

HAND OF THE WEEK

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Everybody likes to bid and make slams. One reason, obviously, is that considering whether to bid a slam means that your side has most of the cards and so you get to do a lot of bidding. This is of course also true, at a lesser level, about bidding games.

But there's something special about slams. Slams get your adrenaline going and can generate swings at matchpoints and big swings at IMPs. But there is a risk-reward that must be met. At matchpoints, the odds on any small slam decision are 50-50, or close enough to that, so you should adopt the old rule that you want to bid any slam that is no worse than on a finesse and stay out of any slam that is no better than a finesse.

Grand slams are a different matter. Generally, practical considerations make bidding grand slams at matchpoints somewhere between 60-40 against and simply suicidal. This is because in a large matchpoint field, even at high levels, there are likely going to be several pairs that don't bid any slam at all even when you have the assets to entertain investigating a grand slam. And at IMPs, the same considerations apply, this time courtesy of the IMP table. If your teammates are -1460 or -1430, you will win 13 IMPs for +2210 but lose 17 IMPs for -100. So bidding grand slams at IMPs is a big decision.

One of the first deals I remember from bridge, when my masterpoint total was probably less than my age, involved a grand slam. I'll show you the hand.

Dummy ♠J92 ♥AKQ82 ♦KQJ ♣A2

My hand ♠AK54 ♥93 ♦A109 ♣KQ98

Our bidding back then was short and sweet. I opened 1NT (16-18), partner bid 3♥ (natural and game forcing, Jacoby transfers were not yet in my repertoire), I bid 3NT to deny 3-card support. Partner asked for aces. I showed 2. Partner asked for Kings. I showed 2. Partner bid 7NT.

As you can see, I got an early start at bad bidding. But the play's the thing. The opening lead was the ♥5. It was 4th best if from length. Plan the play.

I'll come back to this. Meanwhile, here's a deal that one of our Unit's best pairs had trouble with.

Opener ♠QJ987 ♥Q8 ♦AKQ ♣A85

Responder ♠A1062 ♥AK94 ♦8 ♣K432

Their auction was 1♠-4♦, 4NT-5♥, 5♠, All pass. 4♦ was of course a splinter, and 5♥ showed two keys without the trump Queen. Now Opener had a problem. Any one of these hands would qualify as a splinter raise in their (and, I suspect, your) partnership.

♠A1062 ♥AK94 ♦8 ♣J432

♠AK62 ♥J943 ♦8 ♣KJ32

♠AK62 ♥K943 ♦8 ♣Q432

So Opener, rather sensibly, signed off in 5♠. The ♠K was onside, so 13 tricks were available. And their opponents duly bid the slam. Who do you think is more at fault for missing this slam? And, remembering the list of types of mistakes from my last installment, what mistakes were made?

Here are my thoughts.

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1. Neither player anticipated the problem they would face in the auction. Opener, excited about hearing a forcing raise opposite their 18 points, just bid (Keycard) Blackwood, failing to anticipate the problem that a 2 keys response would create. Responder, with two aces and two kings didn't think it would hurt to have extra values. It is MUCH harder to solve problems like this at the table than it is when someone gives you a hand like this as a problem. Not only that, neither player thought about the potential downside of their respective 4♦ and 4NT calls.
2. Both players were impatient. Opener's hand was flawed by holding a wide-open suit. Responder's hand was flawed by being too strong for their splinter response, not so much in terms of points, but simply in terms of trick taking potential facing the right sort of hand. Note that 6♠ is still very good opposite ♠Q9875 ♥82 ♦A54 ♣AQ5.

As is so often the case both players were at fault. There are very few deals where there is only one possible auction to the correct contract, whatever your methods are.

Opener made the last and most obvious mistake, bidding Keycard with an open suit. A simple 5♣ cue-bid would have told responder all. Responder would have known that opener had slam interest in a hand lacking a heart control. A 5♥ return cue-bid would have sent the message about the heart control and opener could have bid the slam. Or responder could simply have bid slam directly (but then risking the chance that the grand slam was cold).

But responder should have visualized the 12 point hand I cited above, and realized that opener could never make a slam try with that after a splinter. We are all taught that using Jacoby 2NT with a short suit is wrong. But the "wrong" is that rule itself. When you have half the aces and kings in the deck, you must take control of the auction as soon as you know what trumps are unless you have another way to show (or have already shown) a hand where partner can expect you to have that many aces and kings.

Responder should have bid 2NT. Opener would have bid 3♠ to show more than an opening notrump with no void or singleton. Now responder could have cue-bid his ♥A, simultaneously denying a minor suit ace and showing slam interest. Opener would have had no problem bidding the slam after the 2 keys no Q response. Or responder could have simply bid Keycard, trusting on partner to have enough "fillers" to have a good play for slam if enough controls were present.

Oh, yes, about my grand slam. The only winning line was to play small from dummy. Opening leader had 3, and 3rd hand 1, of the 4 missing hearts above the 5. So playing small was a solid 50% chance, a much better play than hoping for a miracle in spades. I went up, and so went down.