

SPLINTERS

A splinter, so named because it shows the smallest part of your hand, is a response bid that typically shows the following:

- a) 4-card or better support for your partner's last bid suit
- b) enough high-card points for at least game
- c) a singleton or void in the suit you bid

Typically a splinter involves a double jump-bid in a new suit eg 1S, **4C** or 1H, **3S** or else any jump in a new suit to the 4-level, eg 2C, 2D, 2S, **4D**.

Notice immediately that using splinters means that one cannot also use Gerber, except over a NoTrump bid. Any expert will tell you that is no great loss.

The idea behind using splinters is that the values for game are already present, so if declarer can score two ruffs in addition that means a slam is achievable. Alternately, a splinter ensures that opponents cannot take 2 tricks in that suit. Partnerships who use splinters routinely bid and make slams with a total HCP in the mid 20's, not the 33 novices are told they need for a slam.

Consider the following hands

| | W | E | |
|---|-------|------|---|
| S | K9432 | AQ87 | West has a typical 1S opening hand. HCP = 13. East has HCP=12 and support so could jump to 4S, which would end the auction. |
| H | AQ5 | KT32 | |
| D | A6 | K974 | |
| C | 864 | 3 | |

However, playing splinters, East can splinter bid 4C. This tells West that East has a singleton (not being an ace or king) or void in clubs and enough points in the other 3 suits to be confident of making game. West has the ideal holding in clubs, 3 small, so two club ruffs are likely on.

The suggested bidding sequence is

| | | |
|-----|----|---------------------------------------|
| 1S | 4C | |
| 4NT | 5C | (RKCB, 1 or 4 KC) |
| 5D | 5H | (SQ? Yes plus HK) |
| 6S | | A great small slam, with just 25 HCP. |

Opposite partner's splinter bid, the best holding is 3 or 4 small cards. Any honour card is wasted, except the ace if opposite a singleton. As a singleton is six times more likely than a void, it is best to bid to assume partner has a singleton when she splinters.

It is not always the partner of opener who splinters on the first round of bidding. Consider.

| | W | E | Bidding | | | |
|---|-------|------|---------|-----|-----------|----------|
| S | KQT3 | AJ52 | 1H | 1S | long suit | 4 spades |
| H | AKQ52 | 76 | 4C | 4NT | splinter, | RKCB |
| D | Q76 | AK8 | 5S | 6S | 2KC+Q | easy |
| C | 3 | 9542 | | | | |

Here, West opens their long suit Hearts. East does not have heart support so shows her 4-card spade suit. West now calculates that 4S is probably makeable and decides to show their club singleton on the way there by bidding 4C. This entuses East, who drives on to a small slam.

Let's look more closely at the minor suit holdings of West and East

| | | | | | | |
|---|-----|------|----|---|-----|------|
| D | Q76 | AK8 | OR | D | 3 | AK8 |
| C | 3 | 9542 | | C | Q76 | 9542 |

With a major suit as trumps, the left holding only has one loser.

By contrast, the right holding could lose the first 3 tricks if clubs are lead and continued.

In both cases the same number of points and losers are held together with the same shape. The only difference is where the shortage is held. That can be the difference between game and slam.

| | W | E | Bidding | | Bid Meaning | |
|---|--------|-------|---------|------|-------------|-----------|
| S | AKQ632 | 8754 | 2C | 2D | GF | negative |
| H | ----- | 86432 | 2S | 4C | long S | splinter |
| D | KQJ3 | A74 | 4H | 5D | cuebid | cuebid, A |
| C | AQ4 | 2 | 7S | pass | slam on! | |

Here, after West rebids 2S East has a great hand: 4-card spade support, an ace and a singleton. The splinter jump to 4C shows West there are no club losers. He cuebids 4H to show first round control in hearts. East cuebids 5D, showing the ace. That is enough for West to bid a grand slam in spades (with HCP=25!).

HAND A

Nil Vul
Dealer North

| | | | |
|-------|-------|-----|--------------|
| | K9432 | | |
| | AQ5 | | Bidding |
| | A2 | N | E S W |
| | 864 | 1S | p 4C p |
| 5 | JT6 | 4NT | p 5C p |
| J87 | 964 | 5D | p 5H p |
| QT53 | J86 | 6S | |
| KQ975 | AJT2 | | |
| | AQ87 | | |
| | KT32 | | |
| | K974 | | |
| | 3 | | |

Hand A is a classic case of where, after a 5-card opening of 1S, a splinter bid in clubs allows slam to be reached and usually made.

The bidding involves using Roman KeyCard Blackwood (RKCB) to assess that slam is likely makeable. Using RKCB, 4NT asks for keycards and the response of 5C shows 1 or 4, obviously 1 in this case, the trump Ace. For slam, North needs South also to have the trump Queen. He asks for this by bidding the next (nontrump) suit up, 5D. If South did not have the SQ she would now retreat to trumps at the lowest level, 5S, which North would pass. Instead South bids 5H, showing the SQ and the HK. That is very encouraging so North bids 6S.

The best opening lead against opponents who have splintered and then pushed to slam is often a trump. If East leads the S6, then Declarer needs to be careful. As the cards lie, it does no harm to play (and win with) Dummy's S7. But if West holds the ST singleton, as well they might, the roof caves in. North is forced to win with the SK and now has AQ8 of trumps in Dummy and cannot draw trumps in 2 rounds AND score 2 ruffs with that holding.

The solution: win the trump lead with the SQ. Lead a club. It loses. If a trump is led again, win with the Ace in Dummy. Now use your 3 nontrump entries to hand (DA, HA, HQ) to first score 2 ruffs in Dummy, then draw the last of East's trumps and claim.

This plan only succeeds if the hand with 3 trumps (East) also has at least 2 hearts. But that is an 84% chance, well worth taking.

HAND B

| | | | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------------|---|----|---|
| | 5 | | Dealer East | | | |
| | J874 | | | | | |
| | QT976 | | Bidding | | | |
| | AT3 | | E | S | W | N |
| AQ87 | | K9432 | 1S | p | 4D | p |
| KT32 | | AQ5 | 4S | | | |
| 3 | | A2 | | | | |
| K972 | | 864 | | | | |
| | JT6 | | | | | |
| | 96 | | | | | |
| | KJ854 | | | | | |
| | QJ5 | | | | | |

East holds the same hand as North did in Hand A and also opens 1S. This time, though, partner (West) splinters in diamonds, not clubs. That thoroughly dampens East's enthusiasm for a potential slam as only one ruff can be negotiated in diamonds and she subsides in the spade game. On the lead from South of QC, 4S is all that makes

| HAND C | | | | Dealer South | | | |
|--------|-------|-------|---|--------------|-----|---|----|
| | | | | Bidding | | | |
| | S | Q9 | | S | W | N | E |
| | H | JT76 | | p | 1S | p | 4H |
| | D | Q97 | | p | 4NT | p | 5S |
| | C | JT94 | | p | 6S | | |
| S | AJ863 | | S | T7542 | | | |
| H | A854 | | H | 2 | | | |
| D | 2 | | D | AK63 | | | |
| C | K732 | | C | AQ5 | | | |
| | S | K | | | | | |
| | H | KQ93 | | | | | |
| | D | JT854 | | | | | |
| | C | 86 | | | | | |

South is dealer and passes. Playing 5-card Majors West opens 1S and East immediately sees that game is likely. Her best bid is a splinter to 4H. This tells West, who had been counting 2 losers in hearts, that there are no losers in hearts. West, now enthused, bids 4NT (RKCB) and East bids 5S to show 2 keycards and the SQ, despite not having it! This is normal in RKCB when you know at least 10 trumps are held.

West is then happy to bid 6S.

North leads the CJ. Declarer wins in dummy and leads a low trump, intending to finesse the J if no honour appears from South. But the K does appear, taken with the Ace. A trick is then conceded to the trump Queen and the rest is easy-peasy.

Cautious players will be aware that the slam fails if North holds all 3 missing trumps. But that is only a 10% chance. Not bidding a slam that is 90% likely to succeed is a losing strategy.

HAND D

| | | Dealer West All Vul | | | |
|------|-------|---------------------|----|---|-----|
| | | Bidding | | | |
| | | W | N | E | S |
| | KQT3 | | | | |
| | AKQ52 | | | | |
| | Q76 | p | 1H | p | 1S |
| | 3 | p | 4C | p | 4NT |
| 9864 | | p | 5S | p | 6S |
| J8 | | | | | |
| JT9 | | | | | |
| KJ84 | | | | | |
| | 7 | | | | |
| | T943 | | | | |
| | 5432 | | | | |
| | AQT5 | | | | |
| | AJ52 | | | | |
| | 76 | | | | |
| | AK8 | | | | |
| | 9762 | | | | |

Here is an example of a splinter made on the second round of bidding. North opens 1H and South, not being able to support hearts, responds 1S. North reevaluates his hand as being worth 19 points, enough for game opposite 6HCP now that a trump fit has been found. Instead of jumping to 4S, he splinters with 4C. This enthruses South, who asks for keycards, finds two plus the trump queen, and so confidently bids 6S.

Assume West leads the DJ (top of sequence). Declarer wins with her king. She decides to set up the heart suit for her contract. She now plays the ace of trumps and a trump to dummy's queen, East discarding. She cashes the HA and HK and ruffs a low heart with the SJ. Hearts having been set up, declarer draws trumps, cashes the queen and established fifth heart, then the DA and DQ, merely conceding a club at the end. Slam made.

The slam fails if the first or second heart can be ruffed, but that is only 16% probable.

The play follows similar lines if West leads a trump.

Those of you who play Jacoby 2NT over a major suit opening, to be elucidated by Alan Pinder on May 18th and which is strongly recommended, will know that **all strong hands with 4-card major support travel through 2NT Jacoby.**

This means that you can be TOO STRONG to splinter! The recommended range for a splinter over a major suit opening is about 13-15 points, including distribution. A singleton counts as 3 shortage points and a void as 5. Referring back to hand A, South splintered with an ace, 2 kings and a queen (12 HCP) plus a singleton (3 shortage points). Missing the queen but possessing a void instead of the singleton, one would also splinter and end in slam.

In Hand D, North has 16 HCP and counts 3 shortage points for his singleton club once a major suit fit has been identified. That is enough for game opposite partners presumed 6+ HCP. Therefore he splinters.