

COMMON-SENSE PRINCIPLES OF SLAM BIDDING

The 'Last Bid'

An essential ingredient of good slam bidding is the ability to sniff out danger. Who do you think was to blame for the fiasco in hand (a)?

(a) West	East	South	West	North	East
♠ 3	♠ 9 7 4	3♠	4♥	4♠	5♣
♥ A Q J 10 4 3	♥ K 6 5 2	Pass!			
♦ Q 9 8	♦ A K J 10 5				
♣ K 7 3	♣ A				

East clearly meant 5♣ as a cue bid agreeing hearts. West didn't agree! East could rightly see the prospect of a grand slam if West had a void spade, which was quite likely on the bidding. East's idea was to continue with 6♦ if West could do no more than bid 5♥, thus almost forcing West to co-operate with a spade void. The trouble was that East/West had not discussed this sequence: not surprisingly because there are millions of such sequences. West felt that if East had already passed then 5♣ would clearly be a cue bid, but in the absence of such an initial pass then 5♣ was natural.

East should probably have spotted the danger of a misunderstanding in unfamiliar territory. A good approach to slam bidding is to try to form a view of a likely resting spot. We call it the 'last bid' principle. Imagine that your next bid will end the auction, i.e. it will be the last bid. What would you bid? By all means try to investigate more subtly if it is completely safe to do so, but as soon as there is any danger of misunderstanding you should make this 'last bid'. It might sound defeatist, but too many 'expert' partnerships have played in absurd contracts to believe that perfection in bidding is always attainable. In this example East should have sensed danger and made the 'last bid' of 6♥. A good principle to cover the above situation is that in a contested auction the need to find the correct denomination (for game purposes) takes priority over the need to investigate a slam. In that case East's 5♣ would be natural.

Sometimes the 'last bid' becomes appropriate at a very early stage of the auction, not because you are entering unfamiliar territory but because you want to make it hard for your opponents to get their act together. Only East/West are vulnerable in hand (b).

(b) West	East	West	North	East	South
♠ Q 6	♠ -	1♦	Dbl	6♦	?
♥ K 8 3	♥ A 9				
♦ A Q 9 7 5 4	♦ K J 10 3 2				
♣ 10 4	♣ A J 7 5 3 2				

What is the 'correct' bid with East's hand when 1♦ is doubled? It isn't going to be easy to discover whether or not there are 'slow' losers in clubs. 6♦ may depend on the lead. Equally, your non-vulnerable opponents may find a cheap sacrifice if given the space. There is no correct bid, but 6♦ was highly successful here, scoring 1370 when North/South would have only lost 300 in 6♠ doubled.

There are limitations to science, and there are advantages in putting your opponents under pressure. And the 6♦ bid worked. Scientific bidding should be treated as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Although impressive scientific sequences make you feel

good, you end up regretting all the bids you make in the auction except the last one because they tell opponents how to defend.

Taking the Bidding above Game Level

Be prepared to advance beyond game in the quest for a slam if you judge that the chances of making a slam are substantially better than the risks of going off at the five level. Consider the following North hands after the sequence below.

(c) ♠ Q J 7 ♥ A Q J 3 ♦ 2 ♣ 9 8 7 3 2	(d) ♠ Q J 7 ♥ A Q J 3 ♦ 7 ♣ K Q J 8 7	South West North 1♥ 3♠ ?
--	--	-----------------------------

North would have bid 4♥, under pressure, with (c) so North felt obliged to do more with (d) and bid 5♥. West cashed the ♠A, gave East a spade ruff and East cashed the ♣A to beat 5♥. A freely-bid five-of-a-major going one off is a demoralising result. 4♥ from North would have been sufficient with (d). The five level was not safe, especially in view of the expected bad breaks after an opponent's pre-empt.

Bidding Small Slams

In theory you should aim to bid a small slam if it has greater than a 50% chance of working, or avoid it if it has a less than 50% chance. The theory that a 50% chance of success is the criterion for bidding a small slam also assumes that your opponents will be in a sensible game or slam. There is nothing more frustrating than to go off in a borderline slam, only to find that your opponents have had a misunderstanding and languished in a part-score. Playing against strong opponents the 50% 'rule' is as good a guideline as you will get. Perhaps playing against a weak team you should look for odds of slightly greater than 50%.

An Ace is Missing

Should you bid a slam if an ace is missing? We are not talking about the beginner who takes the initiative with Blackwood at the first opportunity, finds an ace is missing, takes fright and signs off at the five level only to find that the partnership has a combined 36 high card points and a surplus of tricks. How should East continue in hand (e)?

(e) West ♠ A Q 10 7 6 2 ♥ K Q J ♦ 9 7 ♣ K 6	East ♠ 8 5 ♥ A 4 3 ♦ K Q 6 4 3 ♣ A J 4	West 1♠ 3♠ 4♠	East 2♦ 4♣ ?
---	--	------------------------	-----------------------

East's 4♣ is a cue bid agreeing spades as trumps and showing interest in a slam. West's 4♠ denies an ace. Should West continue?

In real life East made another try with 5♥ (showing the ♥A). The partnership played in 5♠ but North had ♠K 9 4 3, allowing the defenders to take two trump tricks and the ♦A.

Here East should have passed 4♠. Once the ♦A was missing everything else would have to work. The trumps would have to be solid. Maybe it would be necessary to drive out the ♦A and set up diamond winners to discard losers in the other side suits, but an inconvenient opening lead would expose a quick loser or inconveniently remove a vital entry from dummy.

The point is that East has only a marginal slam try. If all the aces had been present it could have depended on, perhaps one of two finesses and avoiding a bad trump break: reasonable odds. Once an ace is missing if anything else at all goes wrong the slam is doomed. When considering slams aces are greatly undervalued in the point count. In this case the ♦A would have been doubly important because it would have helped declarer set up quick length winners in diamonds.

Bidding Grand Slams

At teams you stand to lose more by bidding a failing grand slam than by missing a good grand slam.

Hand (f) appeared in a county teams match. The grand slam had no play.

(f) West	East	West	East
♠ A J 7 5	♠ K Q 8 6 2	1♥	1♠
♥ A 9 8 7	♥ K Q J	3♠	4♣
♦ A K	♦ 5 2	4♦	4NT
♣ 7 4 3	♣ A 5 2	5♠	5NT
		6♦	7♠

When East heard West raise 1♠ to 3♠ East had a 'last-bid' of 6♠ in mind. 4♣ was a cue bid, showing the ♣A or club void, similarly 4♦ showed the ♦A or diamond void. 4NT was Blackwood and 5♠ showed three aces. 5NT asked for kings and 6♦ showed one king. East now suffered from a surfeit of imagination. East realised that West need have no further high card for the 3♠ raise, but if West had five hearts then East could see 13 tricks.

Of course, there was no reason to expect West to have five hearts. What was even more demoralising was that when East/West came to compare scores with their team-mates they found that their opponents had settled in 4♠. They had lost 13 IMPs rather than gained 13 IMPs. Note that if the grand slam had succeeded they would have gained 16 IMPs rather than 13. In pursuit of the extra 3 IMPs they had lost 26 IMPs. The reaction was fascinating: 'How pathetic for them to only bid 4♠ with only 12 top tricks'. This is true in as far as it goes, but in the real world opponents often miss slams with only 31 high card points. This hand illustrates very well why a grand slam should not be bid on the basis of: 'If partner has ...'

It is almost worth going so far as saying that to bid a grand slam you should be able to count thirteen tricks, but qualify this by saying that if you know that a grand slam is at worst on a finesse but in all probability is a great deal better then you should risk it. North has hand (g) and South opens 3♥, non-vulnerable against vulnerable opponents.

(g)	♠ A K J 10 9	♥ A K 4 3	♦ –	♣ A 9 7 5
-----	--------------	-----------	-----	-----------

There are vast numbers of hands with complete rubbish that South might have that will make 7♥ excellent

(h)	♠ 8 2	♥ Q J 10 9 8 7 2	♦ 7 4	♣ 8 2
(i)	♠ 8	♥ Q J 10 9 8 7 2	♦ 7 4 2	♣ 8 2
(j)	♠ 8 5 2	♥ Q J 10 9 8 7 2	♦ 7 4	♣ 2

With (h) South will need to set up a fifth spade to dispose of the club loser. South needs spades 4-2 or 3-3. Even if East has ♠ Q x x x there will be a marked ruffing finesse: All this amounts to excellent odds.

With (i) South will need to ruff three diamonds in dummy: no problem.

With (j) South will need the spade finesse, or for East to have the ♠Q singleton.

Of course, you are highly unlikely to be able to find out which of these hands South has, or indeed if South has a better hand with a useful side card like the ♠Q or the ♣K. You might as well immediately bid 7♥, knowing it cannot be worse than a finesse.

Requirements for a Slam

How many points do you need for a slam? Beginners' textbooks quote 33 or 34 for a small slam in no-trumps, and 37 for a grand slam in no-trumps. So how do you rate the contract in (a)?

(a) West	East	West	East
♠ K Q J	♠ A 4 2	1NT	6NT
♥ Q 7 6	♥ A K J		
♦ K Q 5	♦ A J 2		
♣ J 4 3 2	♣ K 7 6 5		

East/West have 34 points, but slam is awful, requiring North to have precisely ♣A Q doubleton. Let us try again. Suppose we turn the ♥Q into the ♠Q as in (b).

(b) West	East
♠ K Q J	♠ A 4 2
♥ 8 7 6	♥ A K J
♦ K Q 5	♦ A J 2
♣ Q J 4 3	♣ K 7 6 5

This time you need the heart finesse and a 3-2 club break (or perhaps singleton ♣A). That is better but still not within the required odds. Let us persevere by turning a small heart into a small diamond, as in (c).

(c) West	East
♠ K Q J	♠ A 4 2
♥ 8 7	♥ A K J
♦ K Q 5 3	♦ A J 2
♣ Q J 4 3	♣ K 7 6 5

Now 6NT is excellent, requiring a 3-2 club break or the heart finesse.

We need to analyse how the hands have changed.

In transforming (a) into (b) we took out a minor honour card from a short suit and put it into a longer suit. High cards in your long suits help develop your length cards. High cards in your short suits have nothing to develop.

In transforming (b) into (c) we have given West more promising shape. 4-3-3-3 shape has less trick-taking potential than 4-4-3-2 shape. It is interesting to see how inexperienced

players would compare the West hands in (a) and (c). Most would be happy about opening (a) with 1NT because 'Every suit is stopped and I have no weakness'. In fact (c) is by far the more promising hand.

Now compare hands (d) and (e)

(d) West	East
♠ 4 3 2	♠ A Q J
♥ 4 3 2	♥ A Q J
♦ A K Q	♦ 8 7 6
♣ K 9 8 7	♣ A Q J 10

(e) West	East
♠ Q 4 3	♠ A J 2
♥ Q 4 3	♥ A J 2
♦ K Q 8	♦ A 7 6
♣ K 9 8 7	♣ A Q J 10

6NT is an excellent contract with (d), requiring just one of two major suit finesses. Again it is a poor contract with (e) because you will struggle to avoid a loser in each major suit even if North has both major suit kings.

The point is that in (d) the major suit honours are in the same hands and back each other up well. In (e) they are split between the hands. Note again that the inexperienced West player might prefer to open 1NT with (e) but (d) is the better hand. Isolated and unsupported honours often don't pull their weight.

From these examples you can see that to bid no-trump slams based on the point count and nothing else is not a good idea. You need judgement

Let us return to (a).

(a) West	East	West	East
♠ K Q J	♠ A 4 2	1NT	4NT
♥ Q 7 6	♥ A K J	Pass	
♦ K Q 5	♦ A J 2		
♣ J 4 3 2	♣ K 7 6 5		

This would have been a better sequence. East has 20 points, but the worst possible shape, only one honour in the only four-card suit, and no intermediate tens and nines. West has 14 points, seemingly a maximum but with the same defects as East. Additionally West has too many unsupported honours (the ♥Q and ♣J) and it seems all too likely that a holding like ♠ K Q J will be opposite a trebleton ♠ A x x (remember partner didn't use Stayman), leaving the ♠J a useless card.

Playing Strength and Control Cards

We start by looking at two hands where West and East each have 14 high card points. The distribution is the same, but in (f) a grand slam is excellent, while in (g) you would not want to commit yourself to playing above 3NT.

(f) West	East	West	East
♠ 7 6 5	♠ A 4 2	1♣	1♦
♥ A 4	♥ 8 5 2	3♣	4♣
♦ A 8	♦ K Q J 10 9	4♦	4♠
♣ A Q 10 9 7 6	♣ K J	5♥	5NT
		6♥	7♣

West has only 14 high card points but with excellent clubs and aces West is well worth 3♣. 4♣ is forcing and a clear slam try. 4♦, 4♠ and 5♥ are cue bids. East can now see the potential for 13 tricks: 2 major suit aces, 5 diamonds and 6 clubs. East bids the grand slam force, asking West to show top trump honours. 6♥ shows two of the top three and East bids the excellent 7♣. East considers 7NT, but decides to pass 7♣ in case West's heart control is a void.

It is important to understand the ingredients that make this grand slam so good: aces in the major suits and playing strength (long solid suits) in the minor suits.

(g) West	East	West	East
♠ A K 5	♠ Q J 2	1♣	1♦
♥ Q 6	♥ A J 2	2♣	3NT
♦ 8 3	♦ K 7 6 4 2		
♣ A J 6 5 4 3	♣ K 2		

In (g) West rightly rebids only 2♣. The clubs are weaker and isolated honours like the ♥Q do not give the hand the same trick taking potential. With no source of tricks East is not tempted to take the bidding beyond the obvious game contract.

The secret of bidding good suit slams is less counting points and more the ability to diagnose fitting cards in bidding. Compare hands (h) and (i).

(h) West	East	West	East
♠ A Q 7 5 3	♠ K J 6	1♠	2♦
♥ A J 5 4 2	♥ K Q 3	2♥	3♣
♦ 7	♦ A K 6 5	3♥	3♠
♣ 7 2	♣ A 4 3	4♥	5NT
		6♥	7♠

East's 3♣ bid is the fourth suit: artificial and game forcing. West's 3♥ confirms 5-5 in the major suits. East initially gives preference to 3♠ and West cue bids the ♥A with 4♥.

East's cards fit West's shape perfectly. West has only three minor suit cards, which will be covered by East's ♦A K and ♣A. East also has four wonderful honour cards in the major suits. 5NT is the grand slam force and 6♥ shows two of the top three trump honours. East can now count 13 tricks unless hearts break 4-1, and even then a dummy reverse might save the day.

(i) West	East	West	East
♠ A Q 7 5 3	♠ 6 4 2	1♠	2♦
♥ A J 5 4 2	♥ Q 6 3	2♥	3♣
♦ 7	♦ A K Q 3	3♥	3♠
♣ 7 2	♣ A K Q	4♥	4NT
		5♥	5NT
		6♣	6NT

In (i) East's 20 points fit far less well with West's 5-5 shape. East might have a sense of foreboding but it is difficult for East to give up on a slam with so much. Any bid above 4♠ is capable of misinterpretation. Faced with no good bid East tries Blackwood and has the presence of mind to bid 6NT rather than 6♠ when West reveals two aces and no kings.

Another type of suit slam which can make with far fewer than the normal points requirement is shown in hand (j). The ingredients are: lots of trumps, control cards and shape.

(j) West	East	West	East
♠ K Q J 9 8 7 2	♠ A 10 5 3	1♠	4♣
♥ 10	♥ A 7 4 3	4NT	5♠
♦ 9	♦ A 8 7 6	7♠	
♣ A 10 3 2	♣ 7		

East's 4♣ is a splinter bid, showing 4 spades, enough high cards to raise to game and a singleton or void club. It is just possible that East has the K Q J of each red suit, making the five level dangerous, but the prospect of making slam is far greater so West bids 4NT, ordinary Blackwood. When East shows three aces West can easily envisage 13 tricks.

(k) West	East	West	East
♠ Q 7 4 3	♠ A J 5 2	1♠	4♣
♥ A 5 4	♥ Q 7 3 2	4♠	
♦ A J 9	♦ K Q 8 3		
♣ K Q J	♣ 4		

In (k) West is not enthused by East's 4♣ splinter bid. ♠K Q J opposite a singleton is likely to be wasted values. West has two aces, but with horrible trumps West wisely makes no slam invitation, signing off in 4♠.

Note the contrast between these final two examples. In the second one West has no fewer than seven extra high card points, but the hands fit badly, the trumps are not good enough and West has poor shape.

With acknowledgement and thanks to Andrew Kambites for the work on this handout