

Summary

To successfully explore whether a slam is possible you need to understand the different slam situations you may face and to correctly apply the different slam bidding conventions to the situation. This paper attempts to cover those situations and tools.

What is a slam and why bother?

We use the term “slam” to refer to a contract of 12 or all 13 tricks. Bidding and making a small slam of 12 tricks (a 6-level bid) earns an additional 500 points if not vulnerable and 1000 if vulnerable. A grand slam of 13 tricks (7-level contract) earns an additional 750 points if not vulnerable and 1500 if vulnerable. *

(*red book page 130 contains an error)



Bidding a NT slam

This usually occurs when both partners hold a balanced hand. For a small slam 33 HCPs are needed and for a grand slam 37HCPs.

You can see that if your partnership has 37 of the available 40 HCPs, the opposition can only have 3HCPs and therefore it is not possible for them to have an ace. Your partnership must have all 4 aces. The opposition therefore cannot lead with an ace and take the first trick.

Identifying a NT slam can simply be a matter of adding the HCPs. For example, if your partner opens the auction by bidding 1NT (showing 12-14HCPs) and you have a hand with 21HCPs your partnership must have at least 33HCPs and at most 35HCPs. You can work out that the partnership have enough HCPs for a small slam but not enough for a grand slam. You would bid ‘stop’ 6NT sign-off bid.

But what if you have 19 or 20HCPs opposite your partner’s 1NT opening? Adding your HCPs to your partner’s you can see that if partner has a maximum hand a small slam is possible but if partner is at minimum you would not have enough HCPs.

Opposite partner’s 1NT or 2NT opening:

*An immediate jump to 4NT or 5NT is quantitative. It is an **invitational** bid.*

Partner will pass if holding a minimum hand.

With a maximum hand partner will bid 6NT or 7NT respectively.

So with 19 or 20HCPs opposite a 1NT opening you bid an invitational ‘stop’ 4NT. Partner will pass with minimum 1NT opening and bid ‘stop’ 6NT if maximum.

Similarly, a 1NT opening followed by partner’s immediate jump to 5NT is also invitational, this time for a grand slam (needing 37HCPs in the partnership).

You have seen that with 33HCPs and balanced hands your partnership should bid a small slam of 6NT. With 33HCPs in your partnership, the opposition have at most 7HCPs. But what if those 7HCPs are the ace and king in the same suit? If that was the case and if the opponent holding those cards was on opening lead then they could (and should!) lead the ace followed by the king and our contract would fail. How do you guard against this?.....see overleaf

Bidding a NT slam (continued)

Well, sometimes it is clear from your own hand that the opposition couldn't have such a holding – perhaps because you have all four of the aces or all four of the kings, or because you are holding three aces and three kings but nowhere is there a suit in your hand that is missing both the ace and the king.

Perhaps a hand like this:



21HCPs

Here you can see it's impossible for the opposition to hold both the ace and the king in the same suit.

But with this hand there is a chance that the opposition hold an ace and king in the same suit:



21HCPs

Here you may want to check that your partner holds the missing ace or king(s). You do this using a convention called "Gerber".

Hands by Gillian Rand

The Gerber convention - 4♣

We use this when partner opens with a NT bid and we immediately decide we want to know how many aces partner has. So 1NT followed by a response of 'stop' 4♣ is responder asking opener how many aces they hold. (Or 2NT – 'stop' 4♣.) After partner's answer, 5♣ is asking about kings.

THIS IS THE ONLY TIME WE USE GERBER –IMMEDIATELY OPPOSITE A 1NT OR 2NT OPENING (including an opening 2♣ followed by 2♦ response and 2NT opener's rebid)

Opposite partner's 1NT or 2NT opening:

4♣ GERBER is used to find out how many aces and then how many kings partner holds....

As a reply to 4♣ gerber:

4♦ = 0 ace or all 4 aces

4♥ = 1 ace,

4♠ = 2 aces

4NT = 3 aces

As a reply to a follow-up 5♣:

5♦ = 0 king or all 4 kings

5♥ = 1 king

5♠ = 2 kings

5NT = 3 kings

NB Other players will use gerber as their only slam bidding tool. We Modern Acoll bidders have 3 different but complimentary ways of investigating whether a slam is possible – gerber, blackwood and "cue-bidding" which for reasons I will explain later, I call control bidding.

Example of bidding using Gerber:

Partner opens 1NT and this is your hand:

You have a balanced hand.

You do not have a 4-card major so you know there is no point in looking for a major suit fit.

You have 19HCPs and therefore your partnership is potentially in the slam zone. (19+14=33 but 19+12=31).



Hand by Gillian Rand

You could bid 'stop' 4NT quantitative invitational raise as we saw earlier BUT you only have one ace. If partner has the other 3, that's 12HCPs swallowed up in just 3 tricks. If they have 3 aces they are not going to have the ♣K or ♦K and any slam would be relying on two finesses – very risky! If they have just one ace, the opposition must have two and you are very unlikely to make a NT small slam of 12 tricks. What you would like is for partner to have two aces and two kings within their 12-14HCPs. (You need to be sure the opposition haven't both the ♦A and ♦K)

You can find out by using Gerber:

| PARTNER | YOU |
|---------|---------|
| 1NT | Stop 4♣ |
| 4♠* | 4NT |
| pass | |

*showing just one ace, therefore the auction ends with you "escaping" into 4NT.

Alternatively:

| PARTNER | YOU |
|---------|-----------------|
| 1NT | Stop 4♣ |
| 4♠* | 5♣ ¹ |
| 5♥* | 5NT |
| pass | |

*showing 2 aces

¹continuing gerber asking about kings

*showing one king. Therefore the auction ends with you "escaping" into 5NT.

Or the "jackpot":

| PARTNER | YOU |
|---------|-----------------|
| 1NT | Stop 4♣ |
| 4♠* | 5♣ ¹ |
| 5♠* | Stop 6NT |
| pass | |

*showing 2 aces

¹continuing gerber asking about kings

*showing two kings. Your partnership is only missing one ace

Partner's "jackpot" hand will be something like this:



Bidding a Slam in a Suit Contract

This handout will now cover what situations indicate that a slam in a suit may be possible and then will go on to look at the blackwood convention and slam control bidding.

What bidding sequences suggest a Suit Slam may be possible?

You are looking for suit agreement and anything that indicates a strong hand opposite a strong hand:

- 16+ HCPs (or equivalent in distribution) opposite an opening bid.
- A strong 2-level opening and a positive response – either as first response or second response.
- Opener's jump shift/reverse/jump rebid opposite a responder's hand that would have opened the bidding.
- Responder's jump bid supporting opener's suit (eg 1♠ - 3♠) when opener has 16+ HCPs
- A 2♠ response to a 1NT opening (2♠ may just be a balanced hand with 11/12HCPs BUT it is also used with a responder's hand of 18+HCPs balanced or unbalanced)

Although 33 HCPs are needed for a NT slam it is possible to bid a slam in a SUIT with fewer HCPs because of the more varied distribution. You "just" need a good chance of making 12 tricks AND you must be confident that the opposition cannot take the first 2 tricks. This latter prerequisite may mean you need to ask your partner about the aces and kings they hold.

The Blackwood convention - 4NT

Gerber, as you have seen, is only used by us immediately opposite a 1NT/2NT opening (or following the sequence 2♣ - 2♦ response - 2NT opener's rebid). The Blackwood convention allows you to ask about partner's aces in other situations and therefore is much more commonly seen at the bridge table.

OTHER THAN opposite partner's 1NT or 2NT opening:

4NT BLACKWOOD is used to find out how many aces and then how many kings partner holds....

As a reply to 4NT blackwood:

5♣ = 0 ace or all 4 aces

5♦ = 1 ace

5♥ = 2 aces,

5♠ = 3 aces

As a reply to a follow-up 5NT:

6♣ = 0 king or all 4 kings

6♦ = 1 king

6♥ = 2 kings

6♠ = 3 kings

Example of bidding using Blackwood:

| <p>Your hand:</p>  <p>18HCPs/10 playing tricks – you could open this hand 2♣</p> <p><i>Hand from page 31 Book Two: Continuing Bridge EBU 2011</i></p> | <p>The bidding:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>YOU</th><th>PARTNER</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Stop 2♥</td><td>2NT*</td></tr> <tr> <td>3♠ (game forcing)</td><td>4♥</td></tr> <tr> <td>4NT[†]</td><td>5♦*</td></tr> <tr> <td>Stop 6♥**</td><td>pass</td></tr> </tbody> </table> <p>*less than 8HCPs, not holding an ace and a king. [†]Blackwood, asking for aces. *showing one ace (could only have one or none, of course, as first response was 2NT) If the bid had been 5♣ denying any aces you could “escape” the slam by bidding 5♥. **bidding the small slam. No point in asking for kings as the initial 2NT response would not be made with an ace and a king – and because an additional king will not help your diamond and club two-losers position.</p> | YOU | PARTNER | Stop 2♥ | 2NT* | 3♠ (game forcing) | 4♥ | 4NT [†] | 5♦* | Stop 6♥** | pass |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|---------|---------|------|-------------------|----|------------------|-----|-----------|------|
| YOU | PARTNER | | | | | | | | | | |
| Stop 2♥ | 2NT* | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3♠ (game forcing) | 4♥ | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4NT [†] | 5♦* | | | | | | | | | | |
| Stop 6♥** | pass | | | | | | | | | | |

But don't think you always have to ask about partner's aces and kings. For example you wouldn't use blackwood if you have a void in a side-suit nor would you use it if you have a side-suit where you could lose the first two tricks (eg Qxx or Jx). An explanation of why not follows and then this paper will tackle how to bid slams in those situations – with control-bidding.

Don't use Blackwood if you have a Void.

Extract from *Bridge with Larry Cohen*

<http://www.larryco.com/BridgeArticles/ArticlePrint.aspx?articleID=63>

1. VOIDS

If you have a void, you should not use Blackwood. For example, Opener holds:

♠ A K J 7 6 4 2
♥ –
♦ K 3 2
♣ K Q 3

You open 1♣ and partner makes a limit raise to 3♣. You expect to be in the slam zone (no, you won't have 31 HCP—but your distribution tells you that slam is a possibility). But, this is not a Blackwood hand. Suppose you bid Blackwood and partner shows 1 ace. Now what? If you jump to 6♣, you could be facing:

♠ Q 10 9 3
♥ A K 4 2
♦ Q 5
♣ 7 4 2

Oops. This is not a good slam—off 2 cashing aces.

But, what if partner's "one-ace" hand were:

♠ Q 10 9 3
♥ K 4 3 2
♦ A 5
♣ J 4 2 ?

Now, slam is laydown. So, Blackwood should not be used with voids. What should you do with a void when interested in slam? Control-bid. More on this to follow towards the end of this article.

Don't use Blackwood if you have a Side-suit potentially offering 2 quick losers

Extract from *Bridge with Larry Cohen*

<http://www.larryco.com/BridgeArticles/ArticlePrint.aspx?articleID=63>

If you have a side suit where you could be off the first two tricks (such as Qxx, or Jx), you shouldn't use Blackwood. For example, Opener holds:

♠ A K J 7 6 4 2
♥ A K Q
♦ 3 2
♣ 3

Again, you open 1♠ and partner makes a limit raise to 3♠. Again you expect to be in the slam zone. This is not a Blackwood hand. Let's suppose you bid Blackwood and partner shows 1 ace. Now what? If you jump to 6♠, you could be facing:

♠ Q 10 9 3
♥ J 3 2
♦ Q 5 4
♣ A Q 5

You are in a slam off the ace-king of diamonds--no good. But, what if partner's "one-ace" hand were:

♠ Q 10 9 3
♥ J 3 2
♦ A K 6 4
♣ 4 2 ?

Now, slam is laydown. So, Blackwood should not be used when you have a suit off two quick losers. Just like with voids, the solution for these non-Blackwood hands lies in cue-bidding.

Slam Control Bidding

The term "cue-bidding" is, unfortunately, used in bridge to mean quite different types of bids. You will hear of "unassuming cue-bids" and "Michael's cue-bid", and "cue-bidding the opposition's suit". All these mean very different things which is not helpful to the novice/improving bidder!

Slam cue-bidding shows in which suits the partnership holds first round controls. For this reason it is sometimes called "control bidding" – a much more helpful term, I think, and one which I will use for the rest of this paper.

As you know, having a first round control means you can win the first trick in that suit either because you have the ace or because you have a void in the suit and would be able to win the trick by trumping.

You use control bidding after explicit trump suit agreement. Both partners must know what the trump suit is. It follows then that there must be two bids on the table of the same suit:

| WEST | EAST |
|------|---------|
| 1♠ | Stop 3♠ |

| WEST | EAST |
|------|------|
| 2♣ | 2♦ |
| 2♥ | 3♥ |

| WEST | EAST |
|------|---------|
| 1♦ | 1♥ |
| 1♠ | Stop 3♥ |
| 4♥ | |

| WEST | EAST |
|---------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♥ |
| Stop 3♥ | |

Once you have suit agreement, particularly if it's a major, there is no need to bid any other suit. We can therefore use the bid of another suit as a control bid – showing an ace or a void in that suit.

| WEST | EAST |
|------|---------|
| 1♠ | Stop 3♠ |
| 4♣* | |

*showing first round control in clubs

| WEST | EAST |
|------|------|
| 2♣ | 2♦ |
| 2♥ | 3♥ |
| 3♠* | |

*showing first round control in spades

| WEST | EAST |
|------|---------|
| 1♦ | 1♥ |
| 1♠ | Stop 3♥ |
| 4♥ | 5♦* |

*we control bid as cheaply as possible so this bid shows first round control in diamonds and also shows that East has no first round controls in spades and clubs.

We don't control bid the trump suit, so a return to the trump suit shows partner has nothing to add to the control bid conversation:

| WEST | EAST |
|---------|------|
| 1♣ | 1♥ |
| Stop 3♥ | 3♠* |
| 4♥* | pass |

*first round control in spades

*return to the trump suit = no first round controls in clubs or diamonds.

| WEST | EAST |
|---------|------|
| 1♥ | 2♣ |
| Stop 3♥ | 4♥ |
| 5♣* | 5♥* |

*first round control in clubs. The bid can't mean anything else – why would you return to clubs after a major suit fit?

*return to the trump suit = no first round control in diamonds or spades

[NB There is another type of bid used after suit agreement called a "trial bid". How do you know whether your partner is using trial bids or control bids? – Well you agree before play which you are using (it might be both!). It's probably worth me saying that I don't use or teach trial bidding as I think it gives too much information to the opposition and is too easily confused with control bidding. So anyone who has been through my course will not use trial bids and will use control bids.]

After bidding first round controls, control bidding can be used again to exchange information regarding second round controls. A second round control is, unsurprisingly, a holding which means that you would be able to win the second round of the suit - a singleton or a king.

| WEST | EAST |
|------|------|
| 2♣ | 2♦ |
| 2♠ | 3♠ |
| 4♣* | 4♠* |
| 5♣** | 5♦** |
| 6♠ | pass |

*first round control in clubs

* back to trump suit – no first round control in diamonds or hearts.

**second round control in clubs (West must have either the ace and king of clubs or a singleton ace.)

Finally, don't feel you always have to move through a slam bidding sequence. Sometimes it is right just to go ahead and bid the slam. Look at these two examples:

Just Bid It, example 1

Partner has opened 1♣ and you have this hand:



From your partner's opening bid you know they have 12 HCPs and 4 cards in clubs. You can see there is no point in looking for a major suit fit as you do not have 4 cards in either major suit. You can also see that a NT contract would be very risky for the same reason – shortage in the major suits.

You know your contract is clubs and as you have a fit in clubs you can add on HCPs for shortage in side suits. Your void in spades gives you an additional 4 HCPs. Therefore, as a partnership you have the equivalent of 31 HCPs (12+15+4).

[NB: As an aside to those of you who know the losing trick count: 7LT in partner's hand, 4 in yours = 11. 18-11=7, suggesting you could just bid 7♣ straight away!]

You also have "first round control" in every suit. This means whichever suit the opposite lead, you will be able to win the trick and take control of the play. So just bid 'stop' 6♣. Don't give the opposition a chance to interfere.

This probably seems like wild advice. I expect you would like to know what is in your partner's hand before deciding whether to bid the slam. Say you did use the blackwood convention and partner's replies told you he has no aces and two kings. Can you see that doesn't take you any further forward? You still don't know whether they are the helpful kings in clubs hearts and/or diamonds, or whether one of them will be in spades and therefore potentially no use to you.

All you can say is that the HCPs and the first round controls indicate that there is a **good chance** the slam will make, and therefore you should bid it. There are rarely any complete certainties!

Just Bid It, example 2

Partner opens 1♦. This is your hand:



Hand from page 35 Book Two: Continuing Bridge EBU 2011

With 17HCPs opposite partner's opening bid you already know you may be in slam territory. You also know that as partner has opened 1 of a suit s/he is promising to rebid if you change suit. You can bid 1♥ knowing partner will bid again. Partner rebids 2NT.

| PARTNER | YOU |
|----------|-----|
| 1♦ | 1♥ |
| Stop 2NT | ? |

The NT rebid by opener shows a balanced hand with either 17 or 18HCPs. You have 17 HCPs. $17+17=34$. $17+18=35$. The partnership have enough for a NT small slam (but not for a grand slam which needs 37HCPs).

With 34 HCPs the opposition can only have 6HCPs. So the opposition cannot be holding two aces, nor can they have an ace and a king. So just bid 6NT.

[Blackwood would not help you here. As you have not shown a trump suit agreement you have no suit to "escape" to should you decide that a slam is not in the cards after all. If you bid 4NTs and don't like partner's reply, what do you do next? You can't pass as partner's bid is not a suit, it's just a count of his/her aces. If you bid 5NT partner will think you're asking how many kings s/he has, and so you will be forced to 6NT anyway. You either bid it or you don't.]

A Final Word

Despite its length, this paper is not an exhaustive coverage of slam bidding. There are other approaches that you may hear of: Key Card Blackwood, Roman Key Card Blackwood, Grand Slam Force, Rolling Gerber, Splinter and Pudding Raises, Kokish Relay and more.

If you would like more information, I recommend starting with Really Easy Modern Acol and, when you're ready, Really Easy Slams from the EBU Really Easy Series ISBN 0-9543685-3-3