



Slam Bidding Part I

Bidding slams is not easy, but there is no doubt that bidding and making a slam is one of the great joys of bridge. The first important element in slam bidding is trying to identify when a slam might be on.

Basic identification

Slams are a lot easier to make if you have a big trump fit, because you can make extra tricks by trumping and so do not have to rely on high cards alone. However, no-trump slams are rather different: you almost always need to rely on a high number of points between you.

The points needed for a 6NT contract are about 33 between the partnership, whilst for a suit contract, when you have a good fit, you are basically looking for no more than a combined 30 and that includes length and distribution.

Adding on for length and shortage can be difficult when you are getting to the slam level and thus the Losing Trick Count is a great help when you have a big fit: it evaluates the whole shape of your hand. Although the LTC is not part

of the approach followed in this article, readers who use this method of evaluation should stick with it, and when it suggests that a slam might be on, they should explore its possibility.

Note that although you may have 30 points between you (or the Losing Trick Count might suggest that a slam is on), but without the necessary controls (aces, kings, singletons and voids), you may still not be able to make a slam – there is plenty of checking to be done!

Let us look at some examples of identification:

Layout A

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

	N	E
W	S	

Opener	Responder
1♥	3♥
?	

When your partner bids 3♥, your hand

leaps in value because you have a fit. You have 17 high-card points, can add two for your excellent long suit and also two for your singleton (with the long trumps); that makes a total of 21. Your partner's bid shows 10-12 points so that puts the partnership in the range of 31-33, which certainly has slam potential, and therefore you should try for slam. A 4♥ bid would finish the auction, so West must do something else to try to find a slam. We will discuss the conventions available in the forthcoming two articles.

Layout B

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

	N	E
W	S	

Layout C

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

	N	E
W	S	

To see how things differ between suit contracts and no-trump contracts, take a look at Layouts B and C, where the East hand is the same. The Wests in both layouts have the same point-count and shape, the only difference being the club and spade suits.

This changes their potential alongside the East hand in a big way: East-West in Layout B can play in 6♠ with a reasonable chance of making the contract by ruffing two diamonds. But in Layout C East-West do not have a fit and therefore have to play in no-trumps; with no ruffing to supply extra tricks, there are just ten tricks off the top with chances to make an eleventh if hearts or clubs break 3-3. Notice that East-West hold all the aces and kings in Layout C, but in no-trump contracts you need more than just aces and kings: you need the queens and jacks too, to make the extra tricks. In the layout above the jack of spades is just as valuable as the ace – they will both make a trick.

Once you have identified that a slam might be on, how do you decide whether to go for it?

The answer is: by using the various conventions that are available, which should include an ace-asking bid.

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Conventions for finding slams

I recommend the following:

- Key-card Blackwood
- Cue-bidding
- Splinters
- Quantitative Bids
- Grand Slam Force

The Gerber (4♣) convention is omitted because to employ cue-bidding and splinter bids you need to use the 4♣ bid for other purposes. Over the next two articles I will be covering these aspects of slam bidding. If after seeing them you don't fancy employing them, then you could stick to Gerber, but otherwise you should steer clear of using Gerber.

Key-card Blackwood

Blackwood is the best method for slam exploration. It is no coincidence that almost all bridge players use some form of this convention: it is simply one of the best ideas in bridge – without the aces, slams cannot be made.

I recommend using *Key-card* Blackwood – it works exactly like normal Blackwood except that you count the *king of trumps* as an *ace*. The idea is that the king of trumps is a very important card (as important as any ace) so that it should be included in your Blackwood calculations, e.g. with spades as trumps the key-cards are: ♣A, ♦A, ♥A, ♠A and ♠K.

The beauty of this convention is that the responses are almost exactly the same as normal Blackwood:

- | | |
|----|--------------------|
| 5♣ | 0 or 4 key-cards |
| 5♦ | 1 (or 5) key-cards |
| 5♥ | 2 key-cards |
| 5♠ | 3 key-cards |

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The only change is that the 5♦ response is used to show five key cards *as well as* the normal one; the five option will not come up very often and, rather like the difference between 0 and 4, there should never be a problem differentiating between the two possibilities.

You will see that this addition to the Blackwood convention is invaluable for accurate slam bidding and yet, at the same time, there is nothing new to learn other than to remember to count the king of trumps in the responses!

There are two common fears with taking on this new convention:

1. How do you know which suit is trumps?
2. How do you know whether partner has the aces or the king of trumps?

The trump suit should be obvious; in fact, you should never use Blackwood unless you have agreed a suit, or you are happy to play in the last-bid suit.

For example, in the auction 1♥ – 4NT, hearts would be trumps, but more usually there will be explicit agreement when both sides have bid the same suit: in the sequence 1♠ – 3♠ – 4NT, spades are trumps. So, if there is doubt about the trump suit, then the last-bid suit should be the one you use. Remember that if you are aiming for a no-trump slam, then aces and kings are not so important and you very rarely need to ask about them. More important is the number of points you hold and, as you will see, we will consider quantitative bidding later.

The answer to question 2 is that it doesn't matter! The king of trumps is just as valuable as an ace so if you are missing *any* two of the five key-cards, you would not want to be in a slam.

It is time to look at some examples:

Layout D

♠ 10 3 2		♠ 4
♥ K 9 5 3		♥ A Q J 7 2
♦ A 7 6 4	N W S E	♦ K Q J 5
♣ A 6		♣ K Q 4

West	East
	1♥
3♥	4NT
5♠	6♥
End	

East opens 1♥ and after his partner's 3♥ response he re-evaluates his hand: 18 high-card points, a strong five-card suit (worth one extra point) and a singleton (with the long trumps, worth two points). That makes 21 points; adding this total to his partner's 10-12 means East is definitely excited about the prospects of a slam.

When contemplating the use of Blackwood, you need to make sure that you will know what to do after any response.

Here East is basically missing four important cards: the ace of spades, the king of hearts, the ace of diamonds, and the ace of clubs. He can find out about all these cards by using Key-card Blackwood. If partner has two, he will sign off in 5♥; if partner has three, he will go for 6♥, and if West has four, East would go for a Grand Slam (this last option is not really likely as West has limited himself to 10-12 points).

Responding to 4NT, West must remember to include the king of trumps (here hearts) in his response. He has three key-cards: the ace of clubs, the ace of diamonds and the king of hearts, and so he responds 5♠. Now East carries out his plan and bids 6♥. He bids it with great confidence because he knows about the king of trumps as well as the number of aces.

Compare this with the auction below on Layout E, where West holds the king of spades instead of the king of hearts as in Layout D:

Layout E

♠ K 3 2		♠ 4
♥ 10 9 5 3		♥ A Q J 7 2
♦ A 7 6 4	N W S E	♦ K Q J 5
♣ A 6		♣ K Q 4

West	East
	1♥
3♥	4NT
5♥	End

Once again East starts a Blackwood sequence, but this time West only shows two key-cards (5♥): the king of spades does not come in to the reckoning, it is only the king of trumps that is included.

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Over 5♥ East passes; missing two key-cards, slam is not a good proposition. It might appear that the slam will make half the time, but the chance of a void in diamonds brings it just below 50% and therefore not a good slam. *You should try to avoid a slam if you are missing two key-cards.*

Let's look at another couple of hands:

Layout F			
♠ A K 8 5 4 2		♠ Q 7 6	
♥ Q 7 6		♥ 4	
♦ A 6		♦ K Q J 5 3	
♣ A 2		♣ K Q J 3	

West	East
1♠	2♦
3♠	4NT
5♣	6♠
End	

West opens 1♠ and East bids his time by responding 2♦; there is no need to hurry, since opener will always bid again if you have changed the suit at the two level. West rebids 3♠, showing a six-card suit and a strong hand. Now the time has come for East to get excited: with excellent support for spades he should re-evaluate his hand: 14 HCP, a strong five-card suit (worth an extra point), and a singleton along with the short trumps (worth three points); that all adds up to 18 points. West has suggested 16 or more points himself, which means the side's total points are at least 34, which is well into the slam range. Now you, as East, have to ask yourself whether Blackwood is the best method for exploring a slam with your hand. Once again the answer is yes, because you are simply in need of the five key-cards: all the aces and the king of spades (trumps). Thus, if partner has three, you would settle for 5♠; if he has four, you would go for 6♠, and if he has all five, you would go for 7♠ (or perhaps even 7NT).

You leap to 4NT, which agrees spades (the last-bid suit) as trumps, and your partner responds 5♣; this shows zero or four aces. Can your partner have zero? If he held no key-cards, then the only high cards he could hold are the jack of spades and the king, queen and jack in hearts – clearly that does not add up to 16! He must have four key-cards and therefore

you bid 6♠.

Change the West hand slightly, as in Layout G, and you would avoid 6♠:

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

West	East
1♠	2♦
3♠	4NT
5♠	End

The bidding starts the same way but now West has only three key-cards (the ♥K does not count), so he bids 5♠, which East would pass. Even if South holds the king of spades, the ten of spades might make a trick anyway. It is certainly not a slam you would want to be in.

What does 5NT mean?

It is important to note that you only use the king-asking bid if your side has *all five* key-cards, as after 5NT you have to be in a small slam (any response will be at the six-level!) and thus your aspirations now should be for a grand slam. I cannot emphasise this enough.

Only bid 5NT if you think there is a chance of a Grand Slam.

So, essentially, a 5NT bid is a Grand Slam Try.

It is rarely important to know the number of kings your partner holds, more

common is the need to know *which* king he holds. Hence the response should show any king you hold in your hand (below the trump suit).

With two kings outside trumps, bid 6NT (or the Grand Slam). And with a hand where you think you can make a Grand Slam (knowing that all the key-cards are held) bid the Grand Slam. Finally, with a hand which does *not* want to accept the Grand Slam Try (e.g. without any kings to show), bid six of the trump suit.

Here are three West hands to partner the same East:

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

West	East
1♥	1♠
3♠	4NT
5♠	5NT
6♦	7NT
End	

After West raises to 3♠, East has a slam in mind: 14 HCP + 2 (for six-card suit) + 2 (singleton with long trumps) = 18. West has shown a better than minimum opening hand, say 15-17 points, leaving you with at least 33 points between you. Blackwood should be able to solve your problems, and there is rather good news because West's 5♠ response shows the three missing key-cards. With everything in place, there is surely a chance for a Grand Slam if opener holds the ♦K. So East bids 5NT and West responds 6♦ showing the ♦K. East can now count thirteen tricks and thus bid 7NT.

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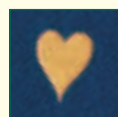
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BETTER BIDDING continued from page 11

Layout I

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

	N	
W		E
	S	

West	East
1♥	1♠
3♠	4NT
5♠	5NT
6♣	6♠
End	

The auction proceeds the same way as on Layout H, but this time over 5NT West bids 6♣, showing the king of clubs. There is no way you can underwrite a Grand Slam now, so you settle for 6♠ – it was the king of diamonds fitting with the diamond suit that allowed East to push on to the Grand Slam in Layout H.

Layout J

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

	N	
W		E
	S	

West	East
1♥	1♠
3♠	4NT
5♥	6♠
End	

In Layout J, West shows just two key cards so East settles for 6♠; with one key-card missing, there is no chance for a Grand Slam, so he does not bid 5NT.

It is important not to over-complicate things because this 5NT bid is not going to come up often – most normal club players will use it just once or twice a year. The most important aspect of Key-Card Blackwood is the inclusion of the king of trumps, allowing you to bid slams more confidently.

What about Roman Key-card Blackwood?

I am often asked why I do not teach Roman Key-card Blackwood and the answer is because I always aim for a mixture of simplicity and usefulness in all the conventions I recommend.

I hope you will agree that Key-card Blackwood is relatively straightforward; with the same responses as normal Blackwood, the only new things to learn are counting the king of trumps as an ace and the 5NT continuation. However, Roman Key-card Blackwood is much more complex: it has completely different responses and also involves a bid to ask about the queen of trumps, etc. The convention gains on very few hands and unfortunately it loses slightly more frequently because a mistake is made!

If you are familiar with RKCB and are happy using it, then continue to do so, because it is a good method – but only if you use the whole of it – and make sure that both players in the partnership are happy with it. Because of the rarity of the extended asking bids, the complexities of Roman Key-card Blackwood are exacerbated by strain on the memory.

When 4NT is not Blackwood

- A raise of a no-trump bid to 4NT is usually a *quantitative bid* (see below).
- When no suit is agreed and there is no jump in the auction, then 4NT can be natural. This is usually so on highly distributional hands when an extra round of bidding is required to settle the argument!

Here is an example of where an auction gets a little out of hand and a natural 4NT is required:

Layout K

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

	N	
W		E
	S	

West	East
1♠	2♦
3♠	4♣
4NT	

West opens 1♠ and over the 2♦ response jumps to 3♠ to show his strength. East is now a little stuck, no-trumps being a little dangerous with such weak hearts, so he bids 4♣ still trying to discover the best denomination for the final contract (no-trumps or diamonds). Now West rebids 4NT to suggest no-trumps as an option and East is happy to agree.

Quantitative Raises

When you are aiming to play in 6NT, it is the joint point-count that matters; you aim for 33 high-card points, so you do not use 4NT to ask for aces, but to ask partner if he has a maximum hand. This bid is used in the same way as a 2NT response to 1NT asks partner to bid game if he is maximum; these types of bids are called *quantitative*. They are easier to bid and

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understand than they are to spell and say – there always seems to be an extra ‘T’!

You use a quantitative bid when your point count plus your partner’s maximum would make 33; for example: opposite a 2NT opening showing 20-22 points, you would raise to 4NT with 11 points (11 + 22 = 33). This says: “Partner, I think there is a chance for slam, so if you have a maximum hand bid 6NT”. Similarly, after a weak 1NT opening (12-14) you could raise to 4NT to show 19 points (19 + 14 = 33).

The 4NT bid is only quantitative if preceded by another no-trump bid.

Take a look at Layouts L and M, where again the East hand is the same on both:

Layout L

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

West	East
2NT	4NT
End	

Layout M

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

West	East
2NT	4NT
6NT	End

On both layouts, West opens 2NT and East responds 4NT, quantitative. West in Layout L has three aces and two kings, but that is not what he is being asked about. He is being asked about his all-round strength in high-card points; with just 20, he should pass 4NT. In this layout, East-West have all the aces and kings between them, but they can only count ten tricks: not enough queens and jacks to supply the extra tricks.

West in Layout M, on the other hand, has an honour-rich 22-count, so when he hears 4NT from his partner he raises to 6NT. Here East-West are missing an

ace between them, but the jacks and queens more than make up for that and there should be an easy twelve tricks: three spades, three hearts, four diamonds and two clubs.

When not to use Blackwood

I finish this article in the same way in which I will start the next, by discussing when *not* to use Blackwood. Key-card Blackwood is brilliant: I try to use it as often as I can, because it gives the answers to the questions I need to ask. However, I only use it when I will be sure of what to bid over any answer from partner. It is no good bidding Blackwood and then having to guess which contract to be in; if that is the case, then you should not have been using the convention in the first place.

There are three basic reasons for not using Blackwood:

1. **Weak side suits.**
2. **The response goes too high.**
3. **Void suits.**

1. WEAK SIDE SUITS: if you hold a suit of two or more cards without the ace or king, then Blackwood is not ideal, because if you are missing just one ace, it might be in this suit and you may well lose two tricks straight away.

♠ K Q J 4 3 2
♥ Q 4 2
♦ K Q 3
♣ A

On this hand, if you are missing one ace, you may or may not make slam: if

the ace of hearts is missing, then maybe there are two tricks off the top.

2. THE RESPONSE GOES TOO HIGH (this arises usually when the agreed suit is a minor). Say, for example, that you have agreed clubs as the trump suit and need two aces to make 6♣ a likely contract (as on the hand below). In that case you must not use Blackwood, since a response showing just one ace (5♦) will force you to bid 6♣ anyway.

♠ A
♥ K 4 3
♦ K Q 4
♣ K Q J 4 3 2

3. VOID SUITS: Blackwood does not work well with a void because you will not know which aces your partner has when he responds to Blackwood. You will have to guess and therefore take a big risk. On the hand below, if your partner shows two aces, slam might well make, but it certainly won't if one of his aces is the ace of spades:

♠ Void
♥ K Q J 9 4 2
♦ K Q 4
♣ K Q 4 3

Your alternative to Blackwood is cue-bidding, which I will discuss in the next article.

Conclusion

In the meantime I hope you have fun bidding more slams. Key-card Blackwood is really worth giving a try. I hope it is not too difficult and not too much to remember! ■

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