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Bidding Matters

The 12 habits of highly effective bidders

6. They make the bids partner wants to hear (continued).

Vulnerable at IMPs, you have this auction:

Partner	You
1♦	1♠
2♣	2♦
3♣	?

What's your call holding:

♠A J 7 4 2 ♥7 4 3 ♦J 8 ♣K 9 4?

Partner is doing more than just showing distribution. His 3♣ is a game try, showing at least 5-5 and extra values. He's asking two simple questions: clubs or diamonds? partscore or game?

When this problem was posed in a bidding forum, the majority of the panel evaluated this hand as worth a game bid. Only half, though, chose to inform partner with a straightforward 5♣. Other panelists tried 3♥ (explained as "notrump stopper search"), 3♠ ("advance cuebid for 6♣") and 4♣ ("re-game try").

Problems with game tries

Most game-try bids are easy to recognize and, in theory, easy to respond to because they ask fairly specific questions. Some auctions — such as 1NT-2NT — require you to do nothing more challenging than recount

your high-card points. Others focus on stoppers for notrump, or ask you to evaluate your trump or side-suit holdings.

When you make a game try, you're asking partner to make a decision about the final contract. Confusion can set in, though, if partner equivocates or, worse, answers a question you didn't ask.

If you were opener in the auction at left, how happy would you be with a waffling 4♣ from partner? Would you have interpreted 3♥ or 3♠ as accepting your game invitation, or would you have thought partner had major-suit length he couldn't show earlier?

Slam try or game search?

The simplest game tries come after you've already agreed on notrump or a major and want to determine if you have enough strength for game. More difficult are situations where you need to ask partner's opinion about exactly which game to bid.

These auctions usually occur when the only fit you've found is in a minor, but you're exploring for a notrump game. The game try may be a direct suggestion, as in the auction 1♦-2♦; 2NT. Opener isn't asking about stoppers or other suits, so responder has only three choices: Pass, 3♦ or 3NT.

Other auctions involve more delicate tries:

♠5 4 ♥A 10 2 ♦4 2 ♣K J 8 7 3.

Partner opens 1♣ and your right-hand opponent overcalls 2♣ (Michaels, 5-5 in the majors). You raise to 3♣ and partner rebids 3♠.

If partner is cuebidding for slam, you'd cooperate with a 4♥ cuebid. If he's just looking for game, is he showing a spade stopper or is he asking for one?

These "expert standard" guidelines

will help you sort out this and similar auctions:

- Game before slam: The three level is for game tries; the four level is for slam tries.
- When there's no major-suit fit, bidding notrump is your first priority.
- When searching for notrump, a new suit at the three level shows a stopper if there are two critical suits. It asks for a stopper if there's one critical suit.

With the hand at left, bid 3NT.

You're at the three level, so for now, treat 3♠ as a search for game, not slam. The opponents have shown two suits, so partner is bidding the one where he has a stopper, and he wants you to bid 3NT if you have the other stopper. If partner is interested in 6♣, he'll clarify by bidding past 3NT.

♠A Q 6 ♥J ♦K 10 9 3 2 ♣J 6 5 4

Partner opens 1♦, you raise to 3♦ (limit raise) and partner rebids 3♥.

Bid 3NT. The stopper-showing principle can apply even if the opponents haven't bid. When you have a minor-suit fit, the two critical (potentially unstopped) suits are majors, so partner has heart cards but no spade stopper. A 3♠ bid would communicate doubt about your stopper.

Partner	You
1♦	1♥
2♦	3♦
3♠	?

♠4 ♥A 7 6 5 ♦J 8 2 ♣K 10 6 4 2

You've both limited your strength, so it's clear partner isn't looking for slam. He's asking two questions: Can we play 3NT? If not, can we play 5♦?

Your answer to the notrump question is difficult because even though there are two unbid suits, there wasn't room below 3NT for partner to show one stopper and ask about the other. When in doubt, the critical suit is