

Slam Bidding

Bidding on point count - No Trump Hands

Point count is a reliable method of valuing the combined strength of hands only when both hands are relatively balanced. As soon as long suits are involved, extra tricks can seem to appear from nowhere. Similarly, in a trump contract, shortages (e.g. voids and singletons) can prevent tricks being lost, and thus contribute to the eventual enjoyment of more tricks than might be expected.

If both hands are fairly balanced, then the “target” number for a small slam is a combined holding of about 33 or 34 points. If the bidding sequence includes at some stage (perhaps even as an opening bid) a no-trump bid that clearly defines the strength of the hand, then it may be possible for the responder to that bid to add his values to those shown and bid a slam:

2 NT (20-22 points) Responder holds:

♠	Q 10 9
♥	A 10 8
♦	A J 3 2
♣	Q 9 7

With 13 points, responder should be confident that the combined values (between 33 and 35 points) are sufficient for a small slam. However, the values are not really enough for a Grand Slam (about 37 points combined!) so an immediate bid of 6NT is called for.

Here is another example:

The opening bid is 1♦ and Responder holds:

♠	A 10 8
♥	K J 7 2
♦	Q J 2
♣	A J 7

Although the hand is strong enough (in terms of points) to make a jump shift response of 2♥, I think that would be a bad bid. It is much better to simply respond with 1♥ and see if partner’s rebid will clarify the situation – after all, partner cannot pass the 1♥ response!

On this occasion, after the 1♥ response, opener rebids 2NT. This shows a balanced hand with 17-18 points. There is no reason to think that, with your balanced 16 point hand, there would be a superior contract to 6NT, and the simplest course is to bid it. The full sequence:

1♦	1♥	
2NT	6NT	Simple but effective.

The Art of Slam Bidding

To make a small slam you need:

1. The power to make 12 tricks
2. The controls to stop the defenders making 2 tricks

The first few bids of an auction are usually aimed at assessing the combined power of the two hands. When this seems to be adequate for a slam, it is time to check on controls.

There are two main techniques for this:

- The control-showing cue-bid
- Blackwood (or a variation)

▪ The Control-showing Cue-Bid

When a trump suit has been agreed, a bid in a new suit at the 4-level or higher is a *cue-bid* showing a control in that suit. Consider this auction:

West	East	West's raise to 3♠ agrees Spades as trumps. East's 4♣ is therefore a cue-bid. It conveys two messages:
1♥	1♠	I have the Ace of Clubs (or possibly a void)
3♠	4♣	I think we may have the values for a slam

Cue-bids are the single most important aid to slam bidding. They invite intelligent co-operation from your partner. If he is unenthusiastic, he will sign off; if his hand is suitable for slam purposes he will make some more encouraging move, perhaps another cue-bid.

What should I cue-bid?

Although it is quite common among tournament players to cue-bid Aces, Kings, voids and singletons alike, this is rather dangerous for the less-experienced player. An easier method is to show first-round controls before you start showing second-round controls.

A first-round control means that you are able to win the first round of the suit if the enemy lead it: you have the Ace, or possibly a void so that you may trump the suit led.

Second-round control is the King of the suit or a singleton.

Note that you start by bidding the most economical first-round control. Had East bid 4♦ over his partner's raise to 3♠ he would have been showing the Ace of Diamonds (or a void) but also be denying the Ace of Clubs (or a void in Clubs).

Here is an example of a sequence with cue-bids:

West	East	West	East
♠ A Q 8 7	♠ K J 10 6 2	1♦	1♠
♥ K 2	♥ A 9 3	3♠	4♥
♦ A K J 7 4	♦ Q 10 3	4♠	5♣
♣ J 2	♣ K 4	6♠	no bid

East's 4♥ bid shows first-round control of Hearts and slam ideas, but West is unable, at this stage, to bid towards slam as there may be two Clubs to lose at once. However, East then makes another try by cue-bidding his second-round control in Clubs. West is now able to accept the invitation to bid the slam.

When is it safe to cue-bid second-round controls?

There are several situations where it is safe to cue-bid a second-round control without running the risk that partner will expect a first-round control instead:

- Where the partnership has already cue-bid the first-round control of the suit

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

Bid 5♣. Partner has already shown the Ace of Clubs by his 4♣ cue-bid. Since a small slam is almost certain and a grand slam not impossible, it costs nothing to describe your hand by showing your second-round control in Clubs.

- Where you have already denied first-round control by a previous cue-bid

♠ 10 4	1♥	1♣
♥ K 10 7 4 2	3♥	3♥
♦ A Q 3	4♦	4♠
♣ K 4 2	?	

Bid 5♣. Since you cue-bid first-round controls in ascending order, your 4♦ bid denied the Ace of Clubs. Now that partner has suggested a slam is a real possibility by taking the bidding beyond game, there can be no ambiguity if you cue-bid the King of Clubs, which may well be a vital card.

In general, you should not cue-bid a shortage in partner's main side suit.

West	East
1♠	2♣
2♥	4♠
5♣	

If East's Club suit is something like A Q x x x or K Q x x x a singleton or void is likely to be unhelpful. When you do cue-bid in this type of auction, partner needs to be sure that you have the Ace or King to solidify the suit as a source of tricks.

The advance cue-bid

Sometimes a trump suit has not been specifically agreed when the first cue-bid is made. It is the cue-bid that agrees the suit as trumps. This is one of the most common situations:

West	East
1NT	3♥
4♣	

West could not possibly be introducing a Club suit here; his partner's bid effectively asks him to choose between a rebid of 3NT or 4♥. Instead, west's bid of 4♣ is a cue-bid, agreeing Hearts as trumps. It indicates a good fit for Hearts and a hand generally suitable for a slam, should East be that way inclined.

When a new suit call would have been forcing but instead you choose to jump in that suit, this is a cue-bid:

West	East	West	East
♠ A Q 10 7 6 3	♠ K 9 5	1♠	2♦
♥ A 4 2	♥ K 4	2♠	4♣
♦ Q 4	♦ K J 9 3 2	4♥	4♠
♣ K 2	♣ A 6 5	5♣	5♦
		6♠	

East is too strong to just bid 4♠ at his second turn. Had he held a 2-suiter in the minors, he could have bid 3♣ forcing (new suit at the 3-level). The jump to 4♣ is therefore a cue-bid, agreeing Spades. An intelligent auction!

Splinter Bids

A splinter bid is an unusual jump in a new suit which confirms trumps and shows a singleton or void in the suit bid, together with slam interest.

Here is an example of a Splinter Bid: 1♠ - 4♣

This jump to 4♣ would

- agree Spades as trumps
- show game values
- promise a singleton or void in Clubs

The precise nature of the bid, pinpointing responder's distributional feature in Clubs, should help opener to assess whether the hands fit well together for the purposes of bidding on to a slam.

A further bid by responder of the splinter suit would confirm no losers in the suit (i.e a void or possibly the singleton Ace), a bid in a new suit would be a cue-bid, and 4NT would be Blackwood.

Opener can also use a Splinter Bid: 1♦ - 1♠
 4♣

opener has values for game opposite a minimum response
strong support for responder's Spades
a singleton or void in Clubs

Because the Splinter Bid shows where the player has a shortage, it can also warn the partnership to stay away from slams where the hands do not fit well.

Blackwood

We have already seen how the intelligent use of cue-bids is often the best way forward towards bidding a slam. However, more popular (because it is easier and requires less in the way of intelligent co-operation) is a bid of 4NT as Blackwood. This is not an exchange of information, as is cue-bidding, but a simple question: How many Aces have you got?

The most common set of answers to the question are:

- 5♣ = 0 or 4 Aces (it should be clear which it is!)
- 5♦ = 1 Ace
- 5♥ = 2 Aces
- 5♠ = 3 Aces

A subsequent bid of 5NT by the bidder of 4NT confirms that all Aces are accounted for and asks for Kings on the same scale, i.e. 6♣ = 0 or 4, 6♦ = 1, etc

It is all very easy, which probably explains why it is used so often when other methods, such as cue-bidding, would work much better.

Blackwood should be used when you are about to bid a slam to check that you are not missing 2 Aces. In other words, it is used to keep you out of bad slams, not get you into good ones.
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Here is a typical case of Blackwood being used when alternatives were better:

West	East	West	East
♠ A K J 7 6 4	♠ Q 10 8 3	1♠	3♠
♥ 8	♥ A Q 9 3	4NT	5♦
♦ Q 3	♦ J 8 2	6♠	no bid
♣ A K J 2	♣ Q 8		

Admittedly, West has a fine hand, and is entitled to consider a slam likely after his partner's raise to 3♠. However, he cannot be sure that every suit is under control. Instead of rushing into Blackwood, he could instead have cue-bid 4♣ and sought his partner's opinion. East would have replied 4♥ and West, buoyed by the knowledge that East held the Ace of Hearts, could now try 5♣. If East also held the King of Diamonds a cue-bid of 5♦ would result, and now the slam could be bid.

In fact, there are a few hands where Blackwood is the best way forward. Here is one:

West	East	West	East
♠ 4	♠ A Q J 6 2	1♥	1♠
♥ A K 9 8 7	♥ 6	2♣	4♣
♦ K 2	♦ 7 4	4NT	5♦
♣ A Q 8 7 2	♣ K J 10 4 3	6♣	no bid

West can see that there is sufficient strength to make slam a good prospect, and checks that there are not two Aces missing (the right way to use Blackwood). The good slam in Clubs is reached.

Warning: take extra care when the trump suit is Clubs: an unsuitable response to the Blackwood enquiry may leave you too high to stop short of a slam that you now don't want to be in!

When is 4NT not Blackwood?

- 4NT is a limit bid, rather than Blackwood, when it is a raise of a natural No Trump call (including after the use of Stayman)

(1)	West	East	(2)	West	East
	1NT	4NT		1NT	2♣
				2♦	4NT

In each case, East is making a quantitative raise of his partner's opening bid. He is asking West to pass with a minimum and to go on to 6NT with a maximum.

- 4NT is natural when you have already bid No Trumps and wish to reject your partner's further advance:

(3)	West	East	(4)	West	East
	1♠	2♦		1♦	1♠
	3NT	4♦		3NT	4♥
	4NT			4NT	

In (3) West pours cold water on his partner's suggestion of a Diamond slam. In auction (4) West doubtless has a fair suit of Diamonds to provide a source of tricks and no liking for a major suit contract.

- 4NT is, however, Blackwood after all if it follows a jump shift response, e.g.

West	East
1♠	3♥
3NT	4NT

Alternatives to Blackwood

There are several fancy versions of Blackwood: Roman Blackwood, 5-Ace Blackwood, Key-card Blackwood, Roman Key-card Blackwood (can be useful), Byzantine (a superb convention, but frighteningly complicated!). However, it is much better to become a good cue-bidder than to learn a fancy version of a generally less effective method.

As we have seen above, if No Trumps has been bid then a bid of 4NT is played as a raise. If, after partner's opening bid in No Trumps, all you need to know is the number of Aces held by partner, there is an alternative convention known as **Gerber**.

It is a bid of 4♣ asking for Aces, with step responses: 4♦ = 0, 4♥ = 1, etc.

I suggest that a bid of 4♣ is Gerber only in the following specific situations:

- In response to a 1NT or 2NT opening
- After a 2♣ opening and 2NT rebid by partner

A subsequent 5♣ by the 4♣ bidder asks for Kings in the same way, with step responses as before.

The Grand Slam Force

Sometimes the only potential loser is in the trump suit:

♠ Q J 9 8	Partner opens 1♠ (!)
♥ A K Q J 5	
♦ void	
♣ A K J 6 4	

All you really want to know is whether partner holds the Ace and King of Spades. There is a special bid for this precise situation: a bid of 5NT, the Grand slam Force. It requests partner to bid the grand slam if he holds 2 of the top 3 honours in the trump suit (i.e Ace, King and Queen).

On this hand partner, holding	♠ A K 5 4 2	wishes he had never opened, but bids a dutiful
	♥ 4 3 2	7♠.
	♦ K J 8 5	
	♣ 10 6	Mission accomplished!