

The Philosophy and Implementation of Game Tries

The ability to recognize which deals will yield a makeable game cannot be overemphasized. The traditional “rules” about how many points are needed to make a game (or a slam) are guidelines, but the location of the honor cards and the distribution of the hand are all important.

As an example...

You hold: ♠ A K J 8 4 ♥ 7 5 2 ♦ 7 ♣ A Q 7 4
Partner holds: ♠ Q 7 3 2 ♥ 9 ♦ 9 4 3 ♣ K 8 6 5 3

We would conclude that a spade game should be easy to make, and yet...

You hold: ♠ A K J 8 4 ♥ 7 5 2 ♦ 7 ♣ A Q 7 4
Partner holds: ♠ Q 7 3 2 ♥ 9 4 3 ♦ 9 ♣ K 8 6 5 3

the exact same distribution and the same honor cards, will likely fail as the opponents will probably cash three hearts and a diamond before you can gain the lead.

In both cases, you will open 1♠, partner will raise to 2♠. If you invite partner to game with an investigatory 3♠ bid, upon what basis will partner make that decision? The two responding hands look (and, in fact, are) identical. How can partner make the correct decision?

So we introduce the notion of Game Try bids. There are (at least) three distinctly different methods used to explore the possibility of game on the sequence that begins 1♥-2♥ or 1♠-2♠.

The first of these is the Long Suit Game Try. This is the most traditional approach, other than simply raising the trump suit to the three level. It consists of bidding a second suit (usually 4 cards, but could have different requirements depending upon partnership agreement) and suggests more than a minimum hand. In the case shown above, you would rebid 3♣ to indicate a “second suit” of clubs. As we can see, this information is useful to partner, but is insufficient upon which to make a correct decision much of the time.

The second is the Short Suit Game Try. In this method, opener rebids a suit containing a short suit (void, singleton, or doubleton). This information is more useful to partner when extending an invitation, but as we can see above 1♠-2♠-3♦ doesn't exactly do the job well, either. Few players today use the Short Suit Game Try.

The more common approach today is the Help Suit Game Try. It consists of telling partner the suit in which you need help (usually a suit in which you hold three low cards) in order to have a reasonable chance of making a game. It asks partner to “cover” those losers in one manner or another. Clearly, an Ace or a King-Queen combination is help.

So is a void or a singleton in the Help Suit. Sometimes a doubleton may be help, as well. In the above example, the sequence 1♠-2♠-3♥ tells partner that you have three small heart losers that need to be eliminated. In the example above, this would be the critical information that partner can use to avoid the unmakeable spade game.

Now, a raise to the three-level asks for “help” in the trump suit (asks about the quality of responder’s trumps), and a rebid by opener of 2NT asks about the general high-card strength of responder’s hand.

So, the following sequences are “normal” Help Suit bids:

1♥-2♥-2♠	asks for “help” in the spade suit
1♥-2♥-3♣	asks for “help” in the club suit
1♥-2♥-3♦	asks for “help” in the diamond suit
1♥-2♥-3♥	asks for “help” (good trump honors) in the heart suit
1♥-2♥-2NT	asks if responder is at the top (HCP) for the original raise
1♠-2♠-3♣	asks for “help” in the club suit
1♠-2♠-3♦	asks for “help” in the diamond suit
1♠-2♠-3♥	asks for “help” in the heart suit
1♠-2♠-3♠	asks for “help” (good trump honors) in the spade suit
1♠-2♠-2NT	asks if responder is at the top (HCP) for the original raise

You always decline the invitation by returning to three of the trump suit. You (usually) accept the invitation by bidding four of the trump suit (see the exception explained below).

Should you accept the invitation? If you hold an ace, a king-queen combination, a void, or a singleton in the “help” suit, accept the invitation and bid the game. If you hold a king without the queen or a doubleton, only accept the invitation if you are at the top of your original raise (9-10 points).

If partner asked for help in trumps, accept the invitation if you can limit the trump losers to 2 if partner opened a suit headed by the 9 (for example, accept the invitation with A-Q-x), but decline with Q-10-x, even if you are at the top of your bid otherwise. Partner can’t get around trump losers.

If partner asked for general strength (1♥-2♥-2NT, or 1♠-2♠-2NT), accept the invitation with 9 or 10 points. Accept the invitation if your hand is 8 points containing (at least) one ace. To accept the invitation, bid the game in the trump suit **unless your hand is 4-3-3-3, with only 3 trumps and at least one stopper in the suit in question. In this case you should accept the invitation by bidding 3NT.** This alerts your partner to the fact that your hand will not be ruffing any tricks, and permits partner to choose the 9-trick notrump game if that is more attractive.

Another method employed **by some players** is to offer “partial” help. This is done by bidding a suit below three of the trump suit. An example would be a sequence:

1♠-2♠-3♦-3♥. This response indicates the responder had (i) some help in diamonds, possibly a doubleton or an unguarded king, (ii) not enough help to bid the game directly, (iii) a hand that might be good enough but needs “help” itself in the heart suit. Such a hand might look like:

♠ A 7 3 2 ♥ 9 4 3 ♦ 9 7 ♣ K 8 6 5

Now it is up to opener to decide whether to attempt the game in spades or to sign off at three. This technique should only be used after explicit agreement with your partner.

Occasionally, you will want to use the Help Suit Game Try to explore the possibility of a slam. In those cases, your partner will not know this is the purpose, so using this technique carries a few risks. But it can be a useful first step to determining if there is any sense in exploring beyond game. If partner accepts the Game Try, you may decide to go on. If partner declines the Game Try, you will simply bid game anyway.

There are other, more indirect methods to employ Help Suit Game Tries in which the opener is not forced to reveal the suit in which “help” is needed. A discussion of those methods is not included here.