



# Adventures in Bridge

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## ***This Week in Bridge***

### **(97) Optimistic Minimum**

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Level: 2

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#### **General**

In bridge we are frequently faced with bidding decisions during which we must guess. They may be educated guesses, but fundamentally we are guessing at what partner has and how that will fit together with our hand. Becoming proficient at this part of the game requires experience. The *Optimistic Minimum* is a concept that will help us in this decision-making process. Let's see how it works.

#### **Optimistic Minimum**

When we have a decision to make in the auction (such as accepting a game invite or trying for slam) we often visualize or guess at partner's hand and try to determine if game or slam would be a good contract opposite what we think partner might have. But this is difficult, because we do not know exactly what partner has – we do not know their exact shape often nor do we know their total HCP or location of those HCP. The *Optimistic Minimum* is a mental process we use to help us at this point in the decision-making process. Here is the process we follow:

- Visualize Partner's hand (especially distribution)
- Give them the minimum number of HCP they have promised
  - Example -- Imagine 15 HCP if they have opened 1NT.
- Select those HCP to be the ones that would be most helpful to our hand (be optimistic.)
- If it seems like we can make game (or slam) opposite this minimum hand then we should probably be bidding more by accepting/making a game try or attempting to reach a slam.

Yes, it is true that partner almost never has these "ideal" cards, but it is also true that partner does not always have minimum values (although we all know that some of our partners always do!)

This may seem like a simple process, but you will be amazed at how often taking the time to go through this process will help you make a good decision about whether to continue bidding or not.

We have all seen these hands where we have relatively few HCP, but slam still makes because partner had “the perfect cards.” Often after these hands we are left trying to figure out how we could have bid this slam. The Optimistic Minimum is very useful in trying to find some (not all, of course) of these slams.

*Note: Don't be too extreme in selecting cards for partner's hand. This process is called the Optimistic Minimum, not the Perfect Minimum.*

### Reason We Do This

One of the most “important” (to some people) parts of bridge is *assigning the blame* after the hand is over – if we miss a good game or slam, then whose fault is it? (Hopefully this is not a conversation you have too often with too many of your partners, but we all have it sometimes.) One of the values of the Optimistic Minimum method is to avoid partner blaming us for missing a game or slam. Think about it this way: if partner has opened the bidding and only has 12 HCP, yet slam makes (and is a good contract) then we are probably the one that needs to bid aggressively for our side to reach this slam – partner certainly will not start the slam try with such a minimum hand.

Let's look at a classic example of the Optimistic Minimum at work.

#### Example

1♠ 2NT\* (Jacoby 2NT)

4♠

If this is our hand as Responder:

♠ KJ84

♥ AQJ83

♦ 8

♣ AJ7

Then we should consider continue bidding on because Opener could have the following hand:

♠ AQ953

♥ K7

♦ 762

♣ K94

In this case, slam would be an excellent final contract. Slam would make easily opposite this “Optimistic Minimum.”

### **Determining Risk in Trying for Slam**

After we have applied the Optimistic Minimum and found a hand where slam might easily make, then we need to weigh this hand against the chance of getting too high and going down.

#### *Example*

A good example of this is bidding 4NT on our previous hand – the worst case scenario is finding out we are off two Keycards and stopping in 5♠, but going down one. Partner is never happy when this happens.

When we think it might be a good idea to bid on in the auction, we should visualize minimum hands where it would be a disaster for us to bid more. If we find some of these hands, then we must weigh the likelihood that partner has one of these “unlucky” hands vs. something similar to our Optimistic Minimum. This can be a difficult “educated” guess.

### **Expanding from the Optimistic Minimum**

Before deciding to bid on (since we found an Optimistic Minimum) we also want to visualize other hands where slam would make – we only want to bid slam if there are several reasonable hands partner can have where slam would be a good contract. We try to determine by taking one of our Optimistic Minimum hands and slightly modify it. We try to make the hand “a little bit worse” by moving around some of partner’s HCP and adjusting their shape to be a little less useful. We then see how many more values we would need to give partner for slam (or game) to have good play.

#### *From our Previous Example*

Give partner

♠ AQ953

♥ 74

♦ K73

♣ K65

If partner has this control-rich minimum hand with the wasted ♦K, then slam is on a finesse (a little more than just the finesse is needed, but there are lots of good things that could happen). But if we add the ♣Q to partner’s hand, then only a finesse is needed for slam to fetch.

So we can see that even if we become more pessimistic (giving partner a wasted ♦K) we don't need to give partner many more values for the slam to be reasonable. Since we can see that slam seems reasonable with these changes then we should feel good and relatively confident about bidding on over partner's 4♠ bid.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of the Optimistic Minimum is not a perfect solution to slam bidding (or game bidding), but it is a good mental tool for us to use to help with our decision-making process. The next time you are faced with a decision about bidding on or passing (ending the auction) give this process a try!