more 5-level hands, some are trivially bad slams (missing two aces, for example) and there may be uncertainties about whether some obscure line of play or defense will affect the outcome. Occasionally such hands are included, where they are especially interesting for some reason, but they are not included in any of the statistics.

There are many gadgets for slam bidding. Each is usually presented with the hands where it succeeds in reaching an unreachable slam. Good slam bidding, though, is not just about gadgets. It needs judgement and risk assessment. When the opponents intervene or preempt, the risk evaluation becomes critically important, and not every decision will be a suc-

cess. With widespread use of weak two bids, multi-colored two diamonds and various flavors of weak two-suited openings, many slams are going to be risky. If something terrible happens, one just has to hope that it happens at the other table(s). The best way of assessing risk is to work out how the hand is likely to play (Key Idea 4).

Quite a lot of small slams are found just on the basis of points. 33 points usually gives a good play for a slam in no trumps. Grands need 37, but even 39 may not be enough. Imagine holding a hand with 36 points and not being able to make a grand slam in no-trumps:

♠ A K Q 2  
 ♥ A K Q  
 ♦ A K Q  
 ♣ A K Q

♠ --  
 ♥ J x x x x  
 ♦ J x x  
 ♣ J x x x x

On the other hand many grand slams make on a lot less. The way to approach grand slams then, is not through points, but estimating how many tricks there are from the bidding. This is not as hard as it sounds. Suppose you've found a solid 5-3 fit and there is an outside 6-card suit headed by AK, which needs one ruff to set up (17 HCP so far). That's 10 tricks. With two additional aces and a king, that comes to 13, even though it's only 28 HCP. This forms one of the cardinal key ideas of this book (Key Idea 15). As we go through the hands, event by event, we see a series of key ideas, such as this. They are independent of bidding systems or conventions, and, hopefully, will help you to see more slam opportunities and to avoid some bad slams.

The suggested bidding sequences are based loosely around Standard American Yellow Card (SAYC), but most of the popular bidding systems have evolved to be reasonably effective. Who plays the original Baron system these days (although bits of it have survived)? The auxilliary gadgets are minimal, most of them in common use:

- Grand slam force;
- Italian cue-bids, treating first and second round controls equally in ascending order;
- Jumps in forcing situations to show solid suits;
- Splinters, or void showing jumps;
- Roman Keycard Blackwood.

2/1 is often quite effective for slam bidding, since it sometimes keeps the bidding low on strong hands. Occasionally sequences are offered where it has a distinct advantage. However, there are lots of treatments and conventions in a modern 2/1 card. Here we rely on Paul Thurston's Pocket Guide and his more recent, *Playing 2/1*, both published by Masterpoint Press.

An estimate of bidding difficulty is given on a scale of 0-5: 0—trivial on 33/37 points; 1—easy, good fit and long suits; 2—straightforward; 3—needs care; 4—very difficult, may need a special gadget; 5—impossible on any methods known to the author.

# Chapter 2

## The Orange 2016 Congress

Orange is a pretty town in regional New South Wales. With premium cool climate vineyards in the immediate neighborhood, and a diversity of excellent food, it is a regional tourist hub. It has a thriving bridge club, which runs an annual congress, attracting people from the region and larger cities such as Canberra and Sydney.

### Hand 1

West passes and partner, North, opens a strong no-trump and you hold as South

♠ K8   ♥ AK7   ♦ KQJ9853   ♣ 7

meaning the combined count is between 31 and 33, so a small slam, especially given the long diamonds is pretty certain.

But what about the grand? Suppose partner has three aces. He ought to have at least Ax of diamonds for the no-trump opening, hence there are 12 tricks. But that's only 12 points. If partner has a king, then that gives him 15 points and makes 13 tricks. But the queen of either hearts or spades would do too and there might be some other slender options in the club or spade suit. Thus asking for kings is a bad idea, since simple auctions are harder to defend against. South uses Gerber to check on the aces and then bids 7♦, as happened at the table:

North	South
1NT	4♣
4♠	7♦

**Key Idea 1:** *Count tricks not points, especially for a grand slam.*

At pairs 7NT is almost as good and, in a good field at pairs, the no-trump contract would be worth more matchpoints. At teams there is a very slight advantage to 7♦, if something needs to be ruffed out in the black suits, but, against this, there is the very small adverse risk of a first round ruff.

**Hand 1 Vul All. Dlr W. Difficulty 2**

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

On this hand responder takes control. At the end of the auction, opener knows that responder has some diamonds, but that is about it. Sometimes, though, it can be a mistake to launch into Blackwood or Gerber, if, at the end of the day, it does not provide all the information required to make the best decision.

**Key Idea 2:** *Only take control of the bidding when you don't want any decisions from partner, especially if she is unlimited.*

## Hand 2

The very next hand was a bit of a fix for North-South. Dealer North has an enormous hand, an easy 8 playing tricks, and opens 2♣.

♠ A2    ♥ 107    ♦ Q4    ♣ AKQJ642

and hears a positive 2♥ from South. This is very promising. If South has 2 aces, king of diamonds and another king, the grand would be unbreakable on just 30 points. For the moment, he rebids 4♣, showing a solid suit.

Turning now to South who holds

♠ K96    ♥ AQ932    ♦ 87    ♣ 873

There are 7 club tricks, with the spade and diamond aces and ♥ K, there would be tricks galore, and it is perfectly possible for North to have 20 HCP. But if he has such a monster, he can take control, since he already knows about the heart suit. At the other extreme, he could be missing a diamond control. Thus 4♥ might be interpreted as looking for a possible major fit, but it definitely ought to imply lack of a diamond control.

### Hand 2 Vul NS. Dlr N. Difficulty 3

	♠ A2	
	♥ 107	
	♦ Q4	
	♣ AKQJ642	
♠ 875		♠ QJ1043
♥ 864		♥ KJ5
♦ AJ10965		♦ K32
♣ 10		♣ 95
	♠ K96	
	♥ AQ932	
	♦ 87	
	♣ 873	

Slams in clubs, though, are difficult for Blackwood since the bidding easily gets too high. If South has one king, he would respond 6♦, which would have gone past 6♣. One way to bid this would be

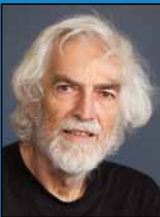
## BIDDING SLAMS IS FUN

Slams are one of the most exciting parts of bridge and, at club level, they occur much more often than they are bid. This book aims to help average and aspiring players to bid a few more of those slams.

Unlike many other books on bidding, this book does not provide a system or set of gadgets. Instead, it looks at a number of tournament events and develops a set of thirty key ideas that will work with any system.

Almost all the slams in this book are skinny slams, with far fewer than the recommended number of points. But these slams have not been specially selected. Not at all. We include all the slams that occurred in the competitions presented. Instead of points we propose some slam hand templates and introduce ideas such as the thirty-point pack.

Bidding and making tight slams is a match-winning strategy. This book will help its readers along the path to more makeable slams and a lot more bidding fun along the way.



**TERRY BOSSOMAIER** (New South Wales) was a keen and successful tournament bridge player in his student years in the UK. He put bridge on hold when he went to Australia — to learn to surf (never happened) and to sail (sort of happened), but instead became professor of computer science and complex systems.