

Bid Your Slams!

There is both an art and a science to accurate slam bidding. Modern bidding conventions have improved the science of slam bidding, but the art is something that develops with intelligent practice. It lies in a player's ability to imagine the potential slam and create a way to discover the slam's feasibility. In these lectures, we will study both the science and the art of slam bidding.

There are several types of slam hands: those hands which take twelve or thirteen tricks on power alone, hands which take tricks due to extreme distribution, and hands which take tricks because the partnership fit is exact. The conventional bids used may vary with each hand type, but the principles to remember will be similar and the basic art is the same.

- **One partner must realize that a slam is a possibility.**
- **That partner determines what information is necessary to test the slam.**
- **That partner then either asks appropriate questions or communicates to partner that a slam may be possible.**

Slams based on power are the most obvious to players, and those in which one partner holds a powerful balanced hand are the easiest to bid. "*Bid Your Slams!*" will begin with slam investigations when one partner shows a balanced hand with at least 15 high card points.

You Hold a Strong Balanced Hand

You have shown a strong balanced hand with one of the following auctions:

- You open the bidding **1NT**. **15-17 HCPs**
- You open the bidding **1 minor** and jump to **2NT**. **18-19 HCPs**
- You open the bidding **2NT**. **20-21 HCPs**
- You open the bidding **3NT**. **24-26 HCPs**
- You open the bidding **2C** and rebid **2NT**. **22-24 HCPs**
- You open the bidding **2C** and rebid **3NT**. **25-27 HCPs**

☞ **Principle:** When you show a strong balanced hand in the bidding, ***your partner is the captain of the auction!*** This is imperative. If a slam is possible, your partner will lead the investigation. Answer partner's questions and respect partner's judgment.

Your Partner Holds a Strong Balanced Hand – Your Hand Is Balanced

When partner opens the bidding showing a strong balanced hand, you know the number of high cards held by the partnership. *If you also hold a balanced hand and know that **no trump** is the correct strain,* make the correct bid based on the partnership's combined high card points. Make a ***quantitative raise***.

- **31-33 HCPs:** 33 high card points are usually necessary for the partnership to take twelve tricks in no trump. You know a slam is possible, but you don't have enough information yet to bid it confidently. You need to know *exactly how many high card points are held by partner*. The bid of **4NT** ***invites partner to bid a slam with a maximum hand***.
- **33-35 HCP:** 37 high card points are usually necessary for the partnership to take thirteen tricks in no trump. You know that the partnership has enough points to take twelve tricks, but not enough for thirteen. You have all the information you need, so bid **6NT**. ***Partner must pass***.

- **35-37 HCP:** You know that you and partner hold enough high cards to take twelve tricks in no trump. Do you hold enough to take all thirteen tricks? The bid of **5NT asks partner to bid 6NT with a minimum hand and 7NT with a maximum hand.**
- **37+ HCP:** If you and your partner hold this many high card points, the opponents can hold no aces. The grand slam depends at worst on a finesse. You need no information from partner. Bid **7NT.**

Example 1. ♠K73
 Your hand: ♥KT7
 ♦AT72
 ♣AQ9

Partner opened the bidding **1NT** (15-17). You know that . . .

- The partnership holds 31-33 HCPs;
- No opponent holds a touching **AK**;
- *No trump* is the correct strain.

The partnership needs 33 HCPs for **6NT** to be a reasonable contract. What information do you need, and what bid should you make to determine that information?

Example 2. ♠AQ72
 Your hand: ♥KQT7
 ♦AT
 ♣T98

You open the bidding **1NT** (15-17). Partner responds **5NT** . . .

- What is partner asking you?
- Do you think partner cares about your four-card major suits?
- What is your call?

Partner's **5NT** bid is a *quantitative raise*. Partner knows that the partnership has enough strength for a small slam and is investigating grand slam possibilities. You are at the bottom of your bid, so place the contract in **6NT**.

Your Partner Holds a Strong Balanced Hand – Your Hand Is Unbalanced

If partner has shown a strong balanced hand, and you hold a hand with at least one five-card or longer suit, a small slam may be a possibility with less than the traditional 33 high card points.

Example 3. ♠95
 Your hand: ♥KQ7
 ♦KQ9742
 ♣84

Partner opened the bidding **2NT** (20-21). You know that . . .

- The partnership holds at most 31 HCPs;
- The partnership has an eight-card or better diamond fit;
- Possible contracts include **3NT**, **5D**, **6D**, and **6NT**;
- A grand slam is unlikely.

The challenge – determine what you need to know and construct an auction to find the necessary answers.

We don't need to know how many high card points partner has; we need to know how many *controls* – aces and kings – partner holds. After all, if the opponents hold two cashing aces, you don't want to bid a six-level contract. **Gerber**, the bid of **4C** by responder after opener has shown a strong balanced hand, asks opener how many aces he holds. Opener responds with step responses.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 4D shows zero or four aces | 4S shows two aces |
| 4H shows one ace | 4NT shows three aces. |

Determine your best options for all possible responses by partner. *If the response is 4D, you should have no doubt about the number of aces in opener's hand.*

- Partner responds **4NT** showing three aces. **6NT** may be risky, but **6D** is likely to fail only if one opponent has a touching **AK** combination and that suit is led. Pass **4NT** or take a chance and bid **6D**.

- Partner responds **4S** showing two aces. A slam is out of the question. Bid **5D** or sign off in **4NT**, the matchpoint choice.
- Partner responds **4H**. Is this possible? Why, or why not?
- Partner responds **4D**. Does this mean all the aces, or none? Assuming partner holds all the aces, a small slam is at worst on a finesse. Do you bid **6D** or **6NT**?

If partner's response shows that the partnership holds all four aces, finding the number of kings the partnership holds may determine both strain and level. If the partnership holds all four aces, responder may ask the number of kings partner holds by bidding **5C**. The step responses are the same. In our example, assume the response was **5H** showing one king. Do you know what partner's hand looks like and can you count the number of tricks the partnership is likely to take?

☞ **Principle:** With the same number of high card points, suit contracts may take at least one trick more than those played in no trump.

☞ **Principle:** Do not ask partner how many kings he holds unless the partnership holds all the aces. Asking for kings implies an interest in a seven-level contract.

Your Partner Holds a Strong Balanced Hand – You Hold a Major Suit

Do not ignore the possibility of a major suit fit or the power of a long suit when partner has shown a strong balanced hand. A six-level or seven-level contract may be successful if the partnership plays in a suit, but the corresponding no trump contract may fail. As responder, use your imagination to visualize partner's possible holdings, both best and worst. If most of the best hands provide good slam possibilities and some of the worst hands do also, construct a bidding sequence to investigate partner's exact holding.

Example 4. ♠A873
Your hand: ♥A8
 ♦KJT975
 ♣T

Partner opened the bidding **2NT** (20-21). You know that . . .

- The partnership holds at least 32 HCPS;
- The partnership has an eight-card or better diamond fit;
- The partnership may have an eight-card spade fit;
- Wimpy game contracts include **3NT**, **4S**, **5D**;
- Small slam contracts include **6D**, **6S**, **6NT**;
- Is a grand slam possible?

You know the partnership should probably be in a slam, but you need a lot of information to discover the best contract. First, you must determine the *best strain*, and only then can you determine the *best level*. Because high-level auctions occur infrequently, you and your partner must discuss the meaning of the many conventional bids and bidding sequences. Most partnerships include **Stayman**, **Jacoby transfers** and **Texas transfers** in their responses to no trump opening hands. It is imperative that you and your partner understand these bids when used in slam-seeking auctions. Consider a possible auction.

- Investigate the possibility of a seven-level spade contract first. Respond to partner's **2NT** opening bid with **3C**, asking partner if he holds a four-card major.
- Partner responds **3D** denying a four-card major. Your next best possibility is a seven-level diamond contract, a strain in which the partnership is known to hold at least eight cards. Now you need to know if the opponents have a cashing ace or two. You bid **4C** (**Gerber**), asking partner how many aces he holds.
- Partner responds **4S** showing two aces. Partner still has 12 to 13 high card points unaccounted for. You bid **5C** to ask for partner's kings. *This bid also tells partner that all aces are held by the partnership.*

- Partner responds **5S** showing two kings. There are 6 to 7 high card points still unaccounted for. Is a seven-level contract a good prospect? **What is your bid?**

Example 5. ♠KQT94
 Your hand: ♥85
 ♦2
 ♣AQJ73

Partner opened the bidding **1NT** (15-17). You know that . . .

- The partnership holds only 27 to 29 HCPs;
- The partnership is likely to have an eight-card or better black suit fit;
- Played in a black suit contract, your hand is worth about 17 playing points!

A small slam, **6C** or **6S**, is a possibility.

You need more information to discover the best contract. *Determine the best strain* and then *determine the best level*. Construct an auction and consider your possible actions based on all possible responses from partner. Consider this auction.

- Partner opens **1NT** (15-17), and you respond **2H!**, transferring to your five-card spade suit.
- Partner obligingly bids **2S**, and you respond **3C**. *You have now shown a two-suited hand*. Partner's next bid will help you proceed.
- Partner bids **4C**. *This is not Gerber*. Only the partner of the strong no trump hand can use Gerber. How many spades does partner have? How many clubs do you think partner has? What information do you need now?

When the partnership has agreed on a trump suit, Use *Blackwood*, a bid of **4NT**, to determine how many aces partner holds. Standard Blackwood responses may not give enough information, though. The king of trumps is such a valuable card that most players now use a modification, *Keycard Blackwood*, which includes the king of trumps as one of five *keycards*. Keycard Blackwood responses are:

- **5C** shows 0 or 3 keycards
- **5D** shows 1 or 4 keycards
- **5H** shows 2 or 5 keycards *without* the queen of trumps
- **5S** shows 2 or 5 keycards *with* the queen of trumps

If responder bids **5C** or **5D**, the next step up (**5D** or **5H**, assuming neither is the trump suit) asks if partner has the *queen of trumps*. Most partnerships return to the trump suit to deny the queen. A bid in another suit shows a king in that suit; a jump to the 6-level in the trump suit shows the queen of trumps but denies an outside king.

Especially when investigating a minor suit contract, consider the problems partner's responses might cause. What possible problems do you see in this hand?

☞ **Principle:** When suit agreement has been reached, the bid of **4NT** is usually treated as a *Blackwood* asking bid. Because the king of trumps is such a valuable card, *keycard responses* are essential for accurate slam bidding.

☞ **Principle:** It can be dangerous to ask for aces when holding an unbid suit with neither first- nor second-round controls. This danger is much less when partner has shown a strong balanced hand. Partner is likely to hold a control in your danger suit.

Slam-Seeking and the Texas Transfer

Some partnerships use the *Texas transfer*, the bid of **4D** or **4H**, to show, respectively, a six-card or longer heart or spade suit. If this convention is part of the bidding arsenal, the partner of the strong no trump

opener can differentiate between game-going hands, slam-seeking hands, and slam-invitational hands. Compare these auctions.

- **1NT (15-17) – P – 4H!** (transfer) – P
4S – P – P – P
- **1NT (15-17) – P – 4H!** (transfer) – P
4S – P – 4NT (keycard in spades) – P

In the first auction, responder shows six or more spades with the four-level transfer and no interest in anything but a game-level contract. In the second auction, responder's rebid of **4NT** is *Blackwood*, spades being the trump suit if the partnership has agreed to play *keycard* Blackwood. Responder is interested in a slam contract.

- **1NT (15-17) – P – 2H!** (transfer) – P
2S – P – 4S – P

In this *Jacoby transfer* auction, responder also shows six or more spades. "Why didn't partner use the four-level transfer?" opener should wonder. The answer to this question might be, "Because you forgot it the last three times partner used the bid!" If that's not the case, responder is showing a hand with mild slam interest. If the no trump hand has the right cards, twelve tricks are likely; but opposite many no trump configurations, ten tricks are the most the hand would yield. *This sequence transfers control of the bidding to the strong no trump opener.* Opener should consider both the trump fit and side suit controls before continuing the auction.

Example 6a. ♠Q7
Your hand: ♥KQT8
 ♦KJT9
 ♣AQT

Example 6b. ♠Q732
Your hand: ♥A8
 ♦AT9
 ♣AKT6

Both example hands have maximum values. The second hand is most likely to produce twelve tricks, however. The extra trumps and doubleton heart suit, four side-suit controls, and the good four-card club suit are all excellent features.

Partner Opened and You Hold a Strong Balanced Hand

When partner opens the bidding with a suit bid and you hold a strong balanced hand, you will probably need to control the bidding, but you may not have enough information to take control with your first bid.

Example 7. ♠AQ73
Your hand: ♥A8
 ♦KJT9
 ♣AQT

Partner opened the bidding **1H**. You know that . . .

- The partnership probably holds at least 31 HCPs;
- A small slam is an excellent prospect;
- A grand slam is possible.

Do you know the best *strain*?

Do you know what questions to ask partner?

In this example hand, you don't yet know the correct strain. You need to know more information about partner's distribution and strength, and there is no *asking bid* that will provide the answers. In this situation, you must make *descriptive and forcing bids* until you have the information you need to place the contract. **1S** is an underbid, but you will learn enough to take control with your second bid. Consider your options after these possible rebids by partner.

- Partner rebids **2H**: Partner has a minimum hand and usually holds six or more hearts. Your best contract is probably **6NT** or **7NT**. What do you need to know and what is your rebid?

- Partner rebids **2S**: Partner holds four spades. Your best contract may be **7S**. What do you need to know and what is your rebid?
- Partner rebids **1NT**: Partner holds a minimum balanced hand with five hearts and no more than three spades. Your best contract is **6NT** or **7NT**. What do you need to know and what is your rebid?

Assume partner opened the bidding **1S** and you hold the example hand. You know the correct strain and you only need to determine the best level. You can take control of the hand immediately. What do you need to know and what is your response?

☞ **Principle:** Strong balanced hands should not jump to control the auction.

☞ **Principle:** Reserve the jump shift only for those hands in which the probable strain is known. The jump shift demands control of the auction.

☞ **Principle:** *All new suits by responder are forcing for one round!* If you forget this principle, you may find it difficult to keep a partner.

Bidding Tools: Summary

- **4C is Gerber if:**
 - It's a jump after a no trump bid; *or*
 - Partner opened **1NT** or **2NT** *and* no suit has been agreed upon, i.e. bid and raised.
- **4C may be Gerber if:**
 - Partner opened **2C**, then jumped to **3NT** over your response, *and* you and your partner have agreed to use **4C** as Gerber in this auction.
- **4C is not Gerber if:**
 - Neither partner has bid no trump; *or*
 - Clubs were bid naturally, it is not a jump, *and* neither player has shown a strong hand.
- **4NT is quantitative if:**
 - Partner opened **1NT** or **2NT** and no suit has been agreed upon; *or*
 - Partner signs off in **3NT** and no suit has been agreed upon.
 - *Note that some partnerships respond to the bid of 4NT as if it were (keycard) Blackwood if they intend to accept the invitation to slam.*
- **4NT is (keycard) Blackwood if:**
 - It's a jump and neither partner has shown a balanced hand by bidding no trump; *or*
 - A suit has been bid and raised.

Ace-Asking Bids: Variations

- A partnership may agree to use **keycard Gerber** after Stayman or transfer responses. For example:
1NT (15-17) – **P** – **2H!** (transfer) – **P**
2S – **P** – **4C** (keycard Gerber for spades) – **P**

4D = 0 or 3 keycards	4S = 2 keycards without the queen of trumps
4H = 1 or 4 keycards	4NT = 2 keycards with the queen of trumps

- After responses to **4NT** (Blackwood) have confirmed that the partnership holds all the aces, **5NT** is used to ask for kings. Two response variations are common. The partnership must agree on a variation.
 - **Number of kings**: Step responses – **6C** shows 0 (or 4) kings, **6D** shows 1 king, **6H** shows 2 kings, etc.
 - **Specific kings**: Responder bids the suit of the cheapest king. Bidding the trump suit denies an outside king.
- When playing *specific kings*, the partnership must agree on the meaning of subsequent bids by the asking partner. Does it show the king of the bid suit, or does it ask for the king of the bid suit?
- Some partnerships use a *keycard Blackwood* variation called **1430**. This variation reverses the meaning of the first two steps. A **5C** response shows 1 or 4 keycards; a **5D** response shows 0 or 3 keycards.

☞ **Principle:** Don't assume that your "standard" and partner's "standard" are the same in slam-seeking bidding sequences. You must discuss possible auctions and agree on the meaning of each bid.

A Word From the Director

Technically, ace-asking bids are conventional bids, but they are not alerted. Assuming you and partner are declaring the hand, explain the sequence to the opponents before the defender makes the opening lead. The usual statement is, "We have had an ace-asking (or keycard) sequence. **4NT** was keycard in spades (or hearts, or diamonds)." The opponents usually know what is going on, but it's possible the variation you and partner play may be unfamiliar to them.

Practice

Your hand.

♠Q7
♥KQT8
♦KJT9
♣AQT

You opened **1NT** (15-17) with this example hand. Try to picture partner's hand in each of the bidding sequences. The opponents' **Pass** calls are omitted.

- Do you and your partner agree on the meaning of each bid?
- What call do you make at the indicated point?

1. **1NT – 2C; 2H – 4NT; ??**
2. **1NT – 2H!; 2S – 4C; ??**
3. **1NT – 5NT; ??**
4. **1NT – 4C; 4H – 5C; ??**
5. **1NT – 2H!; 2S – 3D; ??**