

Splinters

I have given examples of splinter bids on various occasions in the news-sheets and I was asked if I can describe them in more detail. Always willing to oblige, so here goes: -

Splinters make use of bids that would otherwise rarely be used; they allow the responder to agree trumps and show a shortage (singleton or void) in an outside suit all in one go.

A splinter is always an *unnecessary* jump into the short suit and agrees partner's last bid suit as trumps. And what do I mean by unnecessary? – It is a jump to one level above what the forcing bid for that suit would be. One can splinter over partner's major or minor suit, but over a major is more common and is what I shall concentrate on.

A splinter raise is strong and is best played as game forcing and slam invitational. It normally promises 4 trumps although sometimes it is OK with just 3 card support if partner is known to hold a 5(+) card suit.

Hand A With hand A, if partner opens 1♥ or 1♠ then a 2♣ bid would be natural. Most players would play a bid of 3♣ as a good hand with a good long ♣ suit, so the splinter bid is 4♣.

♠ K764 ♠ K764

♥ KJ76 ♥ KJ76

♦ AQ54 ♦ AQ54

♣ 6 ♣ 6

Of course, if you play 4♣ here as asking for aces then you cannot play splinters - just one reason why most experienced players use 4NT or play Kickback. 4♣ as the ace ask inhibits the use of splinters and cue bids.

Note that with Hand A it would be unwise to splinter if partner had opened 1♦. To start with, you have gone past 3NT which may be the best spot when partner opens with a minor suit. But also partner may only have 3♦'s playing better minor and he may well have a 4 card major.

Let's stick with this Hand A and suppose that partner does indeed open 1♦. The correct response is 1♥ (always bid 4 card suits up the line). To support ♦'s is incorrect as it denies a 4 card major. So you bid 1♥ and partner bids 1♠, what now? Splinters are not just applicable at your first bid and may be made later in the auction (by either opener or responder). So over partner's 1♠ you again bid 4♣ (or 3♣ according to partnership agreement).

And another variation. Partner opens 1♦, you bid 1♥ and partner raises to 2♥. Partner has limited his hand (to about 14 or 15 points max) and you could simply bid 4♥. But with the right cards, there could well be a slam. Now in this sequence (1♦ - 1♥ - 2♥) you have agreed trumps and a 3♣ bid would be a game try. So 4♣ is again a splinter and is the best bid. Let's look at a possibility for both hands: -

West	East	West	East	
		1♦	1♥	(1) splinter
♠ AJ	♠ K764	2♥	4♣ (1)	(2) cue bid
♥ AQ82	♥ KJ76	4♠ (2)	4NT (3)	(3) RKCB
♦ K9762	♦ AQ54	5♠	6♥	(4) 2 key cards + the ♥Q
♣ 75	♣ 6	pass		

An excellent slam on a combined 27 count. East's splinter at (1) shows slam interest and a singleton/void ♣. West has a max for what he has shown so far and co-operates with a cue bid. East then simply checks on aces (key cards) on the way to slam.

Of course West may not have the ideal hand. He may be minimum or have wasted values in the short suit. No problem, nothing is lost and he can simply sign off in game: -

West	East	West	East	
♠ 105	♠ K764	1♦	1♥	
♥ AQ82	♥ KJ76	2♥	4♣ (1)	
♦ KJ76	♦ AQ54	4♥ (2)	pass	(1) splinter
♣ KJ5	♣ 6			(2) not interested

West has the same point count as before, but with wasted values in East's short suit he signs off in game.

Now splinter bids are usually pretty obvious, but there are a couple of sequences that need to be agreed:

- Sequence B: 1♥ - 3♠?
- Sequence C: 1♠ - 4♥?

These two bids are both one above the natural strong jump shift. However, some players prefer to play these as pre-emptive and you would have to agree if they are weak or a splinter.

Showing a Void

When you splinter you show a singleton/void, but it is unwise to splinter a singleton ace (partner will downgrade the king in the suit). If you have a void and partner is interested in slam, a subsequent cue bid of your splinter suit shows a void: -

West	East	West	East	
♠ A	♠ Q764	1♦	1♥	(1) splinter
♥ AQ82	♥ KJ763	2♥	4♣ (1)	(2) cue bid
♦ KJ762	♦ AQ54	4♠ (2)	5♣ (3)	(3) void
♣ 752	♣ -	5♦ (2)	6♦ (2)	
		7♥	pass	

Splinters later in the Auction

We have seen that a splinter always agrees the last bid suit, but it may not always be convenient to splinter immediately.

Hand D If partner opens 1♠ then it is probably preferable to show your good ♦ suit rather than splintering with 4♣, so bid 2♦. If partner bids 2♠ then 4♣ would be a splinter showing this type of hand with a good 5 or 6 card ♦ suit. If, however, opener rebids 2♥ then you cannot splinter as that would be in support of ♥'s.

♠ K764
♥ 72
♦ AQJ762
♣ 4

Splinters by Opener

Opener may also splinter in support of responder's major suit, and it is again an unnecessary jump: -

Hand E You are dealer and open 1♦ and partner responds 1♠. 2♣ would be a normal weakish natural rebid, 3♣ would be natural and forcing and so 4♣ is a splinter agreeing ♠'s. Obviously as partner may have as little as 5 or 6 points, you need a hand this good to insist upon game.

♠ AQ64
♥ A72
♦ AKJ76
♣ 4

Hand F You are dealer and again you open 1♦ and partner responds 1♠. This time you want to splinter in ♥'s. 2♥ would be a reverse and forcing (or virtually forcing – depending upon your methods) and so 3♥ is the splinter agreeing ♠'s.

♠ AQ64
♥ 4
♦ AKJ76
♣ A72

Hand G This time you open 1♠ and partner responds 2♥. The 2♥ response promises 5+ ♥'s and it is perhaps up to partnership understanding if you allow splinters with good 3 card support. It seems reasonable to me with this hand. 3♣ would be natural and forcing and so 4♣ is the splinter agreeing ♥'s.

♠ A9642
♥ AK7
♦ AK76
♣ 6

Splinters after a strong opening?

East	West	East
♠ 7642	2♣	2♦
♥ K876	2♥	4♣?
♦ K542		
♣ 2		

West's 2♥ bid is game forcing. If East had a good ♣ suit then 3♣ is quite sufficient. So 4♣ here is a splinter agreeing ♥'s.

Splinters after Stayman?

East	West	East
♠ KQ42	1NT	2♣
♥ KJ76	2♥	4♦?
♦ 4		
♣ KQ32		

East's jump could well be used as a splinter agreeing ♥'s. Fine. But the problem is that there is no equivalent bid with ♣ shortage as 4♣ here asks for aces/key cards (4NT is quantitative). There is a scheme for splinters after Stayman, but it's a bit complex. It's all in the NT bidding book

Mini Splinters

Playing Standard American then a sequence such as 1♠ - 3♣ is a strong jump shift (with some people preferring to play it as weak). But if you play the 2/1 system then you do not need a strong jumps shift and some players play a jump like this as a 'mini-splinter' – showing a ♣ shortage but not necessarily game values (it can be just game invitational).

This is not standard and most certainly has to be agreed.