

# The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders (January 2006)

## 4. They base bidding decisions on the principle of “game before slam.” (Part 3)

Among experts, “game before slam” is an almost universally accepted maxim. It’s based on the idea that when your auction is at or below game level, investigating game contracts should take priority over searching for slam.

In practice, that means that an ambiguous bid should be treated as a natural suggestion of a trump suit or an attempt to find the best game, rather than as a cuebid for slam. This is valuable advice, but like most bridge “rules”, there are exceptions.

You may need to discuss some exceptions in advance. For others, you can rely on broader default agreements to decide when the game-before-slam meaning should be “off”. Here are some guidelines that can be used to interpret these “slam-before-game” situations:

Partner	You
1D	1H
3D	4D

**“You can’t invite the inviter.”** In an uncontested auction, a below-game raise of an invitational bid should be forcing, so your 4D is a search for slam, not game. Partner has already shown invitational values, and there’s little to be gained by playing your raise as a vague “re-invite”. If you have a slam-going hand, you need the low-level raise to set the trump suit and leave room for cuebidding or Blackwood.

Partner	You
1S	3S (limit raise)
3NT	

**“If we have 9 cards in a major, it’s trumps.”** After a forcing or limit raise, it will be a rare deal where 3NT plays better than your major. Partner’s 3NT is best played as a slam try, not a choice of games. Some pairs play 3NT asks for a control cuebid; others play it asks for a singleton.

Partner	You
4H	4S

**“No new trump suits at the four-level”.** This catchall default applies if you’ve already bid and raised a major *or* if one of you has shown a major that needs little or no support. Here, partner has announced “hearts are trumps”, so there’s no point in searching for a better strain. Even though you’re still at game level, 4S should be a move towards a heart slam. In standard, it would show the spade ace or void and ask for a return cuebid. A more valuable treatment, though, is to use a new-suit bid to pinpoint the suit where you *need* a control (first or second round).

Partner	You
1H	1NT (forcing NT)
3H	4C

The same guideline can apply here, even though partner isn’t insisting on his suit. Since opener’s suit will end up as trumps in the majority of these auctions -- and you could have as many as 11 points for a forcing 1NT – many pairs prefer to play the new suit as an advance cuebid. It shows a maximum with a club control and interest in a heart slam. If you happen to have the weak hand with 8 clubs, you’ll have to pass or jump to 5C.

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

This is a tougher problem because there’s a good case for playing partner’s 4H as natural and not forcing. That agreement would give you a choice of games and could help you make a 5-level decision if the opponents compete further.

If you haven’t discussed this in advance, though, you’ll have to rely on your “no-new-trump-suits” default, which suggests that 4H is forcing. It could also be natural, or it could be a control or “last train” cuebid for spade slam. If you apply another common default – “If it could be natural, it is” – your best guess might be that partner has a slam-try hand that’s 5-5 in the majors.

Partner knows your default agreements, too, so he should have a good idea of how you’ll interpret his bid. He won’t bid 4H here unless he can handle an advance from you.

Remember that the purpose of default agreements is not to provide the perfect solution to every bidding dilemma. They’re designed only to help you handle undiscussed bids and avoid major misunderstandings. All of these broad guidelines have possible exceptions, and those are good topics for partnership discussion.