

Slam Bidding (Part III)



Splinter Bids

“Not another convention!” a number of you might be crying, but this is a very worthwhile weapon to have in your slam bidding armoury. In fact, at expert level, “splinters” are almost regarded as “natural” bids.

The value of a singleton is obvious to be seen when playing in a suit contract; knowing in which suit that singleton is can help your partner evaluate his hand and often lead to reaching very good slams on minimal values.

So, what is a splinter bid? It is a double-jump response in a new suit after a one-level major-suit bid by *either* responder *or* opener (i.e. 1♥ – 3♠, 1♠ – 4♦, or 1♥ – 1♠ – 4♣).

A splinter bid shows:

1. The strength for game (at least 12 high-card points if it is responder who “splinters”, e.g. 1♥ – 4♣, and at least 15 high-card points if it is the opener who “splinters”, e.g. 1♥ – 1♠ – 4♦)
2. Four-card (or longer) support for partner’s suit
3. Shortage in the bid suit (singleton or void)

In traditional Acol, high-level first-round responses in a new suit were played as

pre-emptive (e.g. in the partnership sequence 1♥ – 3♠, the 3♠ bid showed a weak hand with seven spades), but there is little point to this when your partner has opened the bidding and might have a very good hand. So the double-jump response in a new suit (for example, 1♥ – 4♦) can be used for something else and my suggestion is to use it as a splinter.

Responding to 1♥

West 1
 ♠ A 5 4
 ♥ K J 4 3
 ♦ 4
 ♣ A 8 6 4 3

If partner opens 1♥, make a splinter bid of 4♦, perfectly describing your hand.

Your hand satisfies all three requirements: enough for game (here, 12 HCP), four hearts and a singleton diamond.

This is an extremely descriptive type of bid, and enables your partner to judge whether a slam might be on by assessing his holding in your short suit. We will see this West hand opposite two different East hands later, but first let us consider some situations where a splinter bid might or might not be appropriate.

Consider the following three hands (A – C) responding to a 1♥ opener:

Hand A
 ♠ 4
 ♥ K Q 4 3
 ♦ A J 4
 ♣ A 8 6 4 3

Perfect for a splinter bid – make a double jump to 3♠.

Hand B
 ♠ 4
 ♥ A 9 8 4 3
 ♦ J 6
 ♣ K 8 6 4 3

Too weak for a splinter bid – bid 4♥ as a pre-emptive raise.

Hand C
 ♠ K Q J 10 9 7 4
 ♥ 3
 ♦ J 4
 ♣ 6 4 3

No fit for partner! Respond 1♠ first and then jump in spades later.

Opener’s splinter bid

A splinter bid by opener must be based on more than enough strength for game and at least 15 points. Generally, a jump to the four level in a new suit can be played as a splinter bid:

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

West	East
1♥	1♠
4♣	

You open 1♥ and hear your partner respond 1♠; you have enough strength to game but rather than going straight for game, you should make the much more descriptive bid of 4♣.

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It describes your hand perfectly: four good spades, a singleton club, and more than enough strength for game (at least 15 points, here 16).

Very often, over a raise to 4♠, the 1♠ bidder can be stuck, whereas now he is in a great position: not only can he assess his hand opposite your shortage, but he can make a cue-bid below 4♠ if he wants to try for slam (I will show the responding East hand later).

Responding to a Splinter bid

Take a look at two East hands alongside the West 1 hand shown earlier:

Layout 1

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

West	East
	1♥
4♦	4NT
5♠	6♥
End	

East has a minimum hand in terms of high-card points, but the hand fits beautifully with West's, since West's diamond shortage ensures that the diamond losers can be ruffed. In fact, if West can supply three of the missing four key cards, a slam will be easy, so East uses Key-card Blackwood and West shows three key-cards (including the king of trumps, here the heart king), allowing a great slam to be bid on just 24 HCP.

Layout 2

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

West	East
	1♥
4♦	4♥
End	

By shuffling the suits around to make up the East hand in Layout 2, you can see

that he is not so happy: he has wastage opposite his partner's singleton diamond and his weakness in spades is a warning sign that bidding on would not be good. Hence East goes back to 4♥. On a spade lead you can make only ten tricks.

Assessing your hand

Once your partner has made a splinter bid, how do you know whether you are happy or not? The perfect holding opposite a singleton is a hand with no wasted values, either four small cards as in the East hand in Layout 1 or A-x-x-x:

♦ 4		♦ 9 8 7 6
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♣ 4		♣ A 8 7 6
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By no wastage I mean that in the diamond layout above you have no high-card points and yet you will lose only one trick in the suit; in the club layout you use just 4 points and lose no tricks in the suit. Compare that with the spade and heart layouts below:

♠ 4		♠ K Q J 6
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♥ 6 5 4		♥ A K Q
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In spades you are using 6 points and yet you will still lose one trick; whilst in hearts you will not lose a trick, but you have had to use up 9 points to manage that.

Can you see how, as long as your side has plenty of trumps, a singleton can increase the playing potential of your two hands together? There are admittedly three tricks in the heart layout, but in the club layout you might well be able to make three or four, by winning the ace and ruffing two or three times. This ability to ruff is paramount, hence the need for good trumps.

So how do you know when to bid on?

Count your points excluding the king, queen and jack of partner's short suit; add on for distribution etc. If you reach 15 as opener (or 12 as responder), consider trying for slam either by cue-bidding or using Key-card Blackwood.

Layout 3

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

West	East
	1♠
4♣	4♦
4♥	4NT
5♥	6♠
End	

You open 1♠ as East and West bids 4♣, a splinter, showing shortage in clubs, four-card spade support and at least 12 high-card points. You evaluate your hand; counting the points outside clubs, you have 14 and can add 1 for your five-card suit: that's 15, just about enough to try for slam. With weakness in hearts, you cue-bid 4♦ to show your interest in slam and when partner cue-bids 4♥ you can use Key-card Blackwood and go for the slam.

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Layout 4

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

West	East
	1♠
4♣	4♠
End	

This East hand is very similar to the East in Layout 3, but when evaluating opposite the singleton you must *not* take into account the queen and jack of clubs (they are wasted) and thus your total comes to just 11 high-card points and 1 for length – not enough to try for slam.

The thirty-point pack

You may have come across this expression before and wondered what it meant.

When one suit can be excluded from your calculations, then you can throw out those ten points and play with the other thirty. The splinter bidder has shown 12 or more high card points, so if you have 15 that makes 27 out of 30, which is likely to be enough to avoid losing a trick as long as you have control of each of the suits.

Layout 5

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

West	East
	1♥
3♠	4♣
4♦	4NT
5♥	6♥
End	

In Layout 5, East hears the spade splinter and does his evaluation: 12 high-card points, a singleton and a six-card trump suit – about 16 points. Worth a go; in fact, if partner holds the ace of diamonds and the ace of hearts, a slam has a reasonable chance, but rather than rush out Blackwood you can slow things down by cue-bidding 4♣; if your partner can-

not cue-bid 4♦ or 4♠, then slam has no chance. West is able to cue-bid 4♦ to show his ace of diamonds, and now East uses Blackwood; two key-cards are enough to propel him to slam.

Layout 6 is another example of hand-evaluation:

Layout 6

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

West	East
	1♥
3♠	3NT
End	

A response of 3NT to a splinter suggests that your holding in partner's short suit is very strong and that the hand might play better in no-trumps. East has 18 high-card points, but remember that you must exclude the king, queen and jack of spades – this leaves just 12 points with no distribution at all. The hand is well short of a slam try, but 3NT is an excellent bid and playing Pairs it will get an all-important extra ten points.

In Layout 7, West 2, featured on page 7, is the opener and this time East will have to evaluate as responder:

Layout 7

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

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

When East hears the club splinter he is very happy: his rubbish can be ruffed away. It is important to note that here, since the splinter bid was made by the opener, East is combining his hand with a minimum of 15 HCP outside the trump suit (rather than 12 as in Layouts 1-6), so he needs about 12 total points to

think about slam. With 9 HCP, a six-card suit and a singleton along with his queen in partner's suit, there is certainly reason to be excited. East cue-bids the ace of diamonds and after West has cue-bid the ace of hearts, he uses Key-card Blackwood and goes for 6♠. 25 points might not seem much for a slam, but when these points are spread over just three suits they are enough.

Showing a void

By making a splinter and following with a cue-bid in the same suit, you suggest a void in the suit (or more rarely a singleton ace). Bidding this way does require a good level of partnership trust, because it might sound as though you are showing an eight-card suit rather than a void!

Layout 8

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

West	East
	1♥
4♣	4♥
5♣	5♠
6♥	End

West makes a 4♣ splinter bid, but East, declines the slam for he only has 12 HCP and 1 length-point from his hearts: 13 in all. However, when West bids again, showing first-round control in clubs, East's hand grows in value – with his 13 and partner's minimum 12, they have 25 out of 30 points, from which there is likely to be only one loser. East cue-bids 5♠ just in case his partner has higher ambitions, but West is happy with 6♥.

Conclusion

Splinters are a useful aid to bidding slams. I am often asked: "How might we have got to this or that slam?" and the answer would be: "With a splinter bid." They might look complicated, but the actual mechanics are relatively straightforward – it is the "evaluation" bit that is difficult! I recommend giving them a go as they come up more often than you might think, but must add my usual proviso: only play them if both members of your partnership understand them and want to try them. Good luck! ■