



Improve your Bridge

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 lot's of people find it pretty scary, so are reluctant to have a go.

There can be a lot of mystique and unnecessary complexity involved, so I want to try to break it down into easy chunks.

Today's lesson is the first of those chunks.

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, but they are for another lesson, and **not** what I want to focus on here.

The key point for today is “How do I decide I might have slam available?”



Today, I am not focussing on slam situations based on long suits and shapely hands- those are typically slams in a suit, and that’s for another day.

I want us to consider the situation where you can work out that you have a **lot of points** between yourself and partner, **balanced** (ish) rather than shapely. 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 vul and 500 points vul.

If you are in 6NT and make, you get the small slam bonus: 800 points non vul and 1250 points vul.

If you are in 7NT and make, you get the grand slam bonus: 1300 points non vul and 2000 points vul.

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.

So, 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 “no-trumpish” hand.

1 ♥ – 1 ♠ – 2NT When partner opens 1 of a suit then rebids 2NT, they are promising 17-18 HCP and a “no-trumpish” hand.

1 ♥ – 1 ♠ – 3NT When partner opens 1 of a suit then rebids 3NT, they are promising 19+ HCP and a “no-trumpish” hand. 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 **PROMISING** 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. So 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.

So 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(ish) 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!

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 can work out partner's point count to within a fairly narrow range. I can see where my points are. **Where could partner's be?**

You can often be pretty confident that they will have 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) 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 **L**iving **I**n **S**in*.

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

** Courtesy of Andrew Robson*

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) ♠AKQ ♥A76 ♦K642 ♣KQ5

Let's look at some examples. You have opened 2NT, 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 Pass

b) ♠A 10 4 ♥A 7 ♦A K J 10 6 ♣K Q 10 6NT

c) ♠A K 4 ♥A 7 ♦Q J 10 9 6 ♣A K 2

Let's look at some examples. You have opened 2NT, 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 Pass
- b) ♠A 10 4 ♥A 7 ♦A K J 10 6 ♣K Q 10 6NT
- c) ♠A K 4 ♥A 7 ♦Q J 10 9 6 ♣A K 2 6NT

BUT, I hear you say, 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.** 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 in a suit.**

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 in a suit, 4NT is ace-asking.

But, then you say: that could be confusing- why shouldn't I keep it simple and just play one ace-asking convention?

Because you will be imposing a needless 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.

So 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.

Today, we have looked at bidding slam when you have a lot of high card points between you and partner.

In another lesson, 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 will cover it in a future lesson, so don't miss it!

Also, of course, there is “ace asking”.

We don’t have time to go into it today, but in a future lesson we will look at

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. Far better than standard Blackwood, which only asks about the 4 aces.

Watch this space!

Thanks for listening.

I know there's a lot to take in, so please go and read the lesson again when you have time.

You can find it on the website.

Any questions?

Jim Steele, November 2020





Improve your Bridge

Slam Bidding – part 2

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 we can all find it pretty scary, so might be reluctant to have a go.

There can be a lot of mystique and unnecessary complexity involved, so I've tried to try to break it down into easy chunks.

Today's lesson is the **second** of those chunks: slam bidding part 2.

We already looked at Part 1 of Slam bidding, a few weeks ago. That time, we concentrated on the sort of slam where you and partner have lots of points, and balanced(-ish) hands. Those are typically slams in NT.

Today, we are going to look at another common type of slam, where you have a shapely hand and a fit in at least one very good suit. You don't generally need quite so many high card points, as you will be relying on making extra trump tricks, often by ruffing.

But before we do, let's have a short recap on part 1.

Remember, in Slam Bidding Part1, we said that to make a slam in NT, there's a useful **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.*

We also looked at a very useful bid, when your partner has shown their point count within a small range

eg 12-14 for a 1NT opener

15-16 when they rebid 1NT after having opened 1-of-a-suit

20-22 for a 2NT opener

and you think slam will be on if they are upper end of their range, but not if they're bottom of their range.

This is the **QUANTITATIVE NT BID**.

For example 2NT – 4NT.

Here the 4NT response is saying: “If your 2NT is minimum, pass. If you have something better than minimum, please bid 6NT”

But we know that a 4NT bid is also Blackwood, asking for aces, and we are going to come on to talk about that today.

How will you know whether a 4NT bid is QUANTITATIVE, or ACE-ASKING?



If your side is bidding NT, and the previous bid by your side is in NT, then 4NT is quantitative.

There is one more case I want to mention: an opening NT bid followed by a Stayman sequence, eg

1NT- 2♣ (Stayman- looking for a major suit fit) – 2♦ (I don't have more than 3 cards in either major) -
4NT

Here, we are obviously interested in playing in NT, because the 2♦ bid denied a major suit fit. So the 4NT is QUANTITATIVE – we haven't found a suit fit, and we clearly aren't exploring for a slam in diamonds!

So, if 4NT is quantitative in a NT auction, how do we ask for aces in a NT auction, if we need to know?



The answer is called Gerber, a bid of 4♣

The response is simply a count, depending on how many aces you hold:

4♦ = 0 or 4 aces

4♥ = 1 ace

4♠ = 2 aces

4NT = 3 aces

The enquirer, the person who has bid the Gerber 4♣, will sign off in the requisite number of NT, or can ask for kings by bidding 5♣.

Have a look at these auctions (opposition passing throughout):

1. 1NT- 4♣: the 4♣ bid is Gerber, asking for aces. Opener must give her ace count.
2. 1NT- 4NT: the 4NT bid is quantitative. Opener must pass or bid 6NT.
3. 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ – 3NT – 4♣: the 4♣ bid is Gerber, asking for aces. Responder must give her ace count.
4. 1NT – 2♣ (Stayman) – 2♦ - 4♣: the 4♣ bid is Gerber, asking for aces. Opener must give her ace count.
5. 1NT – 2♣ (Stayman) – 2♦ - 4NT: the 4NT bid is Quantitative. Opener must pass or bid 6NT.

Now let's move on to the main topic today- **suit slams**.

How might we recognise we might have a suit slam available?

Sometimes, you'll have a very strong hand, with both high card points and shape (a long strong suit, and shortages in other suits). Partner supports your suit, and you are immediately thinking "slam".

But sometimes, you'll have a good but not terrific hand, with some shape, and partner supports your suit, or partner bids a suit which you love.

Recently we looked at LOSING TRICK COUNT - a great way of getting a handle on the trick-taking potential of your hand and partner's, together, in a suit contract.

Remember the mnemonic UFO.

U: unbalanced hand

F: we have a fit (8 or more cards in a suit, between us)

O: we are the opening side

Say partner opens 1♠, and you hold

♠Q J 10 2 ♥6 ♦A K 7 6 2 ♣A Q 5

You have a fit in spades, you're unbalanced, and have a 5-loser hand. If you bid spades here, it will be a limit bid. If you bid 4♠, partner might well pass, and you could miss slam. You count partner with no worse than 7 losers. Your 5 makes 12, and $18-12 = 6$. So even if partner doesn't have anything beyond an ordinary opening hand, you might have 6♠.

Bidding straight to 6♠ looks dodgy- your side might be missing the ♥A and the ♠A, or one ace plus the ♠K on your right, for example, and have two unavoidable losers.

So what to do?

This is where we need an ace-asking bid in a suit contract.

What I'm going to recommend to you today is **Roman Key Card Blackwood** (RKCB).

Why "Key Card"?

Because in suit slams, we are just as interested in the K of trumps as we are in the 4 aces. So we deem there to be 5 "aces" or "key cards": the 4 regular aces plus the K of trumps.

*Clearly therefore we need to know what the **trump suit** is for a RKCB bid to be meaningful!*

The ace-asking enquiry is 4NT.

Why **Roman** Key Card? Just as ordinary Blackwood is obsolete, having been replaced in modern bidding by the more accurate Key Card Blackwood, so Key Card Blackwood has been superseded by the even more accurate Roman Key Card Blackwood, which also considers the Q of trumps.

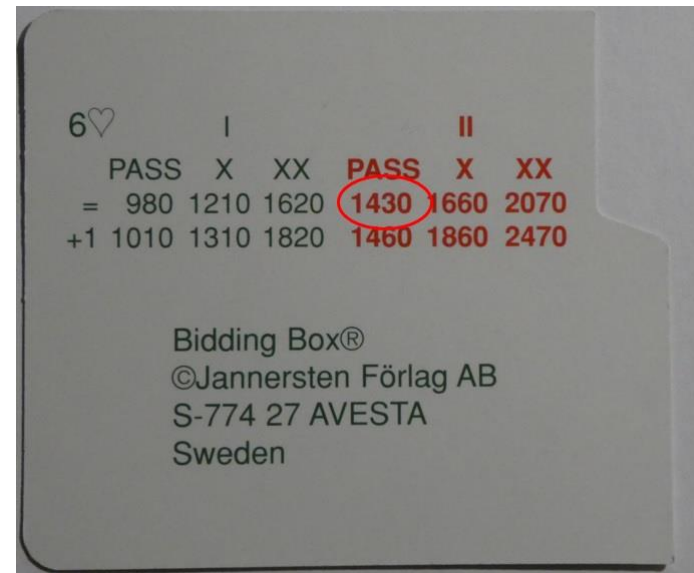
I thoroughly recommend you don't bother using regular Blackwood or ordinary Key Card Blackwood. Go straight for the best from the outset! It isn't really any more difficult, and gives better results.

Here's how it works: in response to a 4NT Roman Key Card Blackwood bid, I'm going to suggest you use "1430" responses. It's a great way to remember how it works, as 1430 is the score you get for bidding and making a small slam (in 6♥ or 6♠) when you're vulnerable.



Remember the back of the bidding cards in bidding boxes?

Here's the back of the 6♥ card.



So our responses to a 4NT RKCB enquiry are based on “1430”

Bid the first bid up for 1 or 4, and the next bid up for 3 or 0. ie 1-4.....3-0

The full set of responses is

5♣ – I hold 1 or 4 of the 5 key cards

5♦ – I hold 3 or 0 of the 5 key cards

5♥ – I hold 2 of the 5 key cards without the Q of trumps

5♠ – I hold 2 of the 5 key cards and the Q of trumps

The “1430” mnemonic makes it easy to remember.

Let's now go back to our example:

Partner opens 1♠, and you hold this lovely 5-loser hand

♠QJ102 ♥6 ♦AK762 ♣AQ5

And the question was, what to do?

We don't want to bid 4♠, as partner will probably pass, and we might miss slam.

(As you get more sophisticated in bridge, you will learn about Splinter bids, and Jacoby 2NT, perfect for this sort of situation, but we haven't got to those yet)

How then about bidding 2♦? Opener is forced to bid again, so we could then make a slam enquiry. But we have a singleton heart, and partner might well rebid 2♥. If we then bid 4NT, the assumed trump suit is hearts, and we are enquiring for the 4 aces and the ♥K. Not very useful, opposite our singleton!

Opener has at least 4 spades, so we know we have at least an 8-card major suit fit, the "holy grail". And we are very interested in the ♠K.

Bid 4NT straight away!!

♠QJ102 ♥6 ♦AK762 ♣AQ5

We hold two of the 5 Key cards – the ♦A and ♣A – and the Q of trumps.

We want to know how many of the remaining 3 key cards partner holds. Our plan if she has only one of the remaining key cards is to end the bidding with 5♠. If she has two, we are missing 1 key card, and will bid 6♠.

But what if she bids 5♦? She is showing 0 or 3.

Is it possible that partner opened 1 spade without the A, K, and 10 of spades, and without the ♥A? It is just possible to construct such a hand, but most unlikely, and bridge is a game of probabilities. So we take 5♦ as showing 3 key cards, and might decide to bid 5NT to ask for kings.

In this case, here is partner's hand

♠A 9 8 6 3 ♥ A J 5 3 ♦ 3 ♣ K 10 6

a very ordinary 12-point 1♠ opener, with 7 losers. She will reply 5♥ to your 4NT enquiry, showing two of the 5 key cards without the Q of trumps (♠Q)

When it sits opposite our 5 loser hand, we count one missing key card – it doesn't matter whether it's the ♠A, the ♠K, or the ♥A that is missing. Here it's the ♠K, ie the K of trumps.

Here is your hand again:

♠Q J 10 2 ♥ 6 ♦ A K 7 6 2 ♣ A Q 5

You can see that 6♠ is going to make almost every day of the week, with a couple of heart ruffs in the short trump hand. You only have 28 points between you- it was counting your losers using Losing Trick Count, opposite an expected no worse than 7 losers from partner, that alerted you to the possibility!

OK, let's look at some examples.

Partner has opened 1♥, your RH opponent has passed, and it's you to bid.

Here is your hand

1. ♠2 ♥QJ1032 ♦8762 ♣AQ5

Partner has opened 1♥, your RH opponent has passed, and it's you to bid.

1. ♠2 ♥QJ1032 ♦8762 ♣AQ5 Only 9 points, but LTC = 7 losers. 4♥!

2. ♠AQ5 ♥QJ1032 ♦AK62 ♣5

Partner has opened 1♥, your RH opponent has passed, and it's you to bid.

1. ♠2 ♥QJ1032 ♦8762 ♣AQ5

Only 9 points, but LTC = 7 losers. 4♥!

2. ♠AQ5 ♥QJ1032 ♦AK62 ♣5

16HCP, 5 losers, at least a 9 card heart fit. 4NT

3. ♠AQJ54 ♥QJ2 ♦AK62 ♣5

Partner has opened 1♥, your RH opponent has passed, and it's you to bid.

1. ♠2 ♥QJ1032 ♦8762 ♣AQ5

Only 9 points, but LTC = 7 losers. 4♥!

2. ♠AQ5 ♥QJ1032 ♦AK62 ♣5

16HCP, 5 losers, at least a 9 card heart fit. 4NT

3. ♠AQJ54 ♥QJ2 ♦AK62 ♣5

17HCP, but no guaranteed fit in hearts. 1♠. If partner repeats hearts, or supports spades, you have a fit, and a 5 loser hand, bid 4NT. If partner bids 2♣, bid 3NT – to play.

Now we'll have a gentle duplicate with some opportunity to practice what we've just done.

For a future lesson, there is more about bidding strong hands: the strong Acol 2♣ opener – how we use that, now that we are using 2♦, 2♥, and 2♠ all as a weak two opening bid.

Thanks for listening.

I know there's a lot to take in, so please go and read the lesson again when you have time.

You can find it on the website.

Any questions?

Jim Steele, February 2021

