

Splinter Bids



A **splinter bid** is a convention whereby an **unnecessary** jump response in a side-suit, for example 1♥ – 4♣ indicates excellent support for partner's major-suit opening bid (at least four cards), a singleton or void in the side-suit (but not the ace or king) and interest in slam. The double jump bid has no natural meaning in bridge so is 'unnecessary' and has a special conventional meaning. The splinter bidder has identified that game in a major is almost certain, and a slam may be on if partner has the right sort of hand. After hearing (and recognising!) the splinter bid from partner A, partner B re-evaluates his losers.

Normally around 33 points (out of 40) are required for a small slam. With seven points missing the partnership can expect to lose only one trick if the slam is bid correctly. However, if game in a major is certain and one partner has a singleton or void in a side suit (a splinter), most of the honour cards in the splinter suit that are held by the opponents can be ignored except for the Ace (assuming the worst case where the splinter is a singleton and not a void) because they will be ruffed by the splinter hand. The partnership is working out of a total of 34 points, not 40, and 34 less 7 = 27 points. So if partner A opens a major and partner B has 12 – 15 HCP and four card support, there is a chance of a slam on minimal partnership values if one or both partners have an unbalanced hand with a void or singleton.

Using splinter bidding there is usually some bidding space available for control showing cue bids before reaching the 4NT Blackwood threshold. For example, after 1♠-4♣, there is room for opener to show a first round control in diamonds or hearts. The partnership may decide to skip over 4NT and continue to cue bid all the way to slam. This is particularly advantageous if one or other partner has a void.

Both of the following West hands have seven losers and 13 HCP – 26 combined HCP. Yet with Hand 1 a slam is very likely, but Hand 2 will struggle to make game unless Hearts break kindly.

Hand 1		Hand 2	
West	East	West	East
♠ A 9 7	♠ K Q J	♠ A 9 7	♠ K Q J
♥ A Q 9 4 2	♥ K 7 6 3	♥ A 9 5 4 2	♥ K 7 6 3
♦ K 3	♦ A 8 6 4 2	♦ 9 3	♦ A 8 6 4 2
♣ 7 5 4	♣ 3	♣ K Q 5	♣ 3

The difference is that West 1 has no wasted values. All West's honour cards are 'working', whereas West 2 has wasted values in Clubs and is therefore shorter of values in hearts and diamonds where they will be needed to make a slam.

Using standard bidding methods it will not be possible to bid a slam with Hand 1.

Summarising, a splinter bid is a **bid in a new suit that is one level higher than that needed for a forcing bid**. A splinter bid shows:

- Shortage in the bid suit (singleton or void)
- Four-card (or longer) support for partner's suit
- If responder splinters e.g. 1♥- 4♣, it shows the strength for game - at least a 'good' 12 HCP (15 points including shortage), **with three or four controls**, where an ace = 2 controls and a king = one control. With greater strength responder should not splinter as it takes up a lot of bidding space and he is strong enough to pursue a slam via natural bidding.
- If opener "splinters", e.g. 1♥ - 1♠ - 4♦, it shows at least 16 HCP (19 points including shortage)

Interference does not affect bidding. 1♥ - 2♦ - 4♦ and 1♥ - X - 4♦ are splinters.

Note: Responder should make a splinter bid with ALL genuine hands worth game in opener's major when holding a singleton or void in a side suit.

Here are some examples of a splinter bid:

Example 1

East
 ♠ K Q 7
 ♥ K 7 6 3
 ♦ A 8 6 4 2
 ♣ 3

West East
 1♥ 4♣

Example 2

West
 ♠ A J 7
 ♥ K Q 6 3
 ♦ A Q J 4 2
 ♣ 3

West East
 1♦ 1♥
 4♣

Example 3

West
 ♠ K Q 9 8
 ♥ A J 2
 ♦ 5
 ♣ A Q J 5 3

West East
 1♣ 1♠
 3♦

Careful! Note that in Example 3 West has been able to 'splinter' with a single jump rather than a double jump, but in this example West's rebid is a 'reverse', a forcing bid showing **16+ HCP unlimited**, so a jump bid has not got a natural meaning - 4♦ would be a wasteful bid, taking up unnecessary bidding space.

Using the Losing Trick Count

If partner A makes a splinter bid he is saying that he has a fit in partner B's major and a genuine game going hand (at most 7 losers, and shortage in the splinter suit. Partner B discounts all losers in the splinter suit except for one loser, and then determines whether a slam is worth investigating using standard LTC methods.

Response to a Splinter Bid:

After partner's splinter bid you should **revalue your hand: Count your losers**, discounting all losers in the splinter suit bar 1 loser (the partnership could be missing an Ace in the splinter suit). Alternatively count all points excluding the king, queen and jack of partner's short suit; add on for distribution etc. If you reach 14-15 as opener (or 12 as responder), consider trying for slam either by cue-bidding (example 5) or using Key-card Blackwood.

Example 4

West	East	West	East
♠ A 10 8 4 2	♠ K Q 7 3	1♠	4♣
♥ J 3 2	♥ K 7 4	4♣	
♦ A 3	♦ K J 6 4 2		
♣ K Q 7	♣ 5		

Example 5

West	East	West	East
♠ A Q 6 5 2	♠ K 9 7 4 3	1♠	4♣
♥ A K 4	♥ Q J 8	4♥	5♦
♦ 7 3	♦ A K 4 2	6♠	
♣ K Q J	♣ 3		

In **example 4** West has 7 losers, and if he discounts all losers in Clubs bar one loser he will still have 7 losers. If he counts points excluding points in the splinter suit he has 10 points (9 HCP plus 1 for the doubleton) once his Clubs are discounted. A slam is not on.

In **example 5** West has only 5 losers and knows that a slam is on, but has a small doubleton (Blackwood does not work well with small doubletons) and is worried about the Diamond suit so cue bids Hearts. East does not know how strong West is, so bypasses 4NT (Blackwood) and cue bids control in Diamonds, denying the ♣A. West cannot find out if East has ♦K without driving the bidding beyond 5♠ points but with none of East's 12+ points in Clubs West is confident enough to bid a small slam.

Good and bad holdings opposite a Splinter bid

The best holding opposite the short suit is three or four small cards, as you can ruff the losers. With Ace plus rubbish, Axxxx, even better!

A doubleton opposite the splinter suit is not so good. Assuming partner has a singleton you can only ruff once. A singleton opposite a singleton is useless.

If the short suit is opposite winners (e.g. KQJ), then your hand is not revalued. Put it back into game in the trump suit.

When not to use a Splinter bid

- When you have a singleton Ace or King in your short suit, unless you have extra values elsewhere. Partner will expect your high cards to be in the other three suits.
- When you are responder and have more than 15 HCP as well as shortage points. Your hand has slam potential, and you are strong enough to use more space efficient bids to explore for the best contract.
- When you are opener and have fewer than 18 points including distribution, and partner has responded at the 1 level, showing 6-9 points including distribution. You have no serious slam potential and need to make good use of the available bidding space to find the best contract.