

# The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders (November 2005)

You and partner have spent countless hours developing complex bidding methods. Your convention card is filled to the margins and you've memorized every word of your hundreds of pages of system notes. Still, science will take you only so far at the bridge table. No matter how detailed your agreements, you're bound to encounter situations where you have to rely on judgment rather than system to find the winning action.

Experienced pairs make these decisions easier by following broad principles that apply to a wide range of auctions. Some of these ideas are so widely accepted that they don't even require discussion. One habit that expert pairs share is:

## 4. They base bidding decisions on the principle of "game before slam".

This advice suggests that when deciding how to structure your system or interpret a bid, finding the best game should take priority over searching for slam. This means that when in doubt, you should treat an ambiguous bid as a natural suggestion of a trump suit or as a search for game, rather than as a cuebid for a possible slam.

The wisdom of this approach is based partly on the idea that games deserve more emphasis because they come up more frequently. More important, though, is that since you have only three or four bidding levels to investigate game – and five or six to search for slam -- it's best to devote that limited space to bids that help you make game-level decisions.

The game-before-slam theory often comes into play when partner makes a new-suit bid at the three-level. Suppose you hold ♠52 ♥AJ1063 ♦AQ ♣KJ62 and the auction goes:

You	Partner
1H	2C
3C	3S

If partner intended 3S as a control cuebid for a club slam, you'd want to encourage with a return cuebid of 4D. But if he has a minimum and is just looking for a notrump game, this is your last chance to show your diamond stopper.

At this point in the auction, those who rely on the game-before-slam guideline treat 3S as a search for 3NT. With two unbid suits in question, partner will bid the one where he has a stopper, so this auction suggests that he needs diamond cards in your hand. Partner might hold ♠KQJ ♥54 ♦103 ♣AQ9743

If he has a more powerful hand, there's still plenty of room to investigate. He can show slam intentions – and confirm that 3S was a control cuebid -- by bidding on over 3NT.

Here are some other three-level auctions where the game-before-slam principle should apply:

You	LHO	Partner	RHO
1D	1S	2S	Pass
3D	Pass	3S	

Even though partner has cuebid twice, there's no reason to assume he has anything more than a minimum game-force. His first cuebid showed a limit-raise or better in diamonds. His second cuebid confirms the "or better" hand and asks for a spade stopper, so your first priority is to bid 3NT if you have one.

Partner	You
1S	2D
2S	3C
3H	

It's unlikely that partner, who has already limited his hand, is making an advance cuebid for a club slam. The game-before-slam interpretation of 3H is that he's interested in a notrump game, but doesn't have a heart stopper (if he did, he would have bid 3NT). He may hold ♠K107643 ♥1042 ♦Q ♣AK6.

You	Partner
1S	2H
3H	3S

Partner's 3S may *sound* like a cuebid, since a major has been bid and raised, but it's more useful to treat it as natural. This is how partner would bid if he had five weakish hearts and three-card spade support – a hand like ♠Q52 ♥K9763 ♦AKJ ♣62.

Partner is asking you to choose between 4H and 4S, so your next bid should be four of your stronger major. If you instead make a minor-suit cuebid, partner will have to make the decision himself.