

Improve your bridge with me



By Migry Zur Campanile

One of the most difficult areas of the game is slam bidding. Usually I can immediately detect the level of players by the way they approach a hand where there is the possibility of a slam. Some of them will be merely guided by the assessment of the total points on their line: if it comes around to a satisfactory total, say at least 30-31 in a suit contract, they will then power through Blackwood and place the final contract according to the reply they receive. The better players have a subtler approach and will try to visualize partner's holding, within the confines of what he has bid, in order to assess the chances of a slam.

One of the great pioneers of bridge in the 1930s, Ely Culbertson, developed the following rule to help his pupils in this tricky area: "Look for a slam if a perfect minimum holding in partner's hand will make it laydown". This rule was published in his "Blue Book" in 1931, only 5 years after contract bridge was developed in its current form by Harold Vanderbilt, and is as good today as it was then.

What does it tell us? That in order to decide whether or not to investigate slam we should try and figure out what is the minimum points that partner can hold and then see if we can construct a hand with these points that makes slam a certainty. In real life we will often find partner with more points but without all of the cards that we need, that might still make slam a good proposition. Some other time he will not even have that and we shall have to stop at the 5 level. The important thing is never to look for a slam which calls for partner to have a maximum and perfect cards,

because this will clearly put us in the real danger of going too high the many times our over-optimistic approach fails us.

After the theory a little practice!

E/W Vulnerable, Dealer South

You hold the following:

♠ 873
♥ 73
♦ AK4
♣ A8753

While opponents pass throughout, your partner opens 1H and after your 2♣ reply he rebids 3H.

What does partner show?

Partner is promising a very good heart suit with a minimum of 6 cards and at least 15-16 points. His bid is forcing and we must now ask ourselves if we should just bid game or rather invite slam.

What do you bid now?

Looking at our hand we should be quite pleased: while we do not have a lot of extras for our 2♣ bid, we do have top cards and those are the best asset we can bring to complement partner's holding. Can we picture a hand with 15 points which makes slam a near certainty? In actual fact there are many: there is an excellent chance of a slam in hearts facing cards like Ax-AKQxxx-Qxxx-x. or even x-AKQxxx-QJxx-Kx and so on.

We should therefore share with partner our mild interest in going beyond game by bidding 4♦ showing our good diamond values but leaving to him the decision to go above 4♥.

Partner replies with 4♠, showing a spade control and willingness to go to slam. There is nothing left for us but to continue with 4NT, Roman KeyCard Blackwood, to which he replies 5♠, showing 2 aces out of five (with the King of trumps being the fifth one) and the Queen of trumps. We close the bidding with 6♥.

Here is a recap of the bidding:

West	North	East	South
			1♥
Pass	2♣	Pass	3♥
Pass	4♦	Pass	4♠
Pass	4NT	Pass	5♠
Pass	6♥	All Pass	

Now let us move over to the declarer seat. West leads the ♠K and this is what we see:

♠ 873
♥ 73
♦ AK4
♣ A8753

W N E
S

♠ AQJ
♥ AQJ1098
♦ Q108
♣ 9

How many losers do we have?

We have two potential losers: one in hearts and one in spades. It looks like the contract will depend on one of two finesses working for us, which makes the slam a good 75% bet. Most players will simply take the ♣A and start finessing the hearts and then continue with the spade finesse.

Can you see anything wrong with that?

When we have such a deceptively simple hand it is a good idea to give it a second look to see if there is anything that might make us stumble. Here we can see that our entries to dummy are not that many: all that is left are the two top diamonds. If both finesses are off then there is nothing we can do but if at least one of them is on it is absolutely crucial to plan the play in order to allow us to use our entries to dummy wisely and if possible to cater for bad splits.

How do you plan the play?

The correct line is to immediately take a spade finesse. If this holds, we go back to dummy with a top diamond to take another spade finesse and then use our last entry to finesse in hearts: now we make 12 tricks whatever the position of the ♥K and we shall make 13 if we find ♥K doubleton onside. If we lose the spade finesse, we still have the chance to finesse in hearts and win whenever the ♥K is onside and hearts are not 4-1.

You may well say: "But I always thought that it is better to take out trumps, why not finesse in hearts first?"

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