

What's Standard?

by David Lindop

This series is based on *Grant Standard*, a set of conventions and agreements that are in popular use today, such as 15-17 1NT openings, five-card majors, and weak two-bids. A summary chart of *Grant Standard* and the corresponding convention card can be found at www.AudreyGrant.com. The site also has *Grant Basic*, a simpler set of agreements.

Earlier articles in this series appeared in the *Bridge Bulletin* and can also be found under 'Articles' at www.AudreyGrant.com.

Slam bidding is an important aspect of the partnership methods since there are lots of points at stake. The conventional agreements in *Grant Standard* are quite straightforward: Blackwood after a suit has been agreed; Gerber after a natural 1NT or 2NT bid.

However, there is a lot more to successful slam bidding than the basic agreements. To consider bidding a slam, there are three fundamental requirements:

1. Combined Strength
2. Trump (or Notrump) Agreement
3. Controls

Let's take a look at each in turn.

1. Combined Strength

The guideline is that **the partnership needs about 33 or more combined points for small slam and 37 or more for a grand slam**. One partner must be in a position to add up the combined strength and determine that the partnership is in the "slam zone." This is most straightforward when both hands are balanced:

WEST		EAST	
♠ K 10 6		♠ A J 5	
♥ K 7 6 4		♥ A Q J	
♦ K J 3		♦ Q 10 7 5	
♣ K Q 5		♣ A 7 3	
WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1NT	Pass	6NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

Slam Bidding — Part I

West opens 1NT showing 15-17 points and a balanced hand. With 18 high-card points, East knows the partnership has at least 33 combined points (15 + 18) and at most 35 (17 + 18). There is enough combined strength for a small slam but not enough for a grand slam.

East knows the partnership belongs in notrump and there's no need to ask for aces. If West has no aces, East would still take the partnership to 6NT. If East has one ace—and even all four of the missing kings—West would still settle for 6NT. The partnership will be missing some queens and jacks, making grand slam unlikely. So East can simply bid 6NT.

This is *quantitative* bidding. East is bidding the slam purely on combined strength. There is no guarantee that the partnership has twelve tricks, only an expectation that slam should have a reasonable chance. On these combined hands, the slam would make easily. There are nine top winners: two spades, four hearts, and three clubs. Three more tricks can be promoted in the diamond suit.

Suppose we make a small change to the West hand:

WEST	EAST
♠ K 10 6	♠ A J 5
♥ K 7 6 4	♥ A Q J
♦ K 5 3	♦ Q 10 7 5
♣ K Q J	♣ A 7 3

There are still nine top tricks, but finding three more won't be so easy. We'll be looking around for the ♠Q and the ♦J. We may make slam or go down one or two tricks. Still, slam is at least reasonable. It could be worse:

WEST	EAST
♠ K Q 10	♠ A J 5
♥ K 7 6 4	♥ A Q J
♦ J 5 3	♦ Q 10 7 5
♣ K Q J	♣ A 7 3

Now slam has no chance, despite the 33 combined high-card points. However, it would take very sophisticated methods to keep out of slam with these combined hands. We would have lots of company in 6NT.

We can invite slam on a purely quantitative basis:

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

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2NT	Pass	4NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

West's 2NT shows 20-21 points. East has 12 high-card points, so the partnership could have 33 if opener has a maximum (21 + 12) but not if opener is a minimum. East can make an invitational—quantitative—raise to 4NT. This is not Blackwood since no trump suit has been agreed. It is similar to a raise of 1NT to 2NT, inviting game. With a minimum, West passes the invitation and the partnership stays out of the poor slam. Even ten tricks are no certainty on these combined hands.

Determining combined strength is more challenging when the hands are unbalanced. Distributional points for length and shortness can play an important role, and the location of the high cards may be critical. Still, we can occasionally bid slam on strength alone:

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

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♠	Pass	6♠	All Pass

East has 20 points—18 high-card points plus 2 length points for the six-card suit. Once West opens the bidding, East knows the partnership is in the slam zone. When West raises to 2♠, showing support and a minimum opening, East knows where the partnership belongs and that there are unlikely to be enough combined points for a grand slam. East settles for a small slam. East could fish around for a while, making forcing bids to try to find out if West has exactly the right cards for a grand slam, but the straightforward approach—**bid what you think you can make**—often works best.

2. Trump Suit Agreement

We sometimes know we are in the slam zone but don't know WHERE the contract should be played. Before launching into slam, we must first find a suitable trump fit... or determine we belong in notrump.

Suppose our partner ♠ A Q 7 5 2 opens 1♥ and we ♥ K 3 hold this hand. We ♦ A J 6 4 have 19 high-card ♣ K Q points plus 1 length point for the five-card suit, a total of 20. Since partner has at least 13, we are likely destined for at least a small slam. It would be premature, however, to use the Blackwood convention, asking for aces. Partner might show one or two, but we wouldn't know which slam to bid. Also, the 1♥ bid covers a wide range of strength. We might belong in a small slam or a grand slam.

So, we start with a simple response of 1♠. It is not a good idea to make a strong jump shift on a complex hand like this. We want to leave lots of room to find a suitable fit. The 1♠ response is forcing.

Partner might raise to 2♠. We've found a fit and can now go into our slam bidding conventions. Partner has also limited the strength of the hand, so we have a better idea that we belong in small slam rather than grand slam. Alternatively, partner might rebid 3♥, showing a six-card suit and about 17-18 points. Now we can go looking for a grand slam in hearts. So, it's "fit first."

3. Controls

Even when we have the combined strength for slam and have found a fit, there is a third consideration.

Suppose partner ♠ K Q 7 5 opens 1♠ and we ♥ K Q J 10 4 have this hand. We ♦ 5 know we have a fit ♣ A K J in spades and our hand is worth 22 points in support: 19 high-card points plus 3 dummy points for the singleton diamond. Still, it wouldn't be a good idea to simply jump to 6♠. These might be the combined hands:

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

West has a sound opening bid but the opponents can take the first two tricks with the ♥A and ♦A.

Notice that we have the strength to take twelve tricks. We have six sure tricks in spades and three in clubs and can promote at least three winners in hearts and two in diamonds. It's just that the defenders get two tricks before we get twelve.

Let's give West a weaker hand:

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

West has 2 fewer points, but 6♠ is an excellent contract. We will lose only a heart trick.

So, we come to the third key to slam bidding, **controls**. We use the term "controls" rather than aces and kings because, in a suit contract, voids and singletons can have the same effect as aces and kings. An ace or a void is a **first round control** since it allows us to win the first round of the suit. A king or a singleton is a **second round control** since it gives us the opportunity to win the second round of the suit.

For a small slam, we need at least first round control in three suits and second round control in the fourth suit. For a grand slam, we must have first round control of all four suits.

Blackwood

This is where a convention such as Blackwood comes into play. It isn't designed to get us to good slams but to keep us out of bad slams, when we are missing too many aces and kings.

When we have found a suitable trump fit, a bid of 4NT asks how many aces partner holds. Partner responds as follows:

RESPONDING TO BLACKWOOD (4NT)	
5♣	0 or 4 aces
5♦	1 ace
5♥	2 aces
5♠	3 aces

The 5♣ response serves a dual role but, in practice, there should be no ambiguity. There is a 16 point difference between 0 and 4 aces. It leaves 5NT available to ask about kings if the partnership has all the aces and is interested in a grand slam.

Let's see how Blackwood can help on the previous hands.

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

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♦	Pass	5♠	All Pass

East's immediate jump to 4NT implies that spades are agreed as the trump suit and asks about aces. West's 5♦ response shows one and East signs off in 5♠ knowing the partnership is missing two aces. West respects East's decision.

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

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♥	Pass	6♠	All Pass

This time, West's response of 5♥ shows two aces. Missing only one ace, East confidently bids the slam.

In the next issue we'll delve further into slam bidding