

The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders (December 2005)

4. They base bidding decisions on the principle of “game before slam”. (Part 2)

In the last issue, we looked at the benefits of using the “game before slam” principle to sort out the meanings of three-level bids. This advice suggests that if a bid could be interpreted as either a slam try or an attempt to find the right game, the “looking for game” meaning should take precedence.

This guideline can also apply at higher levels. A simple example:

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
3C	DBL	Pass	4C

Partner isn't promising slam-try strength. His cuebid is merely a search for the best game, and he may be stretching. Unless you hold a monster, you should settle for bidding four of your longer major.

With some cuebids, partner already knows what the right game is, but is giving you extra information on the way:

You	LHO	Partner
1S	3H	4H

Partner's cuebid shows a high-card raise to 4S as opposed to a weaker, distributional raise. For the time being, it's a “game only” bid -- it doesn't guarantee a heart control and it doesn't ask for a return cuebid. If the opponents bid on, your knowledge of partner's strength will clarify which side is sacrificing and may help you make a five-level decision.

The game-before-slam principle can be useful even at the five-level:

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
1D	Pass	1H	3S
Pass	4S	5C	Pass

A new suit by responder is usually forcing, but when you've been preempted, it's important to avoid being stampeded into a contract you wouldn't have chosen without the interference. If eleven tricks is the limit of the hand, you need a way to stop there, so the game-before-slam rule should apply here. Partner's 5C is natural, showing at least 5-5 in his suits, and non-forcing.

A frequent dilemma is how to interpret an ambiguous rebid of four of a major:

You	Partner
1H	2D
4C	4H

Your 4C was a splinter, showing club shortness and diamond support. What's your rebid with ♠AQJ ♥KQ865 ♦KJ108 ♣5 ?

If you believe this auction absolutely sets diamonds as trumps, partner's 4H is a cuebid for a diamond slam. Your next move would be a 4S cuebid or Blackwood. However, the game-before-slam guideline suggests that 4H is natural, showing a minimum with three-card support. How else would partner bid a hand like

♠K6 ♥1043 ♦AQ962 ♣KJ3 ?

If partner really wants to move toward a diamond slam, he won't risk a 4H “cuebid”. He knows you'll be thinking game-before-slam, too, so he'll find another way to clarify his intentions.

Many pairs solve these four-level problems with a default agreement based on the game-before-slam idea. Their when-in-doubt rule is:

A game bid in a major suit previously bid by either partner is an offer to play there.

This agreement can be especially helpful in longer auctions. For example:

You	Partner
1D	1S
2H	3D
3S	4H

After your reverse, partner's 3D promised support and game strength (at least 8 points). Does that mean you're in a cuebidding sequence for a diamond slam? A spade slam? Or are you still searching for the right game?

As is often the case when your agreed fit is a minor, other games are still in the picture here, so every bid in this auction should be a natural search for the best game. Your 3S showed three-card support for partner's major, and his 4H showed three-card support for yours.

The “offer to play there” agreement tells you partner intends 4H as non-forcing. He probably holds a minimum with weak spades and good hearts:

♠A632 ♥KJ8 ♦1082 ♣J63

If your hand is ♠J85 ♥AQ107 ♦AKQJ9 ♣2, then 4H is the best (and last) making contract. Without the game-before-slam guideline, your auction would probably hurtle to at least the five-level.