

# The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders (February 2006)

## 4. They base bidding decisions on the principle of “game before slam.” (Part 4)

Most of our discussion on the game-before-slam principle has focused on its use in interpreting ambiguous bids. Its advice is that when in doubt about the meaning of a below-game bid, you should treat it as a search for the best game rather than as a cuebid for slam.

The game-before-slam principle also applies to the “unambiguous” bids you discuss in advance. It’s a good guideline to keep in mind when making decisions about your system agreements and conventions.

### Re-inventing Bergen raises

Many popular conventions rely on the game-before-slam approach. Conventions designed to help you make partscore vs. game decisions are usually structured to keep the bidding low when you have minimum values and weaker trump fits. The stronger your hand, the higher you bid.

An example is Marty Bergen’s major-suit raise convention, which defines the lower response (3C) as the weaker hand (a constructive single raise with four trumps). The higher response (3D) shows limit-raise values.

Some pairs choose to “tweak” Bergen’s convention by reversing these meanings, ostensibly to conserve room for slam bidding. Their logic is that if the lower response (3C) shows the better hand, opener will have 3D available as a cuebid.

This essentially transforms the convention into a slam-before-game tool, and it will be a rare deal where this offers an advantage. Over a limit raise, opener usually either bids game or passes (“no inviting the inviter”), but if he has enough for a slam try, the four-level is certainly safe. It’s unlikely that one extra three-level step will make or break a slam cuebidding sequence.

That extra bidding room will more often be needed to investigate game rather than slam. If you play the reversed meanings, you may have a dilemma with a hand such as ♠32 ♥AQ9842 ♦KJ10 ♣A7.

You open 1H and partner bids 3D (a single raise with four trumps, 8-10 playing points). You’d prefer to stop in 3H if partner has a minimum, but you have a good play for game opposite a maximum such as ♠K65 ♥K1063 ♦93 ♣K632.

Over 3D, you have no game try available, so you’ll have to make a blind guess. If you use 3C as the minimum raise, though, you can bid 3D as a general game try and let partner make the decision.

### Re-inventing Drury

A similar problem can occur if you switch the meanings of Bergen’s two-way Drury responses, used by a passed hand to show a strong raise of a major-suit opening. As written, a 2C response shows a three-card raise and 2D is a four-card raise.

With Drury – or any auction where you’re deciding between a game and a partscore -- it’s important to make best use of limited bidding room. The higher you bid, the more information you should be giving. Those who reverse the Drury responses are bidding higher with the less well-defined hand (the three-card raise) and lower with the stronger playing hand.

The value of keeping 2C as the three-card raise is that it gives opener room to rebid 2D with moderate strength – a hand he would have opened in first or second seat, but that wouldn’t have accepted a limit raise. If you have a maximum response, this description may help you find a notrump or major-suit game.

If you instead use 2D as the three-card raise, opener is forced to retreat to 2 of his major with minimum *and* sub-minimum hands, which limits your options as responder. You won’t know whether you have enough high-card strength for game, and with only eight trumps, it may not be safe to investigate at the three-level.

### The confusion factor

It’s fun to tinker with conventions, but evaluate your changes carefully, especially if they stray from the game-before-slam guideline. Keep in mind that Bergen, Mike Lawrence and other writers spent countless hours testing their theories. If there were better ways to structure their conventions, they probably would have found them.

The other downside of rewriting conventions is the confusion factor. If you play “standard” Bergen with one partner and “reverse” Bergen with another, you’re increasing your memory load and the chance for a misunderstanding. Your revisions can also bring up ethical considerations. After a simple “Alert”, your opponents may assume you’re playing a convention as written, so you’ll have to find a timely way to provide them with full information.