

Learning Points – GNT Bid a Thin Slam You Better Make It

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W Deals

♠ Q1073

None Vul

♥ 105

♦ K9

Mike

♣ K8743

Steve

♠ AKJ2

N

♠ 54

♥ AQ6

W 8 E

♥ KJ842

♦ Q103

S

♦ A8764

♣ A96

♣ 5

♠ 986

♥ 973

♦ J52

♣ QJ102

Deep Finesse:

EW: 1♣, 4♠,

4N, 6♦, 6♥

Saturday Afternoon July 18, 2008. Grand National Teams Flight B Semi-Final Round. Special thanks to my District 11 teammates: Mike Purcell, Lorna Davis, Arun Goyal, Arachna Goyal and Vijay Vasudevan. The semifinals had us in different rooms. Only Flight A and the Championship Flight use table screens. However we all use hand records, and different hands are played in each flight to avoid possible unauthorized information.

No doubt practice helps hone bridge skills. Stay away from the game too long and mental sharpness gives way to fuzzy thinking. Since we can't all play as much as we want, internet games, computer software and favorite bridge books can all help keep the finer points of the game fresh and our mind table-ready.

West	North	East	South
1♣ ¹	Pass	1♥ ²	Pass
1N ³	Pass	2♦ ⁴	Pass
2♥ ⁵	Pass	3♦ ⁶	Pass
3♠ ⁷	Pass	4♣ ⁸	Pass
4♠ ⁹	Pass	4N	Pass
5♦ ¹⁰	Pass	6♥	Pass Out

South leads ♣ Q

1 = 16+ HCP (18+ if balanced)

2 = 5+♥ 8+ HCP GF if fit found or NT.

3 = Implies 18+ Bal. Asks A/K Controls.

Could be unbalanced hand with 3 ♥s.

4 = 3 Controls (KKK or AK)

5 = Game Force. Slam interest. 20+ HCP

6 = Cue bid. Slam interest.

7 = Cue bid. Slam interest.

8 = Cue bid. Slam interest. 2nd round control

9 = 2nd round control too

10 = 4 Key Cards (*can't be 0 on this auction*)

A small slam is likely with 10 controls whenever opponents cannot take 2 tricks on the opening lead.

Likewise a grand slam can be made with only 11 controls all else right.

Low level cue bidding helps identify any unstopped suits. If we can show at least 2nd round control of all suits, we can confirm not missing 2 aces and bidding a slam is straight forward. West was content to show a very strong hand in support of ♥ by simply bidding 2♥ (Principle of Fast Arrival – lowest bid is strongest in forcing situations). East's 3♦ showed 1st round control and denies 1st round control of ♣. West's 3♠ cuebid showed 1st round control.

East then cue bid the 2nd round control in ♣, valuing the 55 holding in the red suits as 10 likely tricks opposite partner's fillers. West's 4♠ cuebid said we appear to have enough to check for slam. East tried RKC and found no missing key cards. Since the agreed strain is ♥ we could not ask conveniently for the trump queen. West easily bid the small slam, trusting that if partner held the ♥Q and ♦KQ, s/he would bid on to 7NT on their own. 7NT often depends on owning all the working Queens.

Yes, another 28 HCP slam that opponents might not reach at the other table. There is a suspicious theme in these GNT slams....

Here's a Slam hand that proved to depend on a 50-50 guess. If you are a good guesser, you'll want to declare. If not then defending will get your side a good result at least half the time. Beware the trap....

The Bidding

Mike and I play Precision. West's 1♣ opening was 16+ HCP (18+ with a balanced hand). East's 1♥ response was natural 8+ HCP, and game forcing in NT or if a fit is found. West's 1NT implied 18-20 HCP in a balanced hand, and asked East for the number of controls (A=2 and K=1). West could have a 3 card ♥ raise on a hand with a singleton or void and bid 1NT too. East's 2♦ reply showed exactly 3 controls, either the 3 missing Kings or an A and a K. West knew we should be in slam. How? There are 12 control points in the deck:

$$4 \text{ Aces } (4 \times 2) + 4 \text{ Kings } (4 \times 1) = 12.$$

The Play

South's opening lead appeared unthreatening. Declarer could count 9 tricks off the top and had a 50/50 chance to establish 4 tricks in ♦. It looked important to get 2♣ ruffs and a ♠ ruff in hand, so pulling trumps had to wait. ← *Do you see the error?*

Declarer won the ♣A and immediately ruffed a ♣. A small spade to the ♠A and another ♣ ruff was followed by a small spade to the ♠K and a spade ruff. If declarer draws trump now, diamonds would have to be led from the board first. This seemed like too great a risk. Instead declarer led a small ♦ to the ♦Q losing to the ♦K. North switched back to ♣, shortening Dummy to 2 trumps. In the end, Declarer lost 2♦, a trump and a ♣. Down 3. 6♥ down 3 lost 15 IMPS, as our opponents played correctly and scored the makeable slam.

Post Mortem

Declarer fell victim to fuzzy thinking that often comes from seeing too many options and trying to keep them all open for no real benefit. Ruffing ♣ and spades in hand was a red herring distraction to the simple plan that would have worked.

Go back to the plan - 9 tricks off the top with 4 more from ♦. If declarer stops and realizes that the ♦ play has to happen sooner or later, then playing ♦ immediately will avoid the self-inflicted trump shortening trap. Here, ruffing ♣ too early allowed the defense to shorten trumps and promote the setting trump winner. Extra undertricks came as the hand fell apart.

Declarer erred by ruffing ♣ at trick 2. Declarer did not need the ruff from the long trump holding. (*Think about it – ruffing from the long holding never adds an extra trick. Ruffing from the short holding adds tricks*). Instead the right decision was to play ♦ for 4 tricks without losing a ♦ ruff.

The play in ♦ is almost straightforward when done early. Absent information from bidding or the lead, playing from East's hand toward the dummy seems best. Think about the possible splits for ♦. A 5-0 ♦ split almost a ruff, and there's danger from any 4-1 that opponents will win the 1st ♦ and continue the suit for a ruff. The right sequence is to win the ♣A, play 3 rounds of trumps ending in hand, and lead a low ♦ intending to insert the ♦10. Playing trumps first lets you handle any favorable split without risk of an early ♦ ruff.

When South plays low, some say there's evidence enough that North holds the missing ♦K. I expect many weak South players would play the ♦K immediately, but we're not playing weak players in the GNT semifinals. A good defender should duck equally often with the ♦K or the ♦J, putting declarer to the guess. To guard against ♦KJ 3rd to 5th inside, declarer properly finesses the ♦J and makes 6♥.

Devise the plan, check for unintended consequences, and avoid temptation from red herrings. You'll sleep better... and survive more post mortems.

Standard Bidding

West	North	East	South
2N	Pass	3♦ ¹	Pass
3♥	Pass	4♦ ²	Pass
4♠ ³	Pass	5♣ ⁴	Pass
6♥		Passed Out	

1 = Transfer to ♥. 2 = Natural Slam Invitation
3 = Cue bid. Slam interest. 4 = Cue bid.

Most Standard or 2/1 bidders would start with 2NT causing a transfer auction. With the weak ♠xx, RKC by East's is a poor choice. Instead the ♣ cuebid stands out. Holding the ♣A, West caught on and bids the slam. Notice if West bids 4♥ instead of 4♠ the auction likely stops. Partner's 4♦ bid made West's hand look very attractive. Until 5♣, playing in 5♥ was a likely outcome. It's unclear how West bids a grand slam holding the right cards. That auction would start with 2♣ but there's no guarantee that a grand slam would be found on the right 31 HCP. Forcing ♣ systems clarify fit and strength two levels lower leaving more room for exploration.