



Intermediate- Lesson 33

Slam Bidding – part 1

Slam bidding is one of the most exciting parts of bridge: bidding a small slam or a grand slam can get your pulse racing, as can playing the contract. It's one of the reasons we enjoy playing bridge. But lots of people find it pretty scary, so are reluctant to have a go.

Most people will be aware of various systems for "asking for aces" – used to find out how many aces partner holds. They are very useful, and we will talk about them next time in Lesson 34. But what use are they unless we have some idea whether we might have a slam available? That's what I want to focus on first.

There are generally two situations where slam might be on. One is when you and partner have lots of high card points between you, and the opposition don't have much. The other is where you have a very shapely hand, with at least one long and powerful suit; you might not have lots of points, but the playing strength of your hand is huge. I want to focus now on the first of those situations.

Let's say you can work out that you have a lot of points between yourself and partner, and you have all four suits "stopped" – ie there isn't a suit where the opposition can reel off a few tricks. You are pretty sure that if you play in 3NT, you are going to make easily, with some overtricks. How strong would you need to be before you think "should we be in slam?"

We are talking about the choice of three possible target contracts: 3NT, 6NT, and 7NT.

OK, by exploring for 6NT or 7NT, you might sometimes end up in "no man's land" such as 4NT or 5NT, but hopefully those contracts will still make, so you haven't lost anything by going beyond 3NT to see if slam is on.

Why those 3 target contracts?

- If you are in 3NT and make, you get the game bonus: 300 points non vulnerable and 500 points vulnerable
- If you are in 6NT and make, you get the small slam bonus: 800 points non vulnerable and 1250 points vulnerable.
- If you are in 7NT and make, you get the grand slam bonus: 1300 points non vulnerable and 2000 points vulnerable.

So clearly if you end up in 3NT, and 12 tricks turns out to be a lay down, you might be kicking yourself for missing out.

RULE OF THUMB

If you and partner have balanced (ish) rather than shapely hands, the number of high card points you need to hold between you to make

Small slam 6NT = **33**

Grand Slam 7NT = **37**

Note: this is not a guarantee – sometimes you can make a slam with one or two fewer, and sometimes a slam will fail even with the requisite number of points. But it works most of the time, and that's what's important.

How can we work out how many points we hold between ourselves and partner?

Sometimes, partner will have told us her point range by what she's bid. For example, if she opens 1NT it's 12 to 14. If she opens 2NT, it's 20 to 22. *(Some people play a different range, but that doesn't matter, so long as you and partner have **agreed** what the range is you are playing).*

Sometimes, it will take more than one bid from partner, eg

1♥ – 1♠ – 1NT When partner opens 1 of a suit then rebids 1NT, they are promising 15-16 HCP, and a balanced or semi-balanced hand.

1♥ – 1♠ – 2NT When partner opens 1 of a suit then rebids 2NT, they are promising 17-18 HCP and a balanced or semi-balanced hand.

1♥ – 1♠ – 3NT. When partner opens 1 of a suit then rebids 3NT, they are promising 19+ HCP and happy to play in 3NT. Remember, they are only counting on 6 points from you for your 1♠ response.

How about this one: 1♥ – 2♣ – 2NT?

You have bid 2♣; by bidding at the 2-level, you are GUARANTEEING a “rule of 14 hand”. That’s **at least** 10HCP with 4 clubs, or 9HCP with 5 clubs (or 8HCP with 6 clubs).

Partner is interested in 3NT if you have anything more than a minimum for your 2♣ bid. Partner is counting her hand as worth around 14 points. If she had enough to bid 3NT with you as a minimum for your bid, she’d have bid it herself.

You will often know within quite a narrow range how many points partner holds, and that they have a no-trump type hand (no very long suit, no void, and (almost certainly) no singleton).

Lets’ say you have a balanced or semi-balanced strong hand. You can add your HCP to partner’s and work out where your final contract should be.

If partner’s minimum point count plus your known point count = 33, you can bid straight to 6NT!

If partner’s minimum point count plus your known point count = 37, you can bid straight to 7NT!

For example, if partner opens 1NT and you hold 21 HCP balanced, you know your combined points range is 33 to 35. Not good enough for grand slam, but good enough for small slam. Bid 6NT straight away – no messing!

Note: I have seen many NT slams missed because even though a player can work out that they have enough points between their own hand and partner, and their hand is balanced, they have a weak suit with no stop. Think: I know partner’s point count to within a narrow range. I can see where my points are. Where could partner’s be? You can often be confident that they must hold high cards in a suit where you don’t.

But what if you MIGHT be strong enough for slam, but you’re not sure? After all, partner has indicated a range of points, and if she’s minimum in her range, you don’t want to be in slam, but if she’s not minimum, you do. How can you find out?

For example, partner opens 1NT and you hold 20 HCP. Your combined range is 32 to 34. Do you just have to guess and hope? Bid 3NT to be on the safe side, and risk missing slam? Take a punt at 6NT and risk going down when 3NT was easy?

NO! We have a very handy bid available, called the QUANTITATIVE NT BID.

When you are bidding in No Trumps (when the last bid by your side is a NT bid, or neither of you has made a genuine suit bid – things like 2♣ Stayman is not a genuine suit bid, it’s a conventional bid, saying nothing about clubs) then

- A bid of 4NT says “We might have 6NT, partner, depending on where you are in your range. If minimum, pass, if maximum bid 6NT”
- A bid of 5NT says “If you are minimum, we have 6NT. Please bid it. If you are maximum, we have 7NT. Please bid it.”

Now, all of that might seem quite simple, but what do you do when your partner makes a quantitative bid, and you’re in the middle of your range, neither minimum nor maximum. Do you accept the invitation and bid slam, or decline?

Say you open 2NT with 21 points, and partner bids 4NT. Clearly, she expects you to pass with 20 points, and bid 6NT with 22. But you are in a quandary. You might have enough for slam with your 21HCP, and you might not. The answer is to *evaluate your hand* – shade the 21 down to 20, or up to 22, depending on your holding.

- Deduct a full point for 4-3-3-3 (5-card or longer suits can usually generate extra tricks)
- Shade down if you lack intermediates (10's and 9's)
- Shade up with a decent 5 card suit
- Shade up if you have some intermediates, especially if in a suit where you hold honours
- Shade up if you hold a good sequence (eg Q J 10 9 8 is worth a lot more than 3 points)

A nice little mnemonic to help you remember what to think about when evaluating your hand is **Living In Sin**.

L is for length – add value for a decent long suit, deduct value if you're 4-3-3-3

I is for intermediates – add value for 10's and 9's, and deduct if your spot cards are all small

S is for sequences – add value for a sequence of high cards, eg Q J 10 9 8

Let's look at some examples. You have opened 2NT (20-22 points), and partner has responded with 4NT. What would you bid with the following 21 HCP hands?

a) ♠A K Q ♥A 7 6 ♦K 6 4 2 ♣K Q 5

We are 4-3-3-3 and have no intermediates. Your 21 points is worth 20. Pass

b) ♠A 10 4 ♥A 7 ♦A K J 10 6 ♣K Q 10

A clear case to shade up to 22 points – that diamond suit is superb, and you have three 10's. Bid 6NT

c) ♠A K 4 ♥A 7 ♦Q J 10 9 6 ♣A K 2

That diamond suit is worth a lot more than 3 points. Shade up and bid 6NT.

Can we get confused between 4NT Blackwood and 4NT quantitative?

If we use 4NT as an ace-asking bid, how will partner know whether I'm asking for aces or making a quantitative bid?

The answer is you DO NOT PLAY 4NT as an ace asking bid when the previous bid by your side is in NT, or neither of you has shown a suit. This is crucial to agree with partner. If you are going to play 4NT as an ace asking bid (and I think you should) then it is only ace-asking when the previous bid is a genuine suit bid.

We aren't going to explore this today, but if you do want to make an ace-asking bid when the previous bid is in NT, use the Gerber 4♣ bid.

Yes, this means you are going to have two ace-asking bids in your system, 4♣ for when you're bidding in NT, and 4NT when you're bidding a suit. It might sound confusing, but it really isn't. The distinction is simple- what was the bid your side made immediately prior?

- If it was in NT, 4NT is quantitative.
- If it was a genuine suit bid, 4NT is ace-asking.

Why shouldn't you "keep it simple" and just play one ace-asking convention?

The reason is you will be imposing a limitation on your bidding and will find it more difficult to find the right contracts.

If you pick Gerber (4♣) as your only ace asking bid, you will have to forego some other useful conventions that you might want to add on later (eg splinters), and will not be able to take advantage of the very useful Key Card Blackwood, excellent for exploring suit slams, where the K of trumps is as important as the 4 aces.

If you pick Blackwood (4NT) as your only ace-asking bid, then in NT contracts you will forgo the very useful quantitative bid, and you will often find you don't have enough bidding space to settle in the best makeable contract, if the answer to the ace-ask is disappointing. We can't say Gerber is "better than" Blackwood, or vice versa. They both have their place, and by playing both, you get the best of all worlds.

In this lesson, we have looked at bidding slam when you have a lot of high card points between you and partner, typically NT slams.

In the next lesson (34), we will go on to look at how you might identify you have slam possibilities in a suit contract, based on shape (long suits and shortages). A very useful tool to help with that is Losing Trick Count (LTC). It's not just for slams, of course, but also great for working out if you might have game. For those of you who don't use LTC, I highly recommend it. We covered it in Lesson 17.

Also, of course, there is "ace asking".

Next time, we will look at both

- Gerber 4♣

and

- Key Card Blackwood (a bid of 4NT asking for "aces"). It's called "key card" because it looks at 5 key cards: the four aces, plus the King of trumps. It's more useful than standard Blackwood, which only asks about the 4 aces.

