

## WHEN IS IT GERBER? (AND WHY IT SHOULD BE AVOIDED)

I have seen this issue crop up many times, some of which are more forgivable than others.

N	E	S	W
1N	P	2♣	P
2♥	P	4♣?	
1N	P	2♥	P
2♠	P	4♣?	
1♣	P	4♣?	
1♦	P	2♣	P
2N	P	4♣?	
1♥	4♣?		

The question arises, “Is 4♣ Gerber?”. As one of the first conventions (and slam tools) beginners learn to use, it is (over)used frequently. This is in part due to the idea that conventions are like muscles – you either use it or lose it. Another factor is the need to satisfy one’s idea of himself as a player. Better players appear to use more sophisticated bidding methods successfully, so by improper association, if Gerber gets used quite often...

Another suspect factor is the simplicity of the convention. Responding to Gerber is fairly straightforward: count your aces, then count the steps of the bids you can make. Recognizing Gerber also seems fairly easy – it’s just a 4♣ bid.

This, of course, is where beginner and intermediate players are led astray. Gerber is NOT just a 4♣ bid – it is a 4♣ bid in one of the following situations:

1. A direct response to a 1N opening
2. A direct response to 2N opening

In all other auctions, 4♣ has either a far more natural or useful method.

### SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

It is a quick way to disaster to have a rule saying “after partner’s NT bid, an immediate 4♣ is Gerber”. Take for instance

1♥ - 1N  
2♣ - 2N  
4♣

In this auction, it would be unusual for opener to have any sudden slam interest (he might have opted for a game forcing jump shift). In addition, any hands that would want to try for slam are better served

by making another forcing bid after 2N followed by 4♣. This allows more information to be conveyed, and both parties are participating cooperatively rather than one player asking. In general, shower, more methodical auctions imply stronger hands. They lead to better bidding decisions.

By this thinking, 4♣ (still a rare bird) should be natural, giving responder a choice of games with 5-5 or 5-6 distribution. Opener probably has weak ♣s given the absence of a game forcing jump shift, and no tolerance/interest in playing 3N.

Similar reasoning goes to this auction:

3N – 4♣

3N as an opening shows 25-27 HCP per SAYC. Responder has to have ways to play in a 4-4 major fit when possible, so 4♣ MUST be Stayman! Notice that, while slam bidding after this opening is always tricky, the partnership usually fares OK simply through quantitative bidding. What must not happen is the partnership missing playable major suit games when 3N goes down (which is very possible, as dummy normally has little values, and opener must constantly play out of his own hand).

Another trickier auction is

1N – 2♣

2♥ - 4♣

The argument goes that responder's 4N rebid is quantitative (agreed), so 4♣ is the only way to ask for aces. Many beginners adopt this agreement for the reasons described earlier. It also happens to solve the issue that responder has with strong raises of opener's major.

This auction is an example of when Gerber isn't the best method of choice. Lacking any agreements, responder could fake a new suit (e.g. 3♣ and 3♦, both FG) and return to ♥s to imply a strong ♥ raise. Two sets of good agreements after this auction exist, of course:

1. 3♠, 4♣, 4♦: All GF ♥ raises with 0-1 cards in the suit bid (i.e. Splinters). Implies slam interest opposite a fitting hand.
2. 3♠: A FG ♥ raise, any shape

The key idea is using an otherwise idle bid (3♠ in both cases) to show a strong raise (the hand type that is difficult to express clearly otherwise). Stronger, more sophisticated adaptations will be published upon request (but many are readily found on the Internet).

Another observation is that calls should be natural and express suit lengths when it is at all feasible. Clearly

(1♥) – 4♣

cannot be Gerber – it's an overcall! 4♣ here is a preempt with a good 7 or 8-card ♣ suit. What kind of hand could aggressor have that needs to ask for aces immediately? These hands should all start with a takeout double, or perhaps an overcall. Showing suits allows partner to know whether his honors are

supporting your suits for more tricks. Then, on the second round of bidding, it will be possible to either make another forcing bid or bid 4N (Blackwood) to check on aces.

The recurrent theme is that great slam bidding is based on determining not just aces, but distribution of both hands. It is quite possible to hold all the aces and kings and STILL not make slam!

IS GERBER EVEN NECESSARY?

With all of this bashing of the convention, is there actually any real need for it? Can a partnership simply do away with Gerber as a whole and bid accurately?

I believe this is quite possible, and it will save pairs who struggle recognizing the convention a great deal of grief and mistrust. This is because, as mentioned, slam bidding is often more accurate when suits are shown before controls. Given a hand that truly only needs to ask for aces, it is possible to look for a fit and force the auction until either an appropriate quantitative bid, Blackwood inquiry, or direct bid of slam is possible. The now idle 4♣ bid can be used for any number of other things (which will be left to the reader to choose).

♠KQJT987xxx ♥x ♦x ♣x

Lacking just about all special bidding, it seems acceptable to transfer and then bid 3♣. Notice there's no complete safety here. You may make 9 or 13 tricks opposite the right hand, and it's difficult to get across to partner that ♠xx ♥AJxx ♦AJxx ♣AJx is a great hand. A practical choice is to corner partner into bidding some amount of ♠s and then asking for aces with Blackwood – no guarantees, of course.

Notice that this hand only has 6 HCP and a really long suit. This isn't going to come up very often, and when it does, the opponents usually bid something. Strong, balanced hands can usually infer what number of aces partner can have and bid appropriately based on this. Holding ♠KQJ ♥KQJ ♦KQJ ♣KQJT, for example, it's clear that partner must hold all four aces for his 1N opening. With something less, say ♠KQJ ♥KQJ ♦Kx ♣KQJT, partner must have at least three aces.

The auction is much easier if you incorporate splinters. Then, a 4♣ rebid is clear. Partner will have enough information to cuebid appropriately when the slam (from responder's side) is clearly makeable. This is just one example of several ways to show a strong hand with ♠s – all of which require some partnership discussion.

It's worth noting that if this hand was 10♣s long, Gerber would become awkward after trying to signoff in ♣s (notice that a NT signoff is no safer).

That said, the majority of hand are not just looking for the number of aces. With ♠KQJT ♥KQJT ♦Kx ♣Kxx, it is possible to be held to 11 or 13 tricks opposite the appropriate hand. It's particularly important to know whether partner has the ♦AQ and/or ♣AQ, as a minor lead through this hand when partner declares could lead to an embarrassing -1.

This leads to a final observation about slam bidding. While perhaps morally unsound to some, it can be correct to bid a slam that will not make a substantial percentage of the time, particularly if the amount of information the defense has to find a "killer" lead is limited. For instance, given the hand above, it

would be acceptable to bid Stayman, intending to jump to 6 if partner shows a major. The idea is that 6 rates to make at least half the time, and occasionally will make when it is supposed to set should the opponents not lead correctly. In addition, partner should be able to work out that with all four aces, bidding 7 is correct. If partner responds 2♦ (showing no major suit fit), jump to 6N on the same reasoning.

At the very least, consider limiting the use of Gerber to the appropriate situations, should you not come to despise the convention.