

What does it take to win?

As the end of the year approaches, I have been pondering this question. People tell me that winning at bridge is about making fewer errors. Sure, but *how* does one make fewer errors? In any case, my errors are simply a reflection of my creativity at the bridge table

People also tell me that courage in the bidding is important, and that slam swings often determine the outcome of a Teams match. Now that I can relate to! But when should one go slam-hunting, looking for that swing? Ending up in 5 of a major going one off is possibly an even worse outcome than going one off in a slam – at least in the latter case there's a good chance that the same might have happened at the other table.

However, I have the feeling that missing slams may be more common than over-reaching unsuccessfully. To put this idea to the test, I used the hand generator on playBridge (<http://playbridge.com/>) to produce a whole session's worth of boards in which South as dealer held 18-23 hcp and North 11-13 hcp. The idea was to examine a number of hands with an expected 29-31 hcp, values that just might yield a slam, to see how the bidding might turn out using natural methods, and whether or not it was worthwhile to go looking for slam aggressively.

Unsurprisingly, many of these 28 boards had fairly predictable auctions, either reaching slam quite readily or successfully stopping in game or in 5 of a major. However, about 10 of the boards were instructive. Although "traditional" advice is that lacking a known fit and some shape, it is not wise to bid aggressively towards slam, this sample of hands seemed to suggest that fortune really does favour the brave (or is that the reckless?) quite a lot of the time.

Here's an example of the potential benefits of going slam-hunting with an expected 30-31 hcp and some fit. After 1D – 1S – 4S, one might argue that it's futile to bid 4NT with a flat aceless hand, when needing South to hold 4 keycards. However, South does have them and because E cannot (will not) lead a heart, and both spades and diamonds break, the contract makes.

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

A little courage and enterprise are again richly rewarded on this hand:

		♠Q 7 5		
		♥K 10 5 2		
		♦K J 5		
		♣A 9 4		
	N		♠9 8 6 2	
♠J 10 4 3			♥J 9 7 4	
♥8 3	W 19 E		♦7 4	
♦A 9 6 2			♣Q 6 2	
♣10 8 5	S			
		♠A K		
		♥A Q 6		
		♦Q 10 8 3		
		♣K J 7 3		

After 1D – 1H – 2NT, if North bids 4NT (presumably RKCB in hearts) then 6NT can be reached. The cautious view is that there is no obvious fit, we are clearly missing a keycard and potentially missing an AK, but in fact the slam only needs a finesse, perhaps once again supporting the notion of going hunting.

Here's a hand that requires sensible bidding methods as well as courage:

		♠9		
		♥K Q J 9 8 7 6 2		
		♦K 4		
		♣Q 10		
	N		♠A Q 7 6	
♠8 4 3			♥-	
♥5 4 3	W 28 E		♦Q 6 5 2	
♦J 10 9 8 7 3			♣J 8 7 4 2	
♣5	S			
		♠K J 10 5 2		
		♥A 10		
		♦A		
		♣A K 9 6 3		

If the bidding goes 1S – 2H – 3C – 4H then South will have little incentive to move. Instead, as my partner Julian Abel points out, after 3C North should bid 3D (4th suit forcing). Then assuming South bids 3NT, North can now bid 4H, which must show a stronger hand than a direct 4H bid. Now South needs to investigate with 4NT, which will enable the cold 6H to be reached.

If I've persuaded you to bid 'em up, be aware that may mean that some fairly inspired card play could be required. Witness, for example, this hand. If South is able to show a balanced 18 hcp and North is (too?) courageous, a contract of 6D might be reached. However, will declarer succeed in avoiding 2 losers in the trump suit?

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

I hope you manage to generate a few more slam swings in your favour in 2014, but please don't demand compensation from me if you go down ...