

THE BIG PAYOFF

SLAM BIDDING AT BRIDGE



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Author of Two Over One and Getting Into the Bidding

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FOREWORD

In bridge, there are few satisfactions greater than bidding and making a slam. However, it's easier said than done and quite often a partnership arrives at a contract that is either too high or too low.

You might take some comfort from the fact that even in the expert community, slam bidding was relatively inefficient for quite some time, and that it's now significantly better at all levels.

Some regard the 'great divide' (watershed?) between old-time and modern-day slam investigation as the Italian Blue Team victory over the North American squad in the 1957 Bermuda Bowl. They subsequently dominated that event and followed up with nine more victories, every year it was held, until they briefly retired in 1969. While other European teams such as France and England had won in previous years and begun to challenge the American supremacy, their bidding methods were similar in many respects. The Italian systems were markedly different, and it was felt that they were more accurate in the realm of slam bidding than their counterparts.

That contention is somewhat exaggerated, and the Blue Team had its share of mishaps. However, there is an element of truth in that viewpoint, and it led to the first of three changes to the prevailing wisdom that moved slam bidding forward. It was eventually agreed upon that once you have trump agreement, cuebidding is a far more effective tool than an immediate ace-asking bid to determine whether slam is feasible.

Somewhat later, two more conclusions were drawn, one specific and one more general in nature. They were:

- 1) The king of the presumed trump suit ought to have equal importance to the four aces. This resulted in the creation of the original Keycard Blackwood (3014) and its revised version (1430).
- 2) Getting to decent slams and staying out of poor ones involves more than just adding up the combined points. There are various distributional features that can improve a hand and enable you to judge if the 'mesh' you have with what partner is showing justifies trying for bigger things.

As our launching pad, I'll propose a convention card that we'll use for our discussion and sample hands. It represents the kind of methods many players use nowadays, although you might elect to make some tweaks or changes in it for your regular partnership.

After that, the initial topics we'll address are what you need to try for slam, and how to investigate via the cuebidding route. More direct and advanced techniques, competitive auctions and a final set of practice hands will make up the remainder of the book.

Although there is a fair amount of subject matter to cover, I hope the order in which it is presented will make for a smooth transition to becoming an effective slam bidder.

As always, I'd like to thank my favorite partner and wife Sue in supporting my writing endeavors. She has often remarked to our students and fellow players that if there are four makeable slams in a session of bridge, we'll bid all five of them.

I'd also like to mention Dan Korbel, a fine bridge player and good friend who I've exchanged quite a few emails with in discussing slam bidding in general and various interesting hands, some of which appear in this book.

Bill Treble
Winnipeg, November 2017

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OUR CONVENTION CARD

NOTE — Other than 2/1 and basic splinters, none of these treatments are obligatory. They are, however, used widely throughout the bridge community.

I have not included Bergen major-suit raises or criss-cross, nor Kokish rebids by a 2♣ opener. Neither do I complicate matters by using variants of keycard-asking bids such as Kickback or Minorwood, although they are discussed briefly in the final chapter. While these methods are gaining in popularity, they are not yet universal.

General Approach 2/1 game-forcing

After a 1NT opening For now, regular Stayman, Jacoby and Texas transfers. I'll suggest a more complete framework in the chapter on 1NT auctions.

After a 2♣ opening 2♦ waiting, 2♥ is an artificial negative denying an ace or king. Other suit bids are positive responses, implying five-card or longer suits of good quality (at least two of the top three honors or very close to it). The 2NT response shows good quality hearts and is needed for this purpose since 2♥ is the artificial negative.

Asking Bids 4NT is 1430 RKCB, in the agreed suit or last bid suit. After a first- or second-step reply, the cheapest bid (if available below five of the trump suit) asks for the queen of trumps. Without it, replier signs off at the five-level, but if he has that card he can jump to slam or, if he has at least one king, show that value by bidding the cheapest one he has. A growing number of pairs use a different set of keycard-asking bids when there is minor-suit agreement, and we'll make reference to that in the final chapter.

If, after the initial reply, the asker continues with 5NT, that confirms possession of all the keycards and the queen of trumps.

Replier will show any king he has *below* the trump suit, beginning with the cheapest. If the asker then makes another

bid below six of our suit, it's an inquiry about that king. For example, with hearts as trumps, in the auction:

... ...
5NT 6♣ (showing the ♣K)
6♦

The last bid would be looking for the ♦K. If partner has that king as well, he is expected to bid the grand slam, but without it he'd decline with 6♥.

Minor-suit Auctions Jump raise preemptive, single raise one-round force promising 10+ HCP. If opener rebids either 1NT or 2NT, the other minor asks for what he has in the major suits. At the two-level, the 'new' minor is invitational or better values, but if partner has shown 18-19 balanced by jumping to 2NT, it is now game-forcing.

Major-suit Auctions A jump raise is invitational, showing 4+ trumps. A single raise is constructive, and new suits by opener are help-suit game tries. The 1NT response is forcing. A 2♣ response by an original passed hand is Reverse Drury, showing a good supporting hand. Partner will go back to his suit with minimum opening values or worse, and either bids or tries for game with anything better. A 2NT response is a game-forcing raise in the major.

Other Principles:

Fast Arrival By this we mean that once a game-force has been established, a three-level bid in our major-suit fit displays slam interest, whereas a jump to game suggests minimum values.

Lots and lots of splinters Both by opener and responder. Splinter bids are a great tool for discovering whether slam is worth trying for. Sometimes they will make the hand a 30-point deck, where the shortness is wonderful news opposite partner's quick losers. Conversely, they would be an absolute turnoff when the shortness is facing wasted honors such as KQx or KJ9x in the other hand.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IT TAKES TO BID A SLAM

Some of us who took up bridge might have started out with lessons, while others would have learned the game just through playing experience. Regardless of how we entered the fray, at some point in time we were likely told that it takes 32-33 combined points to produce twelve tricks, and 35-37 to take all thirteen.

Over the course of many deals, though, it's become apparent that those guidelines don't always hold true. While it often does take that many points, slam can also be makeable with less high-card strength, occasionally even when the combined hands add up to a 'mere' 26-27 HCP between them.

There must be a reason, or maybe several of them, why some combinations need the recommended number of points, while others do not. Indeed there are. In this chapter, we'll discuss which conditions justify taking a rosier view of the world, and when we need to exercise some degree of caution.

The First Scenario — Two Balanced Hands

The 32-33 point range is most accurate when each partner has a balanced hand and no eight-card or better fit. If you have a barely adequate trump fit (4-4 or 5-3), then slam could be makeable on slightly fewer points but even then it's a fine line and depends largely on how well the hands mesh in the other suits.

We'll begin with a hand from a club pairs game, with you occupying the North chair. The hand you're dealt is:

♠ 9 3 ♥ A K Q ♦ K 6 4 ♣ K Q J 9 4

Much to your amazement, your partner opens 1♠ in first chair, and the auction proceeds:

Opener	You
1♠	2♣
2NT	?

Virtually every player in the club holding this array of riches asked for aces with a jump to 4♣ and then parked the contract in 6NT when partner showed two of them. Alas, this was not a success as opener held:

♠ K 8 7 6 2 ♥ J 9 3 ♦ A 9 ♣ A 8 2

Even if you find the ♠A onside, there are just eleven tricks in notrump; five clubs, two diamonds, three hearts and the ♠K.

If you play in 6♣ it is slightly better as you can get an extra trick through a diamond ruff, but even that contract requires the ♠A on your left and no spade ruff by the opponents, so it's a shade less than 50%. Besides, you can hardly fault opener for rebidding 2NT on his balanced minimum hand.

It's easy to get carried away with this type of hand, but you need to realize that the partnership could be stuck on 30-31 HCP with no playable trump suit. Because of the quality of the five-card club suit, the hand is worth trying for slam, but should not drive there by itself. Therefore, the bidding should continue:

	Opener	You
	1♠	2♣
	2NT	4NT

The solution is to get opener's opinion with a quantitative 4NT raise. If partner has 14 HCP, he will now bid either 6♣ or 6NT, but with 12 or 13 he'll pass. Now we can look at three hands opener might have:

Opener 1	♠ K 8 7 6 2 ♥ J 9 3 ♦ A 9 ♣ A 8 2
Opener 2	♠ A K J 8 7 ♥ J 9 3 ♦ A 9 ♣ 10 8 2
Opener 3	♠ A Q J 8 4 ♥ J 9 3 ♦ A Q 7 ♣ 10 5
You	♠ 9 3 ♥ A K Q ♦ K 6 4 ♣ K Q J 9 4

Opener 1, the actual hand, will decline the invite by passing. Opener 2 is in the middle of his range with 13 HCP, but it's mostly aces and kings with a good five-card suit and three-card support. He will accept by bidding 6♣, offering a choice of slams. Opener 3 lacks a fit but is at the top of his range, and will carry on to 6NT. The fate of that contract will hinge on the location of the ♠K, making if that card is onside.

We'll move on to another hand where responder is faced with the decision of whether to look for slam. You hold:

♠ K 9 4 3 ♥ A J 4 ♦ A 6 4 ♣ K 8 3

Partner opens 1NT and here you are with 15 HCP. Your side could have as few as 30 or as many as 32 combined points. Should you content yourself with game or try for bigger things?

There might be a slam here, but only if there is a 4-4 spade fit. You can make a Stayman inquiry with 2♣. If partner answers 2♠, then you can invite slam (we'll see how in Chapter 5). If he bids 2♦ or 2♥ instead, you should place the contract in 3NT and not venture beyond the game level. Remember that 4-3-3-3 distribution is never a plus when you're considering slam, as that maximizes the number of potential losers. Also, here your only four-card suit is mediocre and if opener doesn't have a fit or very good three-card holding, you won't be able to develop the necessary tricks in the spade suit.

In this case opener's hand is:

♠ Q 6 5 ♥ K 10 9 8 ♦ K Q 9 ♣ A Q 6

Although he has a decent three-card spade holding, slam needs a miracle to come home, as you'd have to pick up the heart suit for four winners and then hope for one of the opponents to have the doubleton ♠A (not to mention guessing which one). If responder bids 2♣ and then invites with 4NT, that catches opener right in the middle of his range with a positive feature (the heart spots) and a negative one (the 4-3-3-3 shape).

In this example, it was a question of whether responder should invite slam. Now we'll move across to the other side of the table for the next hand, with opener having the decision to make over partner's invite.

The auction has gone:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣
2♦	4NT

Even if opener had shown a major, responder's 4NT would have been a slam invite and not a keycard request.

At any rate, your hand consists of:

♠ Q 10 9 ♥ A J 4 ♦ K J 6 3 ♣ A J 4

Of course, you're smack-dab in the middle of your 15-17 range. So are you going to be a lion or a lamb?

While opener has the ♠109, which is a plus, the hand has two serious flaws. The 4-3-3-3 distribution not only reduces the trick-taking potential somewhat, but also increases the likelihood of having extra losers. The greater drawback, however, is the three scattered jacks. Whenever you have

a mid-range hand, you should tend to go conservative with such values as it's entirely possible that not all of those jacks will be useful. My vote here would be to decline and pass.

Here is what responder actually has for you:

♠ K J ♥ K 9 3 2 ♦ A Q 10 7 ♣ Q 7 5

Should your partner have invited? It's borderline but reasonable. The hand is somewhat better than the previous one, as he has two four-card suits instead of 4-3-3-3 shape and a good spot card in diamonds.

Slam is distinctly against the odds, however. Despite having an eight-card diamond fit, you have a quick loser in spades and will need both the club and heart finesses to work in order to have any chance of making, and likely a 3-3 heart split to boot.

See what I mean about those jacks? Turn the two red ones into the ♥Q and slam has a far better play. As it is, the ♦J is basically a non-card.

Reading this chapter so far may seem a bit depressing, and a bit like the Ten Commandments ("Thou shalt not..."), but there are also hands that justify an upgrade so that you can take the push to slam. Here is one of them. You're back in responder's seat, with partner having opened 1NT:

♠ A J 10 8 ♥ K 10 ♦ A K J ♣ 10 8 4 2

Here you're in possession of 16 HCP, so there might only be 31 between the two hands. However, you should treat the hand as a 17-count and commit the hand to slam, first looking for a 4-4 spade fit. Good spot cards, such as the three tens, add to the value of your hand. Two of those cards are in the long suits, and the ♠J10 in combination with the ace offers excellent chances for three tricks there.

Opener's hand in this case is:

♠ 7 5 2 ♥ A Q J 8 6 ♦ Q 8 ♣ A Q 9

Although not everyone opens 1NT with a five-card major, nowadays more people do it than not if the hand meets the point-count and distribution requirements.

There are eight sure tricks in the red suits, plus the two black aces. You'll catch at least one if not both missing spade honors on the left 75% of the time, so that gets you up to eleven tricks and either a 3-3 spade break or the ♣K onside will provide the twelfth winner. While it's not a laydown slam, it has plenty of chances.

If you know the two hands will add up to at least 32 points, just bid slam and don't even invite. Of course, if you're nervous about missing two aces, you can ask for them along the way to ease your mind. For the next hand, responder picks up:

♠ Q 8 ♥ K 10 3 2 ♦ Q 9 8 7 ♣ Q J 2

The auction proceeds:

Opener	Responder
2♣	2♦
2NT	?

Partner is showing 22-24 HCP, better than a 2NT opening bid. With your 10 points, that brings the total to 32, and that should be enough to drive to slam. Of course, you'll try to unearth a heart fit with 3♣ along the way, and then continue to 6♥ if partner has four hearts and 6NT if he doesn't.

This time opener's collection of riches is:

♠ A 10 3 ♥ A J ♦ A K 10 2 ♣ A K 7 3

Assuming no problem in the diamond suit, you have four tricks in each minor, the ♥AK and the ♠A. Either a spade or heart lead will give declarer an extra trick in that suit. Even if the defenders lead a minor, the chances of making are still quite good. The best line of play is to come to hand and lead a spade towards dummy's ♠Q. If the king is with LHO, you can establish a trick in that suit. Even if the queen loses to the king on your right, the slam will still make if you guess the location of the ♥Q and finesse successfully in that suit.

Most of the sequences we've dealt with so far commence with a 1NT opening bid. However, this is also a frequent auction where responder has the game/slam choice to make:

Opener	Responder
1♣/1♦	1 any
2NT	?

Opener is advertising a balanced 18-19 HCP, and is lacking four-card support if you've bid a major suit. If you have 12 or fewer points, there will be little chance of slam, and you'll place the contract in game. Likewise, 14 or more would be enough to bid slam, as that brings your side up to at least 32. The 'gray zone' here is 13 HCP. If opener has just 18, that leaves you at 31 HCP, which may not suffice, but he could also have 19.

Again, several factors ought to be considered when deciding if you should try for slam in this situation. They are:

- Do you have any fit for opener’s suit?
- Does the hand contain good intermediate cards such as tens and nines?
- Are your honors ‘pure’ (aces and kings) or ‘soft’ (queens and jacks)?
- Finally, do you have extra length in your suit or another suit? Not to harp excessively on it (well yes, I am), but 4-3-3-3 distribution is usually the pits.

To illustrate that it’s more than just a coin-flip, here are two hands that responder might have when the bidding has gone:

	Opener	Responder
	1♦	1♠
	2NT	?
Responder 1	♠ A Q 6 5	♥ K J 7 ♦ J 5 ♣ Q 9 7 2
Responder 2	♠ A Q 6 5	♥ K J 7 ♦ K 10 6 5 ♣ 4 2

With the first hand, 3NT is enough. There’s no fit in either pointed suit as opener hasn’t raised spades and you have just two of his diamonds. Also, queens and jacks make up half of responder’s values.

The second hand is considerably better. We’ve turned the soft values in the minor suits into the ♦K, and given responder a fit for opener’s suit. Also, the doubleton club may be useful in scoring a ruff if the partnership ends up in diamonds. In fact, partner has this for his jump to 2NT:

♠ K 7 ♥ A Q 8 2 ♦ A Q 9 3 ♣ K 5 3

Opposite the first of the two hands, there will be seven major-suit winners but perhaps only three tricks in the minors.

The outlook is far more promising on the second example, as the trick count is three spades, four hearts and four diamonds. If the ♣A is onside, that brings you up to twelve winners — 6NT is a decent contract, but 6♦ is even better. We’ll revisit this hand in our examples and find out what the best auction will be for our side.

Is it possible for two hands with no shortness to have good chances for slam on fewer than 32 HCP? Yes, it can happen, but what you’d need is either a double fit or a great trump fit. Moreover, you’d have to be able to discover those combined attributes in the bidding. Here are two examples.

On the first one, you have the room to locate the double fit and on the other the partnership has extra trump length and a perfect mesh of values.

Here, whether the optimum contract is reached is going to depend on opener's second bid:

Opener	Responder
♠ Q 5	♠ K 9
♥ A K Q 7 5	♥ J 9 4
♦ 8 4 2	♦ A 10 7
♣ K 9 4	♣ A Q J 10 8
1♥	2♣
3♣	3♥
4♥	4NT
5♠	6♥
pass	

Opener has several alternatives for his rebid. He can follow up with 2NT, repeat his good five-card suit, or support clubs despite having only three of them. Since he's at the top of his range for a balanced minimum and has good quality in his primary suit, I'd lean slightly towards the raise.

Responder now indicates slam interest with his 3♥ bid. In the Convention Card details on page 8, I mentioned the Principle of Fast Arrival, which is in effect here. Opener has no outside control and signs off in 4♥, but responder isn't going to let him off the hook and asks for keycards. When partner shows two of them along with the queen of trumps, responder bids the slam.

It's easy to make 6♥, as two diamonds can be thrown away on the clubs after trumps are drawn, and all declarer loses is the ♠A. However, if opener had rebid 2NT rather than 3♣, responder wouldn't have known about the crucial club fit and the auction might have ended in game.

The next example is also a good slam on a limited number of points, but for reasons other than a double fit:

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

On these hands, 6♣ can be made, as a diamond can be ruffed in the West hand and the only trick to be lost is the ace of trumps. Yet in high-card

points, East-West have a paltry 27 between them, and neither hand contains a short suit. How can this be?

Three features combine to make slam a good contract. First, there is a ninth trump in the partnership's best fit. Second, there is not a single wasted high-card point — all the honors in both hands are working cards. Finally, West's two-card diamond holding is magic, as partner's third-round loser can be trumped.

This hand perfectly illustrates some of the themes that I've been emphasizing, such as pure values, extra trumps and so on. But can this 'perfecto' be reasonably bid to slam? The answer is that while it's unlikely, it *is* barely possible if West is first to speak. This will be one of the hands in the final chapter, so stay tuned.

The Second Scenario — One or Both Hands are Unbalanced

In a knockout team match at a local Regional, two expert players picked up the following hand as East:

♠ Q J 9 8 6 5 ♥ — ♦ A 8 4 2 ♣ Q 9 4

The auction at each table went:

West	East
1♥	1♠
4♠	?

Both players thought for a while and then decided to pass, feeling that with a combined point-count of 28-29 HCP, the void in opener's suit would be a liability rather than an asset. However, opener's hand was:

♠ A K 4 2 ♥ A K J 10 4 ♦ 9 7 6 ♣ A

Twelve tricks are a breeze, and there's a decent play for all thirteen. Opener's 4♠ was the value bid, as players don't generally make a splinter bid when their singleton is the ace.

We've already talked about how double fits and pure values enhance the trick-taking potential in a hand, but so does holding extra trumps in your best fit. Here, responder knows his side has ten spades between them. That gives declarer plenty of options in his line of play, as it will usually take only two rounds to draw trumps.

Does East need to blast into slam or make a keycard request? No, as there may be two quick losers in the club suit. However, because of the

ten-card fit, his hand is worth one move with a 5♦ cuebid. As you can see, opener will now commit to at least the six-level as he has all the other bases well covered.

Apart from the superlative trump fit, another key to the hand is that each player has shortness opposite his partner's length. That's especially important in the club suit, as declarer can ruff both of his losers there.

Generally, if just one of the hands is unbalanced and there is an adequate trump fit, slam can be made on 30-31 HCP. If the fit is a minimal one of eight cards, then you need a double fit and pure values to bid and make slam on fewer points. Here is an example:

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

Despite a high-card count of only 28, slam is a good place to be on these cards. If either black-suit finesse works, twelve tricks will be available. East-West have a double fit, both black-suit queens and quick winners in the red suits. Move West's ♠Q over to the diamond suit and slam is no longer such a great proposition.

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

In this example, we have 12 opposite 14, yet 6♦ is a routine make even if there is a trump loser. If the ♦K doesn't fall, declarer plays three rounds of hearts to throw away his second spade and proceeds to crossruff the remainder of the tricks.

How do you bid to 6♦? Suppose East is the dealer and opens 1♠. Partner responds 2♦ and now a good continuation by opener is a splinter raise of 4♣*. That's good news for West, who can now cuebid his hearts. Partner can take over and drive the hand to slam. It is the eleven-card trump fit and the matching shortness in the black suits that enable slam to make for East-West despite the more or less wasted ♣A.

* Since 3♣ would be game-forcing, 4♣ is a splinter, not a jump-shift in clubs.

GO FOR THE GOLD!

Slam bidding is perhaps the most exciting part of bridge, but at the same time it is the most technically challenging. The rewards for success are high, but so are the penalties for failure. As a launching pad, the author introduces some useful agreements and conventions. After that, he addresses how to decide whether to try for slam, and how to investigate via cuebidding. More direct and advanced techniques, competitive auctions and a final quiz make up the remainder of the book.

Studying this book will make for a smooth transition to becoming an effective slam bidder.



BILL TREBLE (Canada) is always a high finisher in the Canadian National Teams Championships. He has written three successful bridge books, the latest of which is *Two-over-One: A First Course*. He received the ABTA Book of the Year award in 2017 for *Defending at Bridge: A First Course*.

