

[Bob Mackinnon](#)

Bob on Bridge

- [Home](#)
- [About Bob Mackinnon](#)

[Subscribe](#)

The Tiny Voices, Yours and Mine

by Bob MacKinnon on February 8th, 2010

With regard to bidding, everyone knows from experience artificial is best because it makes the transmission of information easier and more efficient. No one would willingly give up Stayman, Jacoby, and Blackwood. The only question is, how much is too much? Through the medium of its bulletin, the ACBL attempts to smooth ruffled feathers by providing a forum for disgruntled members. Therein we read letters about aged parents and grandparents, frozen in the past before all this artificiality took root, who can still play a mean game merely by exercising their common sense. Frank Stewart is their adopted champion. In his column he writes favorably of traditional rights and wrongs.

In the January 2010 Bulletin he writes, 'discipline is having a reason to bid and being willing to pass when no bid is just right.' The problem with that advice is that the nature of the bidding mechanism is such that one may not be confident at to what is the right bid, or even if there is a right bid. No system is capable of allowing one always to bid comfortably within strictly defined limits. Too many hands, not enough bids. So if you pass because no bid is just right, you'll pass a lot more than you should. This advice caters to the conservative mindset that impedes action during our senior years.

Stewart's predisposition is towards wait-and-see. He writes, 'discipline is taking the action you know is best when a tiny voice in your head is urging you to take a flyer.' This is a justification for passing when in doubt, but we all know that good advice is, 'when in doubt bid one more.' So, his advice might be reworded to the following, 'discipline is taking the action you feel is best when a tiny voice in your head is urging you to underbid.' Competent players should not imagine they will get doubled every time they overbid because their opponents can see through the cards. Incompetent players may not realize that what they are doing is highly dangerous. To underbid in competition planning to bid again if necessary is a perilous procedure that should be employed only when one wants to get doubled. Passing may not be safer than bidding but more hazardous.

The most dangerous actions are related to not bidding according to one's prior agreements. Take for instance, a preemptive raise of partner's suit defined as 0-6 HCP. The conservative player

may decide to make a preemptive jump raise to 3♠ on 4 spades and some outside stuffing, for example, with ♠ QT76 ♥ K764 ♦ Q98 ♣ T9. This may seem safer than a bare 4 HCP, but it is not, because the opposition may pass and defeat 3♠. The red suit honors and the length in hearts make it less likely that the opponents will be tempted to indiscreet action, and it makes it less likely they can make a contract at the 3-level. A bad player will raise to 2♠, then bid 3♠ after the opponents compete to 3♣, even though the losing trick count is 9. So, another case of more is less.

The Human Factor

It is somewhat odd that the simple-is-best readers of the ACBL Bulletin have come to look at Stewart as their champion, as his methods are quite idiosyncratic. We'll go back to the July 2007 issue of the ACBL Bulletin in which Stewart goes through the bidding of a successful slam hand giving us his thoughts along the way. His honesty is refreshing and much appreciated. In typical fashion Stewart passes a hand that others would open, then overbids to a slam that is made by astute declarer play. Strange as it may seem, his approach is based less on logic than on the tiny voice that tempts him into distorting his bidding practices to conform to his prejudices. It would be very difficult to deduce a general approach that his readers could adopt, although many bid in a similar fashion.

He admits his style requires having a bold partner, 'as odd-couple partnerships work because the players exert a moderating influence on each other.' Notice that the emphasis is again put on the suppression of natural impulses. This is objectionable to the logical mind, because the success of the bidding will depend on the character of the players rather than on the character of the cards dealt them. Exchange the hands and the auction would be entirely different, which Stewart admits. Yes, we know that in practice there are those who bid one way with Jane and another way with John. Adjusting to a partner's personality is a practical approach down at the club, but there should be a general structure of constraints within which one can safely maneuver with any good player.

Convention Free Bidding

We shall study what Stewart's tiny voice was whispering on the hand shown below from a regional pairs event. Looking at both hands one concludes that any reasonable method should allow the partnership to explore for a small slam in spades. We begin by considering bid by bid the natural auction on the right. Most players prefer to ask rather than tell, so to such players a natural system which promotes the free exchange of information between partners treated on an equal basis is an anathema. In theory a bidding sequence is an exercise in constrained optimization, the bidders revealing only what is necessary to reach the best contract. What the best destination may be depends on the route taken to get there. Some players obsessively hide their tracks.

With the hand shown below the HCP content is not a major factor, as the partners hold a mere 26 HCP between them. Distribution is the key. The losing trick count is the proper means by which

to measure potential with shapely hands, and the bidding provides information with regard to the degree of fit. The losing trick counts and number of controls are given below the hands as a reminder that these are the critical factors.

If there is a fit, all should proceed smoothly, but if there isn't, there must be means by which one can put on the brakes and bring the process to a grinding halt. The honor combination of ♣KQxx is a critical factor, so it is East who should have the final say on whether or not to bid slam. Now we shall examine each bid in turn to demonstrate that bidding this slam is quite easy when each player simply bids what he has.

West	North	Natural	Auction
♠ K8762	♠ AQ54	1 ♦	1 ♥
♥ 542	♥ AQ54	1 ♠	3 ♠
♦ AK1052	♦ 7	4 ♦	4 ♥
♣ —	♣ KQ53	4 ♠	5 ♣
6 losers	5+ losers	6 ♠	Pass
4 controls	5 controls		

1♦ Often the most important call is the first one. The question is this: can one open the West hand without misleading partner as to its strength? That is a matter of agreement as to what constitute an opening bid. The high card content, 10 HCP, is dead average, but the hand satisfies the Rule of 20. (HCPs + the lengths of the 2 longest suit = 20). The hand has 4 controls (Ace=2, King=1), 1 more than normal, and they sit in the long suits. What power it possesses is offensive, and that power is considerable as expressed in the loser count of 6. By losing trick evaluation an opening bid in a minor should have 7 or fewer losers, so in that respect West's hand is quite promising. How good it is will depend on the degree of fit with East's hand.

There is an 84% chance that West will find at least one 8-card fit with partner's hand. West should not worry about the opponents entering the auction as one doesn't anticipate being outbid.

If the opponents have a super heart fit, 4♠ may be a profitable sacrifice. The greatest worry is that the 8-card fit is in diamonds, and that partner with a flat 13 HCP hand will insist on playing in a contract of 3NT. During the auction West hopes to reveal that his opening bid was based on shape, not power. No trump bidding has to be different from good-fit bidding, and this difference must be recognized.

Trying to avert playing in 3NT on minimal HCP strength, some would prefer to open 1♠ to put the emphasis on a major suit game, perhaps in a good 5-2 fit with diamonds functioning as surrogate trumps. This prejudice towards the majors is often observed at the table. Some live by it, to the detriment of their slam bidding in the minor suits. There is no need to panic. The primary need is to identify the different hand types.

3♠ The auction has proceeded smoothly and the spade fit has been uncovered. Most Easts have available the Fourth Suit Forcing convention by which they can bid 2♣ to ask a partner to provide more information without revealing their own intent. In that way one can subjugate a partner and take charge of the auction. It is a popular and sometimes necessary treatment in NT bidding. A major virtue is that it saves bidding space.

Slam bidding proceeds more smoothly when a partner can show a fit with a game forcing raise. 'Support with support' is the means by which a partnership switches priorities from high card to loser count evaluation. This one promises 4 spades and 7 losers or less. To use 3♠ as merely invitational means there must be an artificial bid (such as 2♣) available by which East can force to game. This makes for confusion.

4♦ With a 9-card fit in a 6-loser hand, West sees that slam is a distinct possibility. He can hope that East has something good in hearts to keep the defenders at bay. Because the major value of his hand lies in its shape rather than his HCPs, West can't make a descriptive jump to 5♣ to show his void in clubs. He is short the ♥K which would bring the loser count down to 5. The solution is simple enough: reveal the good diamond suit and await developments. That encourages slam, but doesn't insist on it.

We have reached a point in the auction where conventions can be helpful to further describe the opening bid, especially when opening bids can be light on HCP. Modern bidders are willing to give up on playing in 3NT once a major suit fit has been established, so they employ 3NT to investigate slam below the level of 4 of their agreed major. Holding powerhouse 2-suited hands they can employ 5♣ as Exclusion Blackwood. Think of Goldilocks and the 3 Bears. Hands with shape try 3NT (Mamma Bear) and those with power try 5♣ (Papa Bear). Without strong slam interest they may complete a description by cuebidding where their values lie, here 4♦ (Baby Bear), which is 'just right'.

4♥ East is encouraged even though he has no support for diamonds. The ♦Q would be sooo nice. As West hasn't given up on slam, and as he holds such good support for spades, East marks time with a cue bid in his previously bid suit. Some play this as 'Last Train', a non-descriptive bid showing slam interest – 'I've got my bids, have you?'

4♠ In the natural auction West is content that he has indicated some slam interest and has shown where his values lie. This is a situation where he can legitimately make a minimal 'just right' bid at the end of a sequence that has accurately disclosed his values.

5♣ East is not ready to give up. A reflexive 4NT Blackwood won't provide the material necessary to build a case for a grand slam. If West holds the ♥K, East expects to see a bid of 5♥ next. He needn't decide about the grand slam (!) until all the information is in.

6♠ West has no new information to add to the mix. He can see that East must have very good spades, because West has promised just 4 on the auction thus far. He expects partner has hearts well covered and he may well have the ♦Q. There is enough encouraging news here to take a well-reasoned flyer at slam.

Frank Stewart's Tiny Voice

We can take Stewart's subjective approach as reflective of many who play a 2/1 structure where the limits that define the bids are expressed largely in terms of HCP. One does not assume a fit at the start. Rather one assumes one may have to defend or support partner in his attempt to bid and make a NT contract. One plans to make adjustments for shape as the auction progresses and fits are established.

Within such a system it is often easier to pass initially and bid aggressively once a fit is established than it is to open the bidding, raising expectations, thereafter trying to apply the brakes. The modern trend is better: open light and make provision for that by adding conventions, like Last Train and 3NT Slam Try, to set limits on one's ambitions. Coming soon to a table near you: Reverse Two-Way Drury by an unpassed hand.

West	East	Frank's	Auction
♠ K8762	♠ AQ54	Pass	1 ♣
♥ 542	♥ AJ76	1 ♥	4 ♦
♦ AK1052	♦ 7	5 ♦	5 ♥
♣ —	♣ KQ53	6 ♠	Pass

Pass or 1♠? Stewart admits he might go along with the current trend and open 1♠ if the spade suit had more stuffing. His partner would open the given hand. He makes a revealing comment on why he would not: if responder bids 2H as a game force, he would have to raise to 3♥ on ♥542. That might lead to a bad 6H contract with responder holding just ♥AK963. Exactly! That is why the single raise should be avoided on such a weak holding. It could happen that partner bids 2♥, but is this is likely? It is much more likely that partner has a fit in one of the long suits, or that his long suit is clubs.

Returning to the past glories of American bridge, Goren required at least Qxx and Schenken, J10x for such a raise. So one shouldn't engage in the sequence that Stewart fears. This is a red

herring. A 2-suited hand should be bid as a 2-suited hand. After 1♠ – 2♥ opener would have to bid 3♦. This is a poorly defined, strong sequence that has got too high and covers too many possibilities. The case is strengthened for opening 1♦ where the HCP are, thus preparing for a sensible and descriptive rebid. The spade suit is not going to be lost on this hand. So if one decides to open, as one should, the proper plan is to open 1♦ and rebid twice in spades. As we saw in the natural auction, partners can learn a lot without reaching the exalted level of 1NT.

Pass – 1♦? After a pass, Stewart responds 1♠, not 1♦, on the grounds that one bids the higher-ranking of 5-card suits. This is not necessarily so. There is a box on the ACBL convention card for players to check if they frequently bypass a bid of 1♦ over 1♣ when holding 4+diamonds. At one time this was a controversial practice that required an alert. The conservatives argued voraciously against change. Nowadays players follow the Walsh procedure in which one responds 1♦ with a good hand and 1♠ with a lesser hand. The West hand is within the category of a super passed hand that requires at least 2 bids for proper description. The quality of the diamond suit is a prime consideration, as well.

Pass – 1♠? The traditional response of 1♦ is more descriptive, more efficient, and less judgmental than a bid of 1♠. The preference to spades over diamonds is based on the assumption that the contract should most likely be played in spades. This prejudice distorts the auction unnecessarily. Bidding the better suit, diamonds, does not preclude finding a spade fit, it saves bidding space, and it conforms more closely to the expected distribution of HCP between the suits. A one-over-one bid should be forcing, even when made by a passed hand, but not all agree with this simple solution. Again, there is too much allowance being made for rare occurrences. It shouldn't be necessary to jump around to show a normal hand.

4♦! Well, there you go, East did come up with strong support for spades and almost any system can be used to explore for slam whether the West hand is opened or not. Stewart disagrees with his partner's splinter bid of 4♦ – it should be much stronger, he maintains. The East hand fulfills the requirement for a splinter raise if West had opened 1♠, namely at least 13 support points. After a pass, the requirements for a splinter raise go from a minimum of 13 to a minimum of 18, a jump of 5 points. This jump may be caused by a difference of 1 HCP in the West hand. The effect on the bidding system is one of instability where a small difference leads to a huge change in methods.

The justification goes that an opening bid has a lower limit of 11 HCP, but the response to 1♣ has a lower limit of 6 HCP, a difference of 5 HCP, so this difference must be reflected in the response structure. This is against the probabilities, as it is more likely the initial pass is closer to the 10 HCP mark than to the miserable 6 HCP mark. The opponents have passed, the opening bidder has 16 HCP, so it is reasonable to assume partner holds 1/3 of the remainder, 8 HCP. This is in the middle of the range 6-10 HCP for a passed hand, not at the bottom. Seen in this light,

East should be encouraged. A splinter raise is justified, especially so when the trump holding is this strong. One should bid on the basis of what is most probable, not on what is minimal and least likely.

3♦? East need not stretch to a game forcing splinter bid, because there is available an non-forcing splinter of 3♦ that invites game. The general rule for recognizing a splinter bid is that it is a jump in a suit a level above what would have been a forcing bid in that suit. As a bid of 2♦ would be a forcing reverse on the part of the opening bidder, even opposite a passed hand, bids of 3♦ and 4♦ can be defined as splinters of differing strengths, 3♦ being game invitational and 4♦ being slam invitational. This distinction is a necessary consequence of the wide-ranging 1♣ opening bid.

When in doubt about these matters I go to an authoritative prime source, in this case *Max Hardy's Two Over One Game Forcing*, which is the major reference for players in my area who are happy to claim 2/1 as their system. Here is his invitational splinter: ♠KQ84 ♠7 ♦A82

♣AK975. After opening 1♦ and receiving a 1♠ response, opener may jump to 3♥ intending to pass responder's 3♠ rebid. This resembles closely East's hand – good spades, 16 HCP, sufficient controls, 5 losers, shortage in a side suit. Personally, I would be ashamed of myself if I left partner in 3♠ on this hand.

3♠? For Stewart East's proper reply to the 1♠ response is 3♠, a limit raise. He comments, 'players often use splinter bids with high-card values that are too skimpy. They succumb to the lure of finding the perfect hand.' This rather implies that the bidder has made a decision to go to slam regardless. What if the bidder in a cooperative manner is merely describing a hand capable of making game most of the time? What if the bidder is merely revealing a promising loser count? In this case it is controls, aces and kings, and trump quality that are the major factors. A sideboard of queens and jacks may represent nothing of value, like macaroni on a buffet table laden with turkey and smoked salmon.

5♦ – 5♥? Stewart expects his partner to bid outside of the normal range, but he is bidding mostly on what East should have, not so much on what he thinks East does have. The auction is getting high, but his status as a passed hand allows for a slam invitation at the 5-level. What happens, I wonder, if East now bids 5♠ thinking, 'well, I only have 16 HCP, after all, and partner expects 18 at least. My hearts have gaps and the minors don't appear to fit well. 5♠ most accurately describes my hand in the context of the bidding thus far.' Will this sudden conversion to honest evaluation keep Stewart out of slam?

6♣? Recall this statement: discipline is taking the action you know is best when a tiny voice in your head is urging you to take a flyer. Can one say that the above auction demonstrates this

principle in action? As he has bid against the grain by never showing length or strength in diamonds, Stewart feels he is justified in master-minding the final contract. If slam should fail, who do you call to chase away the gremlins? Slambusters.

Hold that call – slam makes! It is fortunate that a club is led rather than a heart. One of the benefits of bad bidding is that the opponents are in doubt as to the best lead. The ♣K is covered by the ♣A and declarer discards a heart instead of ruffing. A second heart goes on the established ♣Q, so Stewart avoids losing 2 hearts. But note that this slam makes because East holds the ♣KQxx opposite a void. Has the bidding revealed this situation? If not, is the slam justifiable? Well, one could argue that what East doesn't have in clubs he must have in hearts. East's bid of 5♥ is a strong indication he holds the ♥AKxx. That may not be so helpful, as declarer may have to ruff a diamond with the ♠Q to make way for a triple squeeze. The luck in the slam resides in a happy ending to a disorderly bidding sequence rather than in the subsequent, careful play.

The Case For Side-Suit Quacks

We are left with an account how a conservative bidder thinking primarily in terms of points was able to reach a makeable slam on just 26 HCP. Granted, it was only a major suit slam. One might observe that the ♥J is a wasted value. The ♣KQxx could be reduced to the ♣KJ10x and the slam might still make in the same way after a lead to the ♣J and ♣A. We wouldn't want to reduce the ♠Q to the ♠J as trump solidarity is always a key component in bidding slams. With this trimming down the losing trick count would still indicate bidding the slam, although the chances of making it are greatly reduced.

The losing trick count strips the hand down to the bare essentials. It caters to a 'nothing wasted' condition. The possession of the ♣Q removes the need for the ♣A to be well placed, provided the lead is a club. However, the chances of a club lead are reduced, if dummy doesn't have the ♣Q because it would be dangerous to lead away from a holding of ♣Qxxx. Declarer is more likely to receive a trump lead. Dummy's not holding the ♥J would increase the chances of receiving a threatening heart lead.

A great advantage of holding side-suit quacks is that the opponents don't have them. That makes their defence more difficult; defenders may not have an obvious lead; they have to envision a particularly favorable distribution of unseen honors. They may lose a tempo by adopting an overly passive approach. Although slam might be made on a double dummy basis without the sideboard quacks, in practice it's going to be helpful to declarer when he tries to manipulate the defence. Thus, the notion that one needs a considerable number of HCPs to make encouraging raises is a conservative one that provides for extra chances that may not be immediately obvious and that may not be necessary. The system is not geared towards finding the 'perfect' result.

The realization that 'what I have, they don't have' is also important in competitive bidding, as noted at the beginning. When deciding whether or not to push on, one has to gauge the effect on the opponents' bidding. They are less likely to take the push if they hold secondary honors in your suit and you have secondary honors in theirs. It becomes too easy for them to pass and let you play in a bad contract.