

Fundamental Principles of Partnership Bidding

Basics

This document does not assume any particular bidding system. However, most of the examples assume a "standard" 2/1 framework.

The purpose of the document is to help when interpreting a bid that has not been discussed explicitly.

An assumption implicit in the following principles is this: there is no recovery after a bid made in error. Every sequence has a meaning (hopefully the meaning will be clear) and once a bid is made, it is impossible to change your mind.

There is also a principle which I believe in which can arise in any sort of auction: whenever you make a "discretionary" bid where pass (or double/redouble) would have been acceptable, you promise some "stuff" in the suit you bid. If you are in a constructive auction and you are forced to bid, then of course your bid tends to be dictated by your shape, without regard to the quality of the suit you now bid. But in other cases where you have a choice of bidding a suit or not, your partner can expect that a lead in that suit will be worthwhile. Examples of discretionary bids include: preempts, overcalls, competitive bids, free bids after you've already made a takeout double, etc. If your hand is simply too good to pass (or double, whatever), and no other alternative is possible, then bid your bad suit and hope for the best.

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1 Constructive Bidding

Captaincy: in all constructive auctions, one player emerges as the captain of the auction. The first player to limit his hand becomes the "crew" and yields captaincy to his partner. Essentially, any non-forcing bid yields captaincy. Examples:

1NT: you know what I have – you're in charge now;

1D . 1S . 2S: if you want to try for a higher-scoring contract, you'll have to suggest it.

Only the captain may raise or suggest raising the auction to a new level, by making a game (or slam) try. The role of the crew is to answer questions and follow orders (such as processing a transfer). Sometimes, the crew can, within the context of a game or slam try, put the onus back on the captain by making a counter try – but can never unilaterally take charge (that would be a mutiny).

We do not try to "improve" part-scores at IMPs. Playing matchpoints, there are times when we can make a non-forcing bid in a higher strain (e.g. 1NT) to try for the best score, but generally speaking if we bid on beyond a reasonable part score contract, it shows an interest in bidding game if partner has the right hand.

For example, suppose we have the following auction (opponents are silent): 1D 1H 2C 2H. At this point, we are presumably in a reasonable part score, especially if opener has at least one heart. Furthermore, it suggests that responder doesn't have four clubs (because he could have passed or raised clubs) or two diamonds (he could have given preference to diamonds). If opener now bids 3C, this suggests a non-minimum hand with at least 6-5 in shape and quite possibly a heart void. This is because the auction suggests a misfit on minimum values. The opponents haven't doubled yet – let's not give them too many more opportunities. Hence, if opener bids again, his hand is good enough that he hasn't completely given up on a game contract.

Opener (especially) and responder each have a responsibility to bid notrump at the appropriate level as soon as the bid makes sense. This limits the hand both in terms of strength and shape. Playing "standard", opener will start with a NT sequence with a balanced hand in one of the following ranges: 15-17, 20+. With a balanced hand (especially when having opened a three-card minor) the rebid will be 1NT or 2NT showing 12-14 or 18-19, respectively.

Once we have found a fit, rebidding or supporting a previously bid suit is offering a choice of games (if the suit outranks our fit), is showing a control (not a void) if in a lower-ranking suit. In a competitive auction, where our goal is not to get to our top spot but to get to the absolute par contract [these are not necessarily the same], we could be giving partner the good news that we have a double fit.

Opener's reverses are forcing for one whole round [we play Ingberman, i.e. Lebensohl over a Reverse, which simplifies things a bit]; responder's reverses are forcing to game. In the case of opener's reverse, the first bid suit is always longer than the second. In the case of responder's reverse, it's usually true.

*Once we are in a game force auction, jumps in new suits always show shortness and, if over our keycard ask and below our King ask, are **Exclusion Keycard**. Jumps in our own suit show a solid suit. Jumps in partner's suit are undefined (perhaps could be defined as showing two of the top three honors). Bidding the fourth suit is a temporizing bid expressing doubt about the strain and/or at least a mild interest in slam.*

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Principle of fast arrival. If we are in a forcing situation, the strongest bid is the one that actually sounds the weakest, i.e. uses up the least room. However, a non-forcing jump to 3NT does not limit your values, but your shape. Indeed, once in a game force, a jump to 3NT tends to show extra (balanced) values.

When there are two routes to bid a certain contract, a direct way and via some forcing sequence, the latter way is always stronger and game-forcing. Examples:

1D . 1S . 1NT. 3S: invitational, six spades.

1D . 1S . 1NT. 2C* . 2D/H . 3S: forcing, six spades (2C* is NMF).

1NT . 2H . 2S . 4S: not forcing but slam-invitational.

1NT . 4H . 4S: want to play in 4S.

When one player offers the other a choice (say between partial and game, or between NT and a suit) then he overrules partner's choice, he is showing a hand too strong to bid his choice directly. Examples:

1S . 2S . 3H . 3S . 4S: slam try with hearts as a second suit (not a help-suit game try that opener thinks better of now);

1D . 1S . 1NT . 2C* . 2S . 3NT: This example is perhaps a little convoluted! 2C* here is NMF. Here there are three possible places to play: 4H, 4S, 6D. Partner apparently doesn't want to play in 4S after all (presumably doesn't have five spades). Opener should bid 4H with four hearts. If responder now bids 5D he is showing a hand too good to bid 5D right away and perhaps unsuitable for a keycard ask because of a void. [in this example, priority over NMF is given to raising partner – I actually prefer to give priority to the cheapest bid].

Impossible bids show a hand which has "grown up" as a result of partner's rebid. Example: 1H - 1NT - 2D - 2S (can't have spades – must really like diamonds).*

We do not generally try to suggest new trump suits at the four level or above (exceptions: when we started with a strong 2C or the opponents have jammed the auction).

When one player offers a choice of games, say between 3NT and 4S, any intervening bid is a mild slam try (and an implicit acceptance of the higher-ranking contract). This generalizes to the following concept: when one player makes an invitation, any non-forcing bid by partner implicitly accepts the invitation. [A forcing bid is a new higher-ranking suit or a jump; a new lower-ranking suit can be forcing by partnership agreement]. Example:

1D . 2NT . 3H: accepts game try and shows a (real) heart suit on the way suggesting an unbalanced hand (i.e. longer diamonds than hearts) with some extras.

Slams arise as a result of shape and controls! Notrump (balanced) slams need at least 32 hcp, preferably with a good 5-card suit. Balanced hands should never stretch to bid a slam, especially in a weak field. Don't bid grand slams at teams unless the other team is definitely good enough to reach their small slam or you can count 13 tricks. Some unbalanced hands can be played at notrump with fewer than 32 hcp when one partner has a long running suit.

Help-suit game tries show three (or four) losers in the suit. Responder bids game with zero or one losers in the suit. With two losers and a max, he bids game. If game isn't clear, he makes a counter try in a new suit (if available) where he has values, looking for fitting values.

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When one partner makes an artificial shape-asking bid (for example Stayman, NMF, 4th suit forcing, XYZ or 2-way NMF), responder bids up the line with any "assets" he may have. [Yes, there are other ways to play this but without discussion, this is a good general rule].

Example (opps silent): after 1D . 1S . 1NT . 2C(NMF), 2H shows four hearts not denying three spades or five diamonds; 2S denies four hearts (but not five diamonds) and shows three spades; 2NT denies four hearts and three spades and presumably also five good diamonds (but in that case maybe 1NT wasn't the right rebid); 3D denies help in the majors but shows five good diamonds.

Inviter may stretch, not acceptor. This makes good general sense but if so discussed it could be played the other way around.

The "Horizon" principle: as an auction continues, certain contracts can be ruled out – they are no longer "on the horizon". For example, your partner opens 1 of a minor and you bid 1 of a major. Partner now bids 1NT, limiting his hand. The opponents now intervene, you make a non-forcing bid, and partner cuebids one of their suits. Is he making a slam try? Or looking for a stopper? Partner cannot possibly be considering a slam – he's already limited his hand which makes you the captain. He's just trying to compete.

Any strength-showing bid should have at least one Ace. Examples: jump rebids, opener's true reverse, any game-forcing sequences opposite a hand which has not shown extras, etc. Have you ever found yourself in a grand slam missing three Aces? I have. Let's say you have a good hand with one ace and partner opens and then makes a jump rebid. Partner then shows zero or three Aces. Well, you can see what can happen

Example: KQxxx KQJxxxx x x. For an 11-point hand, this has tremendous offensive potential. It's tempting to open 1H, planning to reverse. But if you do that you may find yourself in 4S completely unable to prevent the opponents from taking the first four tricks with three aces and a ruff. Your problem is a lack of controls.

Slam cooperation: once you have limited your hand in some way, you must cooperate with partner's slam try cuebids by bidding your cheapest control – you are the crew and have no choice (even if you now regret your earlier actions!). If you haven't limited your hand yet (and there is no established captain) you have some discretion. Making a cuebid yourself suggests enthusiasm (i.e. not a minimum). If you sign off and partner makes another cuebid, you should cooperate (partner has now wrested captaincy). Examples:

1S , 2NT* . 4S . 5C: you have limited your hand and must bid your cheapest control (2NT* is Jacoby so that 4S shows the weakest hand);

1S . 2C* . 2H . 3D** . 3H 4D: neither partner has limited their hand – the sky's the limit. If you feel that you've already shown your full values (e.g. KQxxx AKxxx xx x), you may bid 4H in an attempt to sign off (or get a preference which you will pass). Otherwise, you should ask for Aces/keycards, or show a control in spades, clubs or diamonds (2C* was game-forcing and 3D** was the 4th-suit).

2 Competitive Auctions: coping with interference

Once we have found a fit, non-jump new suits are always game tries or cuebids showing extra strength. Doubling their intervention at this stage is "maximal" and/or penalty oriented (depending on vulnerability and bidding room, and assuming not playing two-way doubles). A pure game try would be made with a new suit (if available). Bidding one more of our suit is always competitive (and therefore shape-showing). Examples:

1S (p) 2S (3D) Dbl shows a good balanced hand and is suggesting a possible penalty double.

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1H (p) 2H (3D) Dbl is Maximal (a game try). Responder would only pass this double when his D holding and the vulnerability were both right.

1H (p) 2H (3D) 3H shows an extra heart or shortness somewhere. It does not invite to game, although responder may now bid game if he has the right hand.

In a competitive auction, 2NT is almost never “to play”, especially when both opponents have bid. Exceptions are when RHO opens a weak two; when LHO opens 1 of a suit and it goes pass pass to you; Example:

(1H) p (2H) p (p) Dbl (p) 2NT. This is “scramble 2NT” denying four spades or any five-card suit. Bid up the line to find our best fit.

(1H) p (2C) 2NT. However good your hand you wouldn't want to suggest playing 2NT here. Your partner has a Yarborough and the opponents will double and eat you alive – they know how to defend it. Therefore, 2NT must be unusual here.

(2H) X (p) 2NT. Lebensohl showing less than 8hcp.

1S (p) 1NT (2D) 2NT: (if agreed in advance) is “Good-bad 2NT” requesting partner to bid 3C as a relay (3C can be bypassed).

In a competitive auction, a bid does not promise the same values as it would sans competition. It may have such values, but it tends to substitute distributional values for high-cards. This arises from the fact that in an uncontested auction, a partnership aims to reach the highest-scoring contract (ie. their directional par). In a contested auction, a partnership aims to reach absolute par or, failing that, to go plus.

Once in a game force, pass over their intervention is forcing and tends to show extra strength and/or more balance. If partner doubles and passer pulls the double, that shows extras with more shape. [I prefer the Meckwell version of this where pass and double are reversed.

When not in a game force, if RHO opponent makes a call over partner's (non-fit-showing) forcing bid, pass tends to show less shape and probably not significantly more values, while bidding tends to show fewer values and/or more shape. Cuebidding their suit (or redoubling) suggests significantly more values (maybe shape too if we pull a double later). Doubling suggests more values and penalty orientation (unless conventional/DSIP). Example:

1H (1S) 2D (2S): pass suggests no great fit for diamonds and probably no extra heart length (or club length). Up to about a bad 15hcp. Would be happy to pass a BOP double by partner. 3S would suggest a very good hand with no extra shape (unless we bid a suit later).

If partner makes a fit-showing bid, and RHO acts, rebidding our suit at the (if at the same minimum level we would have without the interference) is the weakest action (does not promise extra length); bidding our suit at a higher level shows extra length (but not extra values); pass suggests a willingness to bid on (or penalize) but no clear choice; bidding a new suit (or cuebidding) shows extras. Example:

p p 1H (1S) 2D* (X): where 2D* shows a four-card limit raise in Hearts (2-way Drury), 2H shows a sub-minimum hand; pass would promise a true opening hand but with no extra shape. If RHO had bid 2S, 3H would show a minimum opener with a six-card heart suit (or confirm a 5-card suit with shape).

Cuebids:

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If 3NT is a possible contract, cuebids of a (single) enemy suit *request* a control in that suit; cuebids of (one of two) enemy suit *show* a stopper in that suit. In the former case, depending on the level and the rank of "our" suit, it may be sufficient to bid NT with only half a stopper (i.e. Western cue). Cuebidder must have a backup plan. After, say, 1C (1S) 2S (p), opener can bid 2NT with Qx(x). Responder will only raise to 3NT with Ax(x). Otherwise, responder bids a new suit allowing opener to bid 3NT with AQ(x). However, after 1C (2S) 3S (p), opener had better have Kx at least to bid 3NT. In this case, responder should have something like Qxx at least himself.

In general, after partner has bid a suit, a cuebid of the enemy suit shows a "sound raise" (limit-raise) *or better*. The "or better" clause suggests that the hand may be sufficiently strong that support is not guaranteed – in such a case, cuebidder will have a good idea where the hand is headed – very likely she is looking for a stopper in the enemy suit. The higher the level, however, the more a cuebid guarantees support for partner's suit – this follows from the fact that there is now less room to maneuver.

When each of the opponents has bid a suit, especially when neither promises more than four of the suit, a cuebid is *natural*.

Redouble is SOS only when redoubler has not shown any values. Example:

(1H) Dbl (p) 1S; (Dbl) p (p) Rdbl is saying I have a minor two-suiter and I want you to pick. [Yes I recognize that this is a dangerous tactic!]

Lead-directing doubles. Against a slam it is always Lightner (make an unusual lead – typically doubler is void in dummy's long suit). Against 3NT, lead leader's own suit, if any. Otherwise lead doubler's suit only if leader has supported it (or leader has undisclosed support). If doubler has shown one suit, he's generally looking for a lead in his other unbid suit [open to discussion of course]. Otherwise, lead dummy's first-bid (real) suit (if any). Failing all else, lead your highest-ranking and/or shortest suit.

Doubles of artificial bids are lead-directing and/or competitive/sacrificial.

If the artificial bid promises support for another suit, then double as usual to request a lead, etc.; cue-bid their (now supported) suit for takeout.

Doubling a cuebid of partner's suit should be used to show a high honor (essentially a Rosenkranz double). In other words, it is safe to lead your suit, partner. If you just want to support partner's suit, raise it to the next level if possible.

Doubling a cuebid of your own suit guarantees both a good suit (relatively solid) *and* a better than minimum hand [it means a lot more than "I wasn't kidding when I bid this suit before"]. If partner ends up on lead, he *must* lead the suit or apologize if void!

Matchpoint doubles: Below 2NT just about every double is for takeout. Exceptions always involve a NT bid which was "to play" or when partner has opened a weak 2. Above 2NT, if the opponents have not found a fit (in which case, double would be responsive), they tend to be penalty (in "standard" bidding), showing extras and a balanced hand, but can be cooperative. They generally show the balance of power but, if doubler is sitting under the length of the current bid, he asks partner to do something intelligent (BOP double). If doubler is sitting over the length, then it's essentially penalty. I like George Rosenkranz' advice on this. Don't pull a penalty double unless you have a long weak suit which you haven't mentioned yet (partner's tricks in that suit will not be cashing as expected). I might add that if you have been hiding support for partner up until this point, it might be advisable to pull.

If in doubt, partner's 4NT is a keycard-ask when he could have bid 3NT earlier but didn't. Example:

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LHO opens 2S in third-seat and partner doubles. You bid 3D (8+ hcp with diamonds) and partner bids now 3H. If you now bid either 3NT or 4C and partner bids 4NT, he's asking about keycards (most recent suit bid). If he wanted to play in NT, he'd have bid 3NT over your 3D.

In a competitive auction, making two raises is always stronger (and/or more balanced) than making one jump raise. If they bid on we will probably be happy to double them.

When the opponents have preempted, the first priority is to get a reasonable plus. Next priority is to reach absolute par. Only if circumstance allow, do we go looking for directional par. Example:

We are red on white and RHO opens 3S in second seat and we hold: AKT KJ5 QJT54 AQ. If partner has some useful cards and either a fit for diamonds or a heart suit, we might make 620 or even 1440. But we don't have room to find out. Bid 3NT and hope to be plus 600.

After partner's preempt has been doubled for takeout, a new suit is lead-directing and guarantees a fit for partner's suit. The suit bid might be a void. This is sometimes known as McCabe. Some pairs play that even without the opponent's takeout double, a jump shift over a preempt is a fit-showing lead director. Use of these methods ought to be obvious on pure bridge logic.

Support doubles/redoubles (showing exactly three of partner's suit) are on in the following circumstances:

Opener has opened one of a suit;

Responder has promised only four of his suit *but* has not denied five;

Opener's RHO has advanced, overcalled, takeout-doubled or made a two-suited call, provided that there is at least one suit that has not been bid *explicitly*;

Opener could support partner *at the two level* by raising (which would show four);

Examples:

1C p 1H 1S X: support;

1C X 1H 1S X: support;

1C X 1H X XX: support (providing RHO's X is for takeout);

1C 1H X 2H X: penalty in standard (partner has promised exactly 4 spades); but "Chameleon" if playing DSIP;

1C p 1H 1NT X: support if 1NT shows S/D, penalty if X is strong/balanced;

1C 1D 1H 1S X: penalty (all suits have been bid);

1C 1D 1H X XX: support (providing X is for takeout);

1C 1H 1S X XX: penalty in standard (partner has promised 5+ spades); but "Chameleon" if playing DSIP;

*Note also that all non-jump, non-cue bids after a support double are **non-forcing** (even if in a new suit). Doubles after a support double are always for penalty.*

3 Competitive auctions continued: Intervening/Balancing

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Overcalls follow the principle of Useful Space. When no space is used up, an overcall should have full values (opening hand or good suit, both if vulnerable). In contrast, 1S over 1C could show a weaker hand, possibly even a so-so suit when not-vulnerable. If we have three small in RHO's suit, we'd better have a good reason to overcall!

The more overcaller puts his neck on the block, the more essential it is to lead his suit! Contrarily, an opening bid of 1 of a suit, especially a minor suit, does not promise a good suit (or top card). The corollary to this is that when you make a free bid (i.e. one that is not dictated by system – showing your pattern), you must have “stuff” in your suit. All overcalls and preempts are free bids. Competitive bids (after RHO has acted) are “free” also.

Takeout doubles follow the principle of Equal-level conversion, especially as the level gets higher. An apparently three-suited double can be converted into a two-suited double where the two suits are the higher of the three outstanding suits. This is particularly true if the two suits cannot be bid using a cuebid or unusual notrump. In other words, although such a double should not be minimal in high-card points, it doesn't promise the same strength as double followed by a non-equal-level-conversion.

It's OK to raise partner's response to a takeout double in competition without extra strength, but you should have extra shape to compensate.

Raising partner's preempt. In general, don't! If it's a good preempt, it's already done the damage to the other side. Never ever raise with two card support (unless you expect to make the contract) and only raise with three if you have a singleton on the side and/or no defensive values at all. If you do raise, raise as high as you're willing to go immediately. This isn't poker! If you're in any doubt, look for secondary honors (QJs in side suits). If you find any, pass, or raise less than otherwise you might. Don't even think about raising if you have a likely trump trick.

Preempts in 1st or 2nd seat should be based on values which are primarily in the suit bid. A three-level preempt shows a hand which will take at least 5 more tricks in the suit rather than in any other suit (the O-D potential) and without sufficient defense to make a 1-level bid. There should be at most one K or Q outside the suit. The addition of an outside Ace to a 3-level bid will usually make the hand a 1-bid. Examples:

x KQT9xxx xx xxx: open 3H (ODP ~ 5)

x KT9xxxx Qx Kxx: pass and await developments (ODP ~ 4.625);

x KQT9xxx xx Axx: open 1H (ODP ~ 5)

Opposite a passed hand, preempts cover a wider range (and, in particular, possibly more defense) than opposite an unpassed hand. Passed hand must take this into account when deciding whether to raise the preempt. Examples:

p (1H) 2S could show up to about 11 hcp;

p (p) 3H could easily have a hand with the A of H and an outside A (outside Aces do not alter the offensive-defensive potential of a hand). Example: x AQT9xxx xx Axx.

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Reopening. The key to reopening is shape, especially shortness in the bid suit(s). It pays to be aware of dangerous unbid suits too (you need some length there). If the auction has gone 1C p p, there are no danger suits, except possibly diamonds. If the auction has gone 1S p p, all the suits are dangerous, especially hearts. Our partnership has anywhere from 16 to 28 hcp. Assuming that we are reasonably short in the bid suit, partner's maximum is about 15. If we have three or four cards in the bid suit, partner's max is about 12 or 13. Here are some reopening bids after 1-suit, pass pass:

Double: support for the unbid suits. Range about 9-16 hcp, unless you do something more than raise at your next turn. With only 9 (you have good shape), partner has 7-15; with 16 of our own, partner has 0-12. With perfect shape, e.g. 4441 over 1C, you might do it with 7hcp (but bear in mind that partner still has a max of 15). If you double and then rebid 1NT you should have around 15-18 hcp. If you double and then bid a suit, you show a hand that doesn't fit one of the bids below, but still has around 14-18 hcp.

1 suit: doesn't promise much. Four+ cards, not necessarily good. From about 6 up to about 12 or bad 13 hcp. Partner's strength: 10-15 through 4-15. With more strength, start with a double or bid 2 (or 3) or your suit according to suit quality.

1NT: scattered values, no good shape, length in their suit. From a good 11 up to 14 hcp (over 1 minor) or 15 or even 16 (over 1 major). Partner's strength: 5-13 through 1-11.

2 (lower ranking) suit: good overcalling hand (suit quality). 10-15hcp. Not a common bid.

2 (higher ranking) or 3 (lower ranking) suit: good suit, good hand (*not* preemptive obviously). 12-18 hcp;

2NT: natural: 19-20; (*Not* unusual). Partner could have about anything up to about 9 hcp. He can't be negative!

3 (higher ranking) suit: very good suit, good hand. You expect to buy the contract and make it. About 14-18.

Cue-bid: a hand which you might have opened a strong 2C in (and where you're short in the bid suit). Forcing to at least 3NT or 4 of a minor.

Fourth-seat bids. If you bid, you expect to be plus else why not just pass it out? Assume that all the points you don't have are equally divided among the other three hands. If anything, your partner probably has slightly more than the other two since he was in 2nd position. 2/3/4-level bids should have 6/7/8 cards in them and minimum opening bid values. If you have the spades or if you have at least 15hcp, you might want to open with a one bid (you're less concerned that the opponents can successfully outbid you now – and it's possible you can make game). The range of 1NT should probably be a good 13 to a bad 16, whatever your normal range. If you have 13hcp, the others have 27 to share – about 9 each. In order to make 1NT you'll therefore need about 13. With a bad 16, the others will have around 8 each, and you probably still can't make 3NT. Partner should obviously take this into account!

Balancing when opponents have stopped at a low-level. This can be very effective and/or very dangerous. Obviously, the opponents must have shown a true fit (not a preference) typically 1M p 2M p p. Hopefully, opener didn't think for several minutes before passing! We should have at most xx in their suit before considering an action and we probably should be non-vulnerable. I like to play that a 3-level response to a balancing double shows a five-card suit and that 2NT is "Scramble 2NT". We then bid four card suits up the line.

4 Other

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Staying with the program: if you're not sure whether your partner is making a forcing bid or not, even though you've considered the Horizon principle, etc. assume that he is. It's much more fun to play the occasional reasonable but optimistic slam down a trick or two than to play a part-score in a 3-1 fit.

Is 4NT to play, quantitative, ace-asking or unusual? Generally, the auction so far will guide you (is slam still on the horizon, for example?). But here's another worthwhile test: is or was a natural 3NT available? Let's say partner voluntarily bypassed 3NT and bid 4NT. It can't be "to play". Let's say that the opponents jammed the auction and 3NT is not available. It might be "to play", depending on the earlier auction. In a competitive auction, a good partner will generally preface a slam-seeking 4NT call by cuebidding first. That sets the stage for a slam try.