

Relaying to slam

Relay systems are seen at their best in slam bidding. This is no surprise – each relay response adds a piece to the jigsaw of describer’s hand. As slam approaches, the asker can sometimes name every high honour in partner’s hand. This makes decisions easy, impresses any kibitzers and irritates the opponents.

While learning relay, you might prefer to stick with your usual slam machinery – RKC Blackwood and cue bids – but these do not mesh well with relay.

Because positive responses to 1♣ are unlimited, opener would like to find out more about strength before pressing the Blackwood button. Sometimes this is not possible:

WEST'S HAND	WEST	EAST	
♠ A 5	1♣	1♠	hearts, 8+ pts
♥ K Q 7	1NT ^R	3♥	3-6-3-1
♦ Q 7 6	?		
♣ A K 10 6 5			

What now? Remember that responder does not know that hearts will be trumps. Slam is easy opposite an ace and two kings but the 5-level may be too high opposite the wrong minimum:

♠ K J 7 ♥ A J 8 6 4 2 ♦ 10 5 4 ♣ 8

so opener might simply raise to 4♥ and hope partner can kick with the right hand. It would be nice to set trumps below game or find out about strength.

Points for slam

High card points are fine for bidding game but have limitations for slams. In slams, aces and kings carry more weight than their point count. Players supplement the 4-3-2-1 count with their favourite form of Blackwood, ignoring the fertile middle ground.

Some systems – notably Blue Club – count *Kontrols* (A = 2, K = 1) a good yardstick of slam potential. We have that option (see *Chapter 14*) but we usually prefer another measure – *Slam Points*.¹ (A = 3, K = 2, Q = 1) The 3-2-1 scale better reflects the relative slam values of the honours and helps the asker to identify specific picture cards. The Slam Point count also limits describer’s hand.

Asking for strength

After the shape is out, asker bids the step to ask for Slam Points. However a bid of 3NT – or a slam bid – is always a sign-off. (That is, if the describer showed the full shape with 3♠, then 4♣ would ask for SPs) Responses depend on the high card strength previously shown:

HCP	Slam Points
10 - 15	6 - 9 (10)
12 - 15 (1NT)	7 - 10
8+	5+
5-7	3 - 5

Occasionally, describer might have one fewer than the advertised minimum – giving a positive to 1♣ with 4 SPs – something the asker needs to bear in mind. A limited opening won’t have 11 SPs because A-A-A-K is enough to open 1♣.

Here’s an example on showing SPs. East holds this 1♥ opening:

♠ A Q 4 ♥ K 7 6 5 ♦ 3 ♣ A 10 6 5 4

WEST	EAST	
	1♥	
1♠ ^R	2♥	& clubs, canapé
2♠ ^R	3♦	3-4-1-5
3♥ ^{SPs}	4♦	9 SPs

With shape revealed by 3♦, relay bids the step to ask for Slam Points. East counts fingers “6-7-8-9, ♠-NT-♣-♦” and waits. West might bid the step (4♥) to continue relay. Any other minimum bid by relay – even 4NT – would be a sign-off.

¹ Also known as QPs (Queen points)

Slam Points give an accurate guide to slam potential. The relayer should think of slam if the total of Slam Points and useful 3-2-1 distribution points is 21+, a sort of key number.

Resurrection

If the 1♣ opener finds shape then signs off without asking for Slam Points, responder is expected to *resurrect* with Base+4 = 9 SPs.

Bidding the first step over the sign off shows 9 SPs; could be 8 SPs and a chunky, shapely hand. The 2nd step shows 10 SPs, etc. (Resurrection with 9 SPs is optional – a square 12-count with three empty aces will pass)

A limited hand cannot resurrect. All bids by a limited hand over the relayer's sign-off are natural, self-supporting suits. Likewise, an unlimited hand can retreat to game in known long suit (6+ major or 7+ minor) so resurrection ignores those steps.

Ask or not?

The rough guide is that key number 21. That will do in the early days, or if time is short. Better is to construct a typical hand **one short of resurrection** and see whether it makes slam a good bet. Also ask "Would any relay response take us too high?"

WEST'S HAND	WEST	EAST	
♠ A Q 4	1♣	2♣	8+ bal with a major
♥ K Q 9 5	2♦	2♠	hearts
♦ A K J 2	2NT	3♦	2-4-3-4
♣ 9 5	?		

Let's give partner a useful 8 SP hand (one short of resurrection):

♠ K x ♥ A J x x ♦ x x x ♣ A x x x

Slam is okay opposite this and space is not a problem, so check for strength then press the following button if partner shows enough.

Denial cue bidding (DCB)

Most symmetric systems use a special version of cue bidding, called denial cue bidding. With Slam Points known, the relayer makes the cheapest bid (other than 3NT) to ask, "Do you have a top honour (AKQ) in your longest suit?"

Describer then bids the next step to **deny** an honour in the longest suit, or the **higher-ranking** of equal suits. If describer skips the step, it **shows** an honour in that target suit. Then describer looks at the second suit, continuing to skip steps until a suit with no honour is reached.

This is East's hand:

♠ J 6	♥ K 8 7	♦ 7	♣ A 9 8 6 5 4 3
WEST	EAST		
1♣	3♥	2-3-1-7	
3♠ ^{SPs}	3NT	5 SPs (rarely 4)	
4♣ ^{DCB}	?		

East now bids 4♠, which shows a top honour in clubs (by skipping 4♦) an honour in hearts (by skipping 4♥) but no spade honour.

There are two adjustments. We also stop with A-K or A-Q in a suit, so stopping shows **no honour, or two including the ace**. (That is, 0 or 4+ SPs)

With singletons we switch to positive cueing. Bidding the step shows a stiff ace or king. (We ignore stiff queens, both in counting SPs and DCB)

Another example. This is East's hand, a 1♦ opening:

♠ A 9 8 3 2	♥ 6 5	♦ A Q 8 7	♣ K 9
WEST	EAST		
1♠ ^R	1♦	spades	
2♣ ^R	1NT	& diamonds	
3♦ ^{SPs}	3♣	5-2-4-2	

After opener's complete shape is revealed, West asks for Slam Points with 3♦. The base for the 1♦ opening is 6 SPs, so East counts "6-7-8-9, ♥-♠-NT-♣":

.... 4♣ 9 Slam Points
4♦^{DCB}

West triggers denial cue-bidding with 4♦. East looks first at spades, the longest suit. Bidding the step (4♥) would deny a spade honour or show two with the ace. East has a spade honour, so doesn't bid

4♥. Instead he looks at the next longest suit, diamonds, this time bidding the next step (4♠) to show 0 or 2:

.... 4♠ ♠ - yes, ♦ - 0, or 2 with the ace
4NT^{DCB}

West isn't through and bids the step to continue DCB. In response, East bids the step (5♣) to deny an honour in the next suit – hearts – the higher-ranking doubleton:

..... 5♣ ♥ - 0 or 2
5♦^{DCB}

West steams ahead. East has a club honour and says so by skipping 5♥. This completes the first pass through the suits and takes us back to spades. East takes a second look at each suit and bids 5♠ to deny a second spade honour

.... 5♠ ♣ - yes, ♠ - no 2nd
6♣ No

West places the contract, revealing the trump suit for the first time. West's hand:

♠ Q 6 ♥ A 10 4 ♦ K 3 ♣ A Q J 10 3 2

Quickly now, play it on a trump lead!

Rules for Slam Points

- Relayer cannot ask for strength until describer's shape is completely revealed.
- 3NT is to play, as are all slam bids.
- If the 1♣ opener signs off after finding shape, describer is expected to resurrect with Base +4 = 9 SPs. A limited hand cannot resurrect.
- Stiff kings (kingletons) count as 1 SP and are included in DCB.
- Stiff queens are ignored, both in counting SPs and showing honours.

DCB - First Scan

- Describer looks at suits in order of length. With suits of equal length, look at the higher-ranking suit first.
- Bidding the step shows no A, K or Q in the corresponding suit, or two honours including the ace (A-K, A-Q or A-K-Q). That is, 0 or 4+ SPs².
- With an honour in the suit in question, describer skips the step and looks at the next suit, continuing to skip until a suit with 0 or 4+ SPs is reached.
- When looking at a singleton, describer switches to positive cueing – bidding the corresponding step shows the stiff ace or king, skipping over denies either.
- Nominally, the furthest you can go is a raise of the DCB ask. For instance, if partner asks with 4♣, don't go past 5♣ without a good reason. (Substantial unrevealed extras)

DCB - Second Scan (rarely used)

- If describer has shown an honour, skipping again shows a second honour. (KQ, KJ or QJ, but not AJ³) Stopping denies a second honour, unless AJ.
- If describer has shown 0 or 2 honours in a suit, a stop second time round confirms no honour; a skip shows two honours only; skipping two steps to show three honours. (AKQ, AKJ or AQJ)
Often, describer can tell that relayer knows whether it's 0 or 2. If it's zero, the suit drops out. If it's 2+, use the scheme above.

Do you or don't you?

With DCB, the relayer keeps pressing the button until he knows enough to place the contract. The method is sound but there is room for vision. The relayer must assess how likely it is that partner has the right cards and whether a DCB response might prove embarrassing.

2 Some pairs only stop with 0 or 6 SPs (so AKQ). Not convinced.

3 Because the relayer might not be able to distinguish KQxx from AJxx (both 3 SPs)

Here's a complex one through the eyes of the relayer:

WEST'S HAND	WEST	EAST	
♠ A Q 7	1♣	1♠	4+ hearts, 8+ pts
♥ A Q 10	1NT ^R	3♣	6♥s, semi-balanced
♦ A Q J 7	3♦ ^R	3♥	3-6-2-2
♣ Q 10 3	?		

A positive opposite a 21-count makes slam likely. West grinds out shape, then stops to decide whether it's safe to continue.

If we ask for strength and East bids 4♦, we can't stop in 4♥⁴. That's okay since 4♦ over 3♠ would show 7 SPs, when slam is good. So

3♠^{SPs} 4♣ 6 SPs

Is that enough? Let's construct some typical hands. We can tell from our hand that partner has three kings, so start by assuming one is the likely ♥K.

♠K & ♦K would see us in 5♥, which would be **very** unlucky to fail.

♣K & ♦K means slam is virtually cold.

♠K & ♣K makes 6♥/E 50% on a diamond lead, a bit better if South leads something else. (A pity that partner bid hearts first) How's 6NT? Well, we might get a club lead, or partner might have the ♣J, or we might guess well. In any case, 5NT would be safe opposite the black kings if we decide to chicken out. So we press on:

4♦^{DCB} 4♠ ♥ - yes, ♠ - no

So the minor kings, therefore 6NT.

Partner would bid 4♥ without the ♥K. (We could sit that or even sign off in 4NT) East's hand:

♠ 8 6 2 ♥ K 9 8 5 3 2 ♦ K 8 ♣ K 6

What happened to the Standard pair at the other table? After West opened 2NT, East's 9-count had to make the running. After Texas and some cueing, she bailed in 5♥, concerned about trump losers.

"Ask for SPs if you can construct a typical non-resurrecting maximum where slam is good, and you won't get too high otherwise."

4 Some pairs use a game bid in describer's known **6-card suit** as a sign-off, even if it's the step. (For them, 4♥ over this 4♦ would be to play. 4♠ would be DCB)

The following hands are taken (undoctored!) from recent events.

♠ A 10 6 4 3	♠ 9
♥ A J 10 8	♥ 4 3
♦ K	♦ A 8 5 4
♣ A Q 3	♣ K J 10 8 6 2

1♣	1NT	diamonds, 8+ pts
2♣ ^R	2♥	& clubs, canapé
2♠ ^R	2NT	spade shortage
3♣ ^R	3♥	1-2-4-6
3♠ ^{SPs}	3NT	4-5 SPs
4♣ ^{DCB}	4♠	♣, ♦ - yes, ♥ - no
6♣	No	

It's just possible that East had the ♠K and ♦Q instead of the ♦A but that would also be okay.

Incidentally, East knows that partner is aware that he has no heart honour, not two. (Having shown an honour in each minor, there's no room for 4+ SPs in hearts)

Slam sum: 11+5 SPs + 5 DPs (on 3-2-1 scale) = 21. This is counting the stiff ♦K as 1 SP.

♠ K 7	♠ A 10 8
♥ A K 7 2	♥ J 8 5 3
♦ K Q 9 5 4	♦ 5
♣ K 7	♣ A Q 4 3 2

	1♥	
1♠ ^R	2♥	& clubs, canapé
2♠ ^R	3♦	3-4-1-5
3♥ ^{SPs}	3NT	7 SPs
4♥	No	

Easy stop, since the equally likely ♠A, ♣A and ♥Q is not quite enough. 4♣ over 3NT would drop us at the 5-level for no good reason. You kind of hope that South had ♥QT96.

♠ K1087	♠ A632
♥ 3	♥ Q865
♦ K10964	♦ AQJ3
♣ AKQ	♣ 4

1♣	1♥	spades
1♠ ^R	1NT	& hearts
2♣ ^R	2♦	3-suited
2♥ ^R	2♠	& diamonds
2NT ^R	3♣	4-4-4-1
3♦ ^{SPs}	4♣	8 SPs
4♦ ^{DCB}	4NT	♠, ♥ - yes, ♦ - 0 or 2
6♦	No	

That 1♣ opening was a mild overbid; we would certainly open 1♥ if the majors were swapped.

West can work out that partner has ♦A-Q to make up the total. Again, East might have the ♠Q and ♥A – it doesn't matter. Either way, there's just one major loser. Good to avoid 6♠.

♠ AKQ	♠ J7543
♥ AQ43	♥ KJ865
♦ A73	♦ 8
♣ K74	♣ 108

1♣	1♦	0-7 pts
1♥ ¹⁹⁺	1NT	spades, 5-7 pts (Up 2)
2♣ ^R	2♦	& hearts
2♥ ^R	3♣	5-5 or better
3♦ ^R	3♥	high shortage
3♠ ^R	3NT	5-5-1-2
4♣ ^{SPs}	4♦	2 or 3 SPs
4♥ ^{DCB}	4♠	♠ - no
4NT ^{DCB}	5♦	♥ - yes, ♣ - no
6♥	No	

West keeps grinding away, knowing the ♣K will be protected in a heart contract. It took a while to nail the ♥K.

Slam sum: 15+2 SPs + 3 DP = 20. The double fit swings it.

♠ AJ95	♠ 7642
♥ Q83	♥ AK1094
♦ AK763	♦ —
♣ Q	♣ AK103

	1♠	majors
2♣ ^R	2♦	flat or Roman
2♥ ^R	3♥	4-5-0-4 ⁵
3♠ ^{SPs}	4♠	10 SPs "base +4 is a raise"
4NT ^{DCB}	5♣	♥ - 0 or 2
5♦ ^{DCB}	5♥	♠ - 0 or 2
6♥	No	

West can place partner with the two ace-kings. The only challenge is to avoid 6♠.

♠ A98	♠ Q732
♥ 2	♥ AKJ97
♦ AKQ643	♦ J95
♣ A62	♣ 9

1♣	1♥	spades, 8+
1♠ ^R	1NT	& hearts
2♣ ^R	2♥	canapé
2♠ ^R	3♦	4-5-3-1
3♥ ^{SPs}	3NT	6 SPs
4♣ ^{DCB}	4♦	♥ - 0 or 2
4♥ ^{DCB}	4NT	♠ - yes, ♦ - no
6♦	No	

Grand slam needs ♥AKQ, so West checks for this then settles for six when the presence of a spade honour precludes it. East could also have ♥AQ and ♠K.

♠ 10 5	♠ AK 8 7 6 3
♥ A 8 5	♥ K J 10
♦ AK J 9 2	♦ Q 8 5
♣ Q 9 3	♣ 10

1♠ ^R	1♦	spades
3♥ ^{SPs}	3♦	6-3-3-1
4♦ ^{DCB}	4♣	8 SPs
4♠ ^{DCB}	4♥	♠ - 0 or 2
6♦	5♥	♥, ♦ - yes, ♣ - no, ♠ - no 3rd
	No	

Note that East did not need to confirm two spade honours, thus 5♥ denied a third. On a bad day, East will have

♠ A Q 8 7 6 3 ♥ K Q 10 ♦ Q 8 5 ♣ 10

when slam is a bit below 50% but the actual hand is three times as likely. See *Chapter 18* for the mathematics.

Slam sum: 9+8 SPs + 3 DP = 20. East has perfect cards.

♠ Q 10 7 5 4 2	♠ AK 9 8 6 3
♥ AK	♥ —
♦ Q	♦ K J 6
♣ A 9 8 3	♣ 6 5 4 2

1♠ ^R	1♦	spades
2♥ ^R	2♦	& clubs, 5+♠s
3♣ ^R	2NT	high shortage
4♣ ^{SPs}	3♠	6-0-3-4
4♠ ^{DCB}	4♥	7 SPs
5♣ ^{DCB}	4NT	♠ - 0 or 2
5♠	5♦	♣ - no
	No	

This is an easy stop since West knows the ♦A is missing (A-K + A = 8 SPs) and partner showed the wrong minor king.

West would have done better to make a splinter raise – *Chapter 11*.

♠ A 6 2	♠ 9
♥ K 5 3	♥ A J 10
♦ K J 6 5	♦ A Q 3
♣ AK 10	♣ Q 9 8 7 5 2

2♦ ^R	2♣	clubs, 10-14
2NT ^R	2♠	6+♠s, HS
3♥ ^{SPs}	3♦	1-3-3-6
4♦ ^{DCB}	4♣	8 SPs
7NT	4NT	♣, ♥ - yes, ♦ - 0 or 2

Very easy for us, thanks to strangely silent opponents. Natural bidders would have to work hard to locate the ♦Q.

♠ A 7 4	♠ K Q J 5
♥ A 8 6	♥ K 7
♦ A 7 2	♦ K 10 4
♣ AK 4 3	♣ Q J 10 5

1♠ ^R	1♦	spades, 10-15
2♦ ^R	2♣	balanced
3♣ ^{SPs}	2NT	4-2-3-4
4♣ ^{DCB}	3♠	8 SPs
5♦ ^{DCB}	5♣	♠, ♣, ♦, ♥ - yes, no further info
6♣ or 7♣	5NT	♠, ♣ - 2nd, ♦ - no 2nd

Probably just six, even though East got to show the ♣J. 7♣ needs four spade tricks, so ♠J; or ♠10 and luck or a 3-3 break. Plus extra chances like the ♥J and various squeezes.

Maybe it was worth a shot.

Naturally, the Butler field bid 1♣ : 1♠ : 2NT : 6NT, so relaying to the "correct" 6♣ cost us 2 IMPs. Sigh.

♠ K J	♠ A Q 6 3
♥ A K Q 9 8 6	♥ J 7 4
♦ A 9 6 5	♦ 4
♣ 10	♣ A 7 6 5 2

1♣	1♥	spades, 8+
1♠ ^R	2♥	longer clubs
2♠ ^R	3♦	4-3-1-5
3♥ ^{SPs}	4♣	7 SPs
4♦ ^{DCB}	4♠	♣ - yes, ♠ - 0 or 2
4NT ^{DCB}	5♣	♥ - no
5♦ ^{DCB}	5♠	♦ - no, ♣ - no 2nd
7♥		

3♦ came as a pleasant surprise. 5♦ was needed to check that partner did not have ♣KQxxx. (Would have skipped 5♠ with that)

♠ A K 9 3	♠ Q 10 8 4 2
♥ A Q 4	♥ 5 3
♦ J 8	♦ A K 9
♣ A J 10 3	♣ 7 4 2

1♣	1♥	spades, 8+ pts
1♠ ^R	2♠	HS
2NT ^R	3♦	5-2-3-3
3♥ ^{SPs}	3NT	6 SPs
4♣ ^{DCB}	4♥	♠ - yes, ♦ - 0 or 2
4♠ ^{DCB}	4NT	♣ - no
6♠		

West pushed the boat out a bit. Just five of 70 pairs bid this one. Slam by West is about 60% so no complaints.

4NT revealed the ♦AK. You work it out!

♠ 5	♠ A J 10 8 4
♥ A Q 4 3	♥ K 10
♦ A K Q 9 8 6	♦ 10 7 4
♣ K 4	♣ A 7 3

1♣	1♥	spades, 8+ pts
1♠ ^R	2♠	HS
2NT ^R	3♦	5-2-3-3
3♥ ^{SPs}	4♦	8 SPs
4♥ ^{DCB}	4NT	♠ - yes, ♦ - no
5♣ ^{DCB}	5♠	♣, ♥ - yes, no 2nd ♠
7♦		

Again, West had to go round the block to check that East did not have ♠KQ. That hand would bid 5NT to show a second spade honour.

Asking for *Kontrols* (A=2, K=1) would have been quicker.

Some pairs don't use Slam Points at all, using the step to ask instead for *Kontrols*, on the way to DCB.

Others don't even use DCB. After shape is out, they might use the step as a *puppet*, a prelude to suit-setting and RKCB. There is also the well-known 4♦ *End Signal*. Some of these options are covered in *Chapter 14 – More Slams*.⁶

Yes, but is there time to play it?

Those examples are neat but unlikely to sway many. "How common are slams anyway? What happens when they overcall, which will often happen?"

Fair enough. Full relay auctions are rare – we average three or four a session, maybe one of which is a slam hand. We've included a lot to show the full system in action. Opportunities may be rare but you have to be ready.

⁶ Not all. There are heaps of methods. Go google, starting with Mulberry.