

SIMPLE SLAM BIDDING AND PLAY

With Simon and Vera Simple

Chapter 1

Slams can be fun, or they can be frustrating. Frustrating when you have difficulty in bidding the laydown ones, or keep bidding those that don't have any realistic chance of making. Frustrating also when your opponents stumble into a slam which has seemingly no chance yet somehow makes when every one-way finesse works and declarer guesses each two way one.

By and large, slam bidding is quite inadequate at MOST levels of play. This book is dedicated to the slam aficionados who want to not only take a vicarious delight in reading about other people's successes and failures with them, but want to improve their own slam bidding, the SIMPLE way.

We find that there are two main reasons why slam bidding is so inadequate. The first is that people do not realise that there is only ONE of the partnership that ever has enough information available to make the crucial decision of whether to bid a slam or not. All too often it is the WRONG partner who decides to do so, and who decides which denomination the slam is to be played in. The other partner may SUGGEST that a slam may be in the offing, but ultimately it is ONE partner's decision. Take a very simple example. One of the partnership opens 2NT which shows 20-22 HCP and a balanced hand. WHO is responsible for bidding any slams? Of course it is the PARTNER of the 2NT opener, because the OPENER has absolutely NO information to suggest that GAME is on, much less a slam. Their partner, on the other hand, KNOWS that there is a balanced 20 to 22 count opposite. They can see THEIR OWN hand and immediately work out the possibilities: whether to PASS and play there, whether to remove to a three level heart or spade contract (if that is POSSIBLE in their system) or whether to bid game in 3NT or look for game in a major. OR whether to look for a slam or just go ahead and bid one. The OPENER can do nothing other than to SUGGEST, given the chance, that they MIGHT have a hand suitable for slam if that is what partner is interested in. Just how to do that, we'll see later.

The other reason that slam bidding is inadequate is that most people, including some quite GOOD players, seem to be limited in what conventions and gadgets they use to ask partner about things which may be relevant to their decision to bid a slam. In fact I know a LOT of above average pairs whose only slam bidding 'tool' is GERBER. 4C asks for aces, 5C then asks for kings. That's it! Nothing else! No wonder it's either 6NT or nothing!

This series of analyses of slam hands, from ALL grades, will hopefully show our reader how THEY can improve their slam bidding the SIMPLE way. WITHOUT any fancy relay systems, confusing ace and trump asking bids, control requirements, and all that nonsense. And for those who are INTO that sort of 'nonsense', we will also include chapters which will help them make use of a number of the more complex ace and control seeking and finding bids if they genuinely believe that they will improve their slam bidding as a result!

The following hands are taken in chronological order rather than chosen to illustrate any particular points about slam bidding. That is because most slams in fact are not at all difficult to bid properly given even the most basic system of bidding, aided by the use of common sense and logic. The more difficult slams can be bid with a little more sophistication, and some indeed are only biddable by a good partnership which employs bidding tools and strategies that the mere mortal is unable to assimilate in their repertoire. But as you will see when the slams are reviewed, such slams are few and far between and make little difference to a good match point or even teams result in the long term, and are more of academic interest than anything else. What is of interest to the more serious reader is the WAY that partnerships should be able to diagnose slam possibilities and bid good slams with more confidence, and avoid bad ones.

There are a handful of themes which keep recurring in slams, and by being aware of these you will be able to judge your slam bidding more easily. Before reviewing the slams, let's have a look at these basic themes as WE see them, and add one or two SIMPLE things that make slam bidding easier.

Firstly, the DECISION making process. As earlier stated, it is only ONE of the partnership who should be responsible for making the decision to bid a slam. There ARE times when the decision will be overruled by partner but only in cooperation with the instigator, and that is when the partner of the one in charge knows something the 'general' does not. Which brings up the point of who is the decision maker or 'general'. Most of the time that is a simple question to answer: the person who knows MORE about partner's hand than partner does about theirs! Take the earlier example of the 2NT opening. The partner who has opened 2NT has already shown responder a very specific hand. But they know NOTHING about partner's. If partner forces to game, that is ALL the 2NT opener knows, and they should bid according to responder's instructions. Responder may force to game by bidding a suit which opener has wonderful support in. That is STILL no excuse for opener to race off and go asking for aces or even just bid a slam if they have all four aces. Forcing to GAME is one thing, looking for slam is another. The BEST that opener can do is to SUGGEST that, should responder be interested in a slam, they DO have the best possible hand for it. Yes, to SUGGEST but not to take charge. You see, they can NEVER know enough about the responding hand. The same applies in the case of a 1NT opener. THIS partner can never go asking for aces and decide to bid a slam, it is over to responder to do that, but opener can HELP at times by defining their hand even further, as long as it can not cost to do so. Unless there is a specific understanding that certain sequences are instigated by responder because THEY are looking for a slam, then all game forcing sequences should be treated as such, and NOT slam invitations! The same with part score sign offs. If responder wishes to sign off in a low level contract, opener should NOT be able to dictate to responder that they go on to game. They CAN, however, take the risk of suggesting to responder that they may like to go further than they were expecting to go because opener has the best possible hand in support. Let's look at some examples and we'll see just what we mean.

Here is a 2NT opening bid:

♠ A Q 7 3
♥ A 7 2
♦ K Q J 9
♣ A Q

You open 2NT (20-22 balanced) and partner bids 3S, the normal forcing to game bid with a 5 card spade suit. With all YOUR spade support and great maximum hand, surely you should go asking for aces and then kings and at worst end up in Five Spades which should be a make? So, 4C! WRONG, if what you're doing is asking for aces. WHY? Because partner has the following hand:

♠ J 9 6 4 2
♥ Q 10 8
♦ 8 5 4
♣ J 2

Yes, even FOUR Spades may go down, and what chance have you got of making five unless things are very favourable. And YES, partner SHOULD bid to game with that hand AND look for game in SPADES not just blindly bid 3NT.

But then, partner might have

♠ K 9 6 4 2
♥ K 10 8
♦ 10 8
♣ K 8 2

NORMALLY that is not enough to think about a slam opposite a balanced 20-22, is it, yet that slam, even in No Trumps, is stone cold. Now if OPENER doesn't make a move, responder certainly won't!

Now look at a 1NT opener and a similar situation:

The 1NT opener is

♠ A 10 9 2
♥ A 7 2
♦ K Q J 3
♣ 9 2

and after a 1NT opening, partner bids 2S: TO PLAY. You have your instructions, or DO YOU? Let's have a look when responder has a very similar hand to the one we gave them opposite the 2NT opener:

♠ K 9 6 4 2
♥ K 10 8
♦ 10 8
♣ K 8 2

There is an EXCELLENT play for 4S. The spades may fall 2-2 or the ace of clubs may be 'on side', or opponents may not find the club switch in time. Yet your conservative nature will have you playing the hand in 2S. Look at the opener's hand. Surely this is a case of when you DISOBEY instructions and, instead of passing 2S you RAISE partner to THREE. A known NINE card fit, a MAXIMUM with such good controls, a great four card diamond suit on the side, all those factors make your hand much BETTER than even your 'maximum' fourteen count. What are the chances that opposite a REAL load of rubbish partner won't be able to make THREE, and if encouraged to bid game, that they will have NO chance of making it if they do?

With the above hand in response to the opening bid and 'unauthorised' raise to 3S, it is still doubtful that responder SHOULD go to game, and much depends on the form of the game. At TEAMS, the answer would be YES, at MATCH POINTS, NO. The same should apply if you're playing TRANSFERS. You open 1NT and partner makes the transfer bid of 2H. You are asked to bid 2S, but with THAT opening hand, you disobey the instruction and bid THREE Spades instead. Not only are you flying high but you'll also have to play the hand, so better make sure you DO have your full values to disobey. Such an unasked for jump in a transfer system is known as a 'SUPER ACCEPT' and can help in slam bidding when that was possibly on responder's mind in the first place. But what difference is there in a 'NORMAL' system when 2S is simply 'to play' and 3S forces to game? The 'Normal' system may even be better for slam bidding purposes if you can employ the use of cue bids to SUGGEST such great supporting hands without risking going any higher than game if that was all that partner was interested in in the first place.

Let's go back to the opening 1NT hand and look at the situation where responder has bid THREE Spades, forcing to game and showing a five card spade suit, asking to be raised to game in spades with three or four card support, or 3NT if not. Let's look at your hand again:

♠ A 10 9 2
♥ A 7 2
♦ K Q J 3
♣ 9 2

You open 1NT, partner forces with 3S and you are delighted to raise to 4S. RIGHT? What is partner going to do holding e.g.

♠ K 8 7 6 3
♥ K Q 8
♦ A 9
♣ A 10 3

Partner was going to game without any serious thoughts about slam at all. A 16 count opposite a maximum 14 count means all that should make is game, yet what are the chances of SIX SPADES making? If trumps are 2-2 you make SEVEN. If trumps are 3-1 the opponents need to: a. find a club lead and b. be able to ruff the THIRD diamond in order for 6S NOT to make. Another slam missed because the POINT count tells you not to bid it! But what can opener DO to tell partner?

The answer is SIMPLE: opener can bid 4H over the 3S bid! NO, that would NOT mean that opener opened with a five card heart suit. What that means is: "I have a GREAT hand in support of spades, a great fit and a maximum hand with the ace of hearts (but not the ace of clubs or diamonds). If you're interested in slam, over to you!" You see, opener has been able to tell partner something which MIGHT be of immense value to them WITHOUT going past the contract they were headed for in the first place. Now look at the responding hand. Doesn't it suddenly become HUGE as well? Worth a TRY, so responder bids 5C, another CUE bid to say: yes, I too am interested. Opener now bids 5D which shows the KING since they DENIED the ace of clubs or diamonds by bidding 4H. Music to responder's ears and he continues the probing with a bid of 5H. Opener can now see the value of the queen and jack of diamonds and bids 6S.

Change the hearts and clubs in both hands and the bidding is little different, this time opener cue bidding 4C, which you can see is NOT Gerber, because we have decided that opener has no business to ask for aces, haven't we. Over 4C, responder bids 4D but over opener's 4S 'sign off' it is responder who knows that opener can't bid the ace of hearts which RESPONDER has. Responder therefore makes a further try with 5C and opener can now say "yes, let's go", by bidding 5H!

Finally note that during all this cue bidding, OPENER has not gone any higher than they were authorised to do having opened 1NT. RESPONDER is in charge and can go as far as they wish. Now add just one more high card to the responding hand and change the EIGHT of spades into the QUEEN:

Let's look at both hands together again:

Opener	Responder
♠ A 10 9 2	♠ K Q 7 6 3
♥ A 7 2	♥ K Q 8
♦ K Q J 3	♦ A 9
♣ 9 2	♣ A 10 3

This time responder has serious slam interests but still bids 3S to see what opener does. If opener raises to 4S responder will probably have a shot at slam but without any certainty. But when opener bids 4H and over responder's 5C bids 5D, responder can be sure that 6S is an EXCELLENT slam. It is the RESPONDER who once again sees the true value of THEIR holding rather than the opener, who has merely suggested in the first place and then shown something else along the way to a higher spade contract. But when responder bids 5H and OPENER now bids 6S, responder can bid SEVEN because RESPONDER knows ONE thing which opener does not. THAT is that they not only hold the queen of hearts, but the queen of spades as well, without EITHER of which responder would have settled for a SMALL slam.

This is another logical extension of bidding which can help immensely. If YOU hold a card or cards which partner cannot possibly know about, your hand is worth the extra trick that the card contributes. Thus, responder can place opener with four spades to the ace, the ace of hearts, the king of diamonds (a total of 11 HCP so far) PLUS enough to bid to 6S WITHOUT knowing that responder has any more in the trump suit than king or queen to five. THAT means that the queen of trumps and queen of hearts MUST be enough to bid to the GRAND slam. Nothing too scientific about any of that, just logical bidding and inference aided by the art of SIMPLE cue bidding!

The following hands will illustrate how slam bidding can be made much easier by use of CUE bids and the principle that ONE hand has to take charge and the OTHER has to play a secondary, 'assisting' role in the decision making process.

We will also introduce a number of other tools which can help slam bidding, and these you can take or leave. We ourselves are not overly concerned with them, but by all means, use them if you feel they will help. We will look at a number of hands which are NOT cut and dried, whether slam is reached or not, and look at the difficult area of when BOTH sides are in slam territory and how to sacrifice against slams and when not to, and how to know whether to 'bid one more'. We will also look at the area of defending against both freely bid slams and those bid in intense competition. All these things will come out during the course of the review of the slam hands, and will be interspersed with some aspects of bidding or play as they arise.

We hope that by the time you finish reading through this collection of hands, you will be a confident handler of all that the cards can throw at you in the slam area.