

# Roman Key-Card Blackwood



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USEFUL CONVENTIONS

IN this series, we will look at several conventions that have been embraced both by the expert community and also by aspiring players looking to develop their bidding accuracy. The first of these is a variation on the Blackwood convention, which utilises a bid of 4NT to ask partner how many aces he holds, to ensure that the partnership does not attempt to bid a slam when missing two aces. The traditional responses to the Blackwood 4NT enquiry are: 5♣ = 0 or 4 aces; 5♦ = 1 ace; 5♥ = 2 aces; 5♠ = 3 aces.

## Why have variations developed?

How many times have you bid a slam that failed having found out that your partnership is only missing one ace? The most likely reasons for such slam contracts to be defeated are unavoidable losers in the trump suit. For example, holding:

♠ Axxx ♥ KQJxx ♦ x ♣ KQx  
it would be reasonable to respond 4NT if partner opens 1♠ and then bid 6♠ if the opener shows two aces by bidding 5♥. However, if the opener has:

♠ Jxxx ♥ Ax ♦ AKQx ♣ Jxx  
the chances of losing just one trump trick will be very small. Thus it is useful to incorporate information regarding trump quality, rather than simply showing the number of aces held by the responder to a Blackwood enquiry.

## How do the responses differ when playing RKCB?

Roman Key-Card Blackwood is the brainchild of Eddie Kantar (one of USA's best player/teachers), who came up with the idea that the 4NT enquiry should ask for the five 'key cards': the four aces and the king of trumps. The responses are:

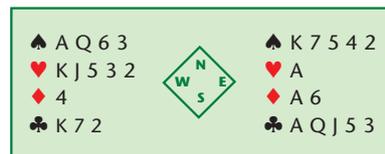
- 5♣ = 0 or 3 key cards.
  - 5♦ = 1 or 4 key cards.
  - 5♥ = 2 key cards without the trump queen.
  - 5♠ = 2 key cards with the trump queen.
- Note that when holding two key cards, the

responder also reveals whether he holds the queen of trumps, the final important card when bidding good slams.

## How does the 4NT bidder proceed?

While it may seem that having either/or responses will be confusing to the 4NT bidder, it will often be the case that he will know how many key cards his partner has as a result of the number of key cards he possesses himself. If two key cards are missing, the enquirer will simply sign off by returning to the trump suit at the five level. When the partnership is missing just one key card, he will still be interested in slam; now the enquirer should consider whether there is a danger of losing to the queen of trumps. However, following a response of 5♣/5♦ the enquirer will not know whether his partner also holds the trump queen. The solution is for the RKCB bidder to follow up with a second enquiry. This is achieved by bidding the next suit up (excluding the trump suit). Thus after a 5♣ response, a bid of 5♦ asks for the trump queen (5♥ if diamonds are trumps). The responder returns to the trump suit at the lowest level without the queen, and bids the trump suit with a jump when holding the queen.

Note: when confident of the initial principles, a further twist is for the responder to bid the cheapest suit in which he holds the king when making a positive response to the trump queen enquiry. For example:



West	East
1♥	1♠
3♠	4NT <sup>1</sup>
5♦ <sup>2</sup>	5♥ <sup>3</sup>
6♣ <sup>4</sup>	7♠

<sup>1</sup> RKCB with spades as trumps; <sup>2</sup> 1 or 4 key cards; <sup>3</sup> Asking for the spade queen; <sup>4</sup> ♠Q + ♣K.

## Asking for kings

Can the enquirer still ask for kings when interested in a grand slam?

As with regular Blackwood, the enquirer can ask for kings by asking for key cards first, then following up with a bid of 5NT. This confirms that the partnership has all five key cards and asks for kings excluding the king of trumps. The two most common ways to respond are to bid the cheapest king in the same way that the responder shows a king when responding positively to the trump queen enquiry, or to show the number of kings, as follows:

- 6♣ = 0 Kings
- 6♦ = 1 King
- 6♥ = 2 Kings
- 6♠ = 3 Kings

## In summary:

1. When the partnership have found a fit, a bid of 4NT is an enquiry relating to the five key cards – the four aces and the king of trumps.
2. Following a 5♣/5♦ response, a bid of the next suit (excluding trumps) asks for the remaining important card – the queen of trumps.
3. A bid of 5NT (which has been preceded by a 4NT enquiry) confirms the partnership has all five key cards and asks about kings in case a grand slam can be made. □



## Roman Keycard Blackwood, Part 1

Over the last few months we have looked at the common pitfalls that await people wanting to bid slams, from using Blackwood when you should be cue bidding, before finally reviewing grand slam bidding.

The one thing we have danced around, but not looked at, is what type of Blackwood you should be playing. In my opinion as a bridge teacher everyone should now take on board Roman Key Card Blackwood. Whilst it is more involved and rigorous than ordinary Blackwood, some hands are impossible to bid without it, and if you don't play it then I think you should take it up as part of your Post Easter resolution.

The premise of Roman Key Card Blackwood is very simple, the aim is to get you to bid this slam:

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

Whilst keep you out of this one:

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

These two sets of hands contain the same number of high cards and same honour structure, but the trump suit, while robust on the first hand (coping with every bad break other than 4-0 offside, so making 95% of the time) is rather tenuous on the second hand (needing trumps to break 2-2, barely a 40% shot).

Just to be clear, Roman Key Card Blackwood was *not* invented to help people bid more slams – the idea was to keep you out of bad slams by identifying holes in the trump suit.

RKCB (as we will refer to it hereafter) works by treating the king of trumps as the 5th ace, and also finding out about the queen of trumps.

### HOW DOES IT WORK?

Bidding 4NT asks for keycards and the responses are:

- 5♣ – 1 or 4 key-cards, (trump queen unknown)
- 5♦ – 0 or 3 key-cards, (trump queen unknown)
- 5♥ – 2 key-cards, denying the queen of trumps
- 5♠ – 2 key-cards, promising the queen of trumps

### 30-41 OR 41-30?

For some of you who already play RKCB you might be playing the 5♣ and 5♦ responses the other way round, which is the old fashioned version. It is not essential that you play it this way, but it is ever so slightly superior due to situations where you ask for the queen of trumps. The important thing is to play the version you and partner are happy with and more importantly that you won't forget!

A common question that people ask when they take on board RKCB is *what suit is trumps?* and the answer is very simple. If you and partner have bid and raised a suit then that suit is trumps, otherwise it is the last bid suit.

Note that phrase – the last bid suit means the last suit that was bid that actually showed a suit. To take a silly example have a look at this sequence:

1♠–4♦\* (splinter), 4NT

The last bid suit was diamonds, but since 4♦ was a splinter bid agreeing spades then 4NT is RKCB for spades.

1♠–2NT\*, 3♣\*–4NT

In this sequence 2NT is a game forcing raise with at least four trumps (Jacoby) and 3♣ shows a shortage, so of course 4NT agrees spades.

What about this one?

1♠–3♦, 3♠–4NT

3♦ is a traditional Acol strong jump shift, and opener rebids his suit showing nothing much in particular. The 3♦ bidder was suggesting strong diamonds, is there any ambiguity in what suit are trumps?

No, the simple rule applies, the last bid suit was spades so spades are trumps for purposes of RKCB. (If responder wants to ask about diamonds he needs to bid 4♦ over 3♠ and then bid RKCB over his partner's cue bid).

By the same token . . .

3♣-3♥, 4♣-4NT

Surely when partner pre-empts and then the suit is changed responder wants to know about his own suit . . .

No, the simple rule applies once more, the last bid suit was clubs so clubs is the agreed suit. (This makes sense anyway since a pre-emptor won't normally have an honour in hearts – if he does he would normally have raised 3♥ to 4♥).

Note that it is possible to use RKCB and then end up in a different suit, such as here:

♠ 5	♠ AKQJ1073
♥ AK762	♥ Q85
♦ K765	♦ A
♣ Q432	♣ A5

When West opens 1♥ it is fine for East to respond 4NT (RKCB) and upon hearing the 5♥ response (two key-cards and no queen of trumps) asks for kings. When he hears of one he will either bid 7NT (if playing duplicate pairs) or 7♠ (if playing a Hubert Phillips match where, for reasons passing understanding, honours are counted).

It's true that West will think he is going to play the hand but I'm sure he will also understand that 7♥ minus one (on a 4-1 trump break) scores slightly worse than 7NT making.

### The Dos and Don'ts of using RKCB

- Do** take on board RKCB after discussing it with your favourite partner (and showing them this helpful article).
- Do** remember that it is the last (natural) bid suit that is agreed as trumps for purposes of the king and queen of trumps.
- Don't** forget you can use RKCB for one suit and then convert to no trumps (or another suit) late in the day.
- Don't** abuse RKCB in the same way you shouldn't abuse normal Blackwood; the usual rules about needing a control in every suit and some belief that you actually have the necessary firepower to take 12 tricks are still required before you reach for your favourite toy. ☐

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## Roman key-card Blackwood, Part 2

Last issue we started looking at Roman key-card Blackwood (RKCB) – an essential tool for slam bidding which will help you stay out of slams that have fair values and playing strength but a somewhat tenuous trump suit.

### A REMINDER

Bidding 4NT asks for keycards and the responses are:  
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### AAARGH - IS IT 1 OR 4?

For the purposes of this article, we are going to assume that you play the suggested version above. Is there a danger that the Blackwood user can get confused as to whether his partner has 1 or 4 key-cards? Or 0 or 3? Take this example below – who would you blame for this disaster?

♠ Q J 9 5 4 3 2	♦ K Q 4 3	♠ A 10 8
♥ K 3	♣ –	♥ Q J 4
♦ K Q 4 3		♦ 6
♣ –		♣ A K Q J 9 2

E/W Game. Dealer South			
W	N	E	S
			3♦
3♣	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♦	Pass	7♠	Pass
Pass	Dble	All Pass	

East responds RKCB and then blasts a grand slam knowing that partner 'must' have three key-cards for his vulnerable overcall at the 3-level. The good news is the trump finesse is right so they only go for 500 in their doubled grand slam.

Where did we go wrong? Notwithstanding the fact that East gambled on missing the queen of trumps (and more on that later) East was guilty of assuming that the situation he wanted to be true was actually true.

East's correct bid after 5♦ is 5♠ which is called *pass or correct*. It says to partner:

'Please pass if you have the lower number of key-cards as we won't have enough. If you have the higher number of key-cards, carry on bidding, showing a feature if you have the queen of trumps along the way.

On the hand above EW would be able to stop in 5♠, and while this would need the spade finesse it is odds on to be right.

This scheme of *pass or correct* means you can sign off even when you are 99.99% sure partner has the higher number knowing he will bid again. Let's see a hand where it works well:

♠ A 4 3	♦ K Q 5 4 3	♠ 2
♥ K Q 5 4 3	♦ A 4 3	♥ A J 10 7
♦ A 4 3	♣ J 2	♦ K Q J 9 8 5 2
♣ J 2		♣ A

E/W Game. Dealer West			
W	N	E	S
1♥	Pass	4NT	Pass
5♦	Pass	5♥	Pass
5NT	Pass	7NT	All Pass

When West opens 1♥ East bids 4NT, (a little hasty perhaps but keeping things simple is a winning policy in the long run) and West responds 5♦ showing 0 or 3.

East is pretty sure that West has three – his only other possible hand would be something like:

♠KQ83 ♥Q7632 ♦4 ♣KQ8,

but it costs him nothing to bid 5♥ as *pass or correct*.

When West bids on he would bid 6♥ to say ‘I have three key-cards and no queen of trumps’, so his bid of 5NT says ‘I have three key-cards and yes I do have the queen of trumps as well’.

After counting on his fingers and toes East bids a grand slam and chooses no trumps just to make sure that the opponents can’t get a pesky first round ruff.

### ASKING FOR THE QUEEN OF TRUMPS

We saw above how you can find out about the queen of trumps simultaneously to finding out whether partner has 0 or 3 or 1 or 4 but, most of the time, don’t you know which partner has anyway? How do you just ask about the queen of trumps? This sort of auction is typical:

♠ A Q 8 5 4 ♥ Q J 6 5 ♦ 4 ♣ K 8 4		♠ K 10 9 3 ♥ A K ♦ A J 9 6 5 3 ♣ Q						
<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">West</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">East</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">1♠</td> <td style="text-align: center;">4NT</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">5♣</td> <td style="text-align: center;">?</td> </tr> </table>	West	East	1♠	4NT	5♣	?		
West	East							
1♠	4NT							
5♣	?							

West opens 1♠ and East responds 4NT (again, a little lazy when there are so many exploratory bids that could be used but let’s play along for purposes of highlighting the queen ask).

East now needs to know about the queen of trumps, since if West has ♠A854 then slam will have almost no play, and even if he has a five card suit (and the jack) slam will not be worth bidding.

The way to find out about it is to bid the next suit up, which is the *queen ask*. After a 5♣ or 5♦ response, the next suit up says to partner ‘Do you have the queen of trumps?’

If partner doesn’t have the queen of trumps then he returns to the trump suit at the lowest level, if he does have it then he responds 5NT or cue bids a king below the level of slam. In the auction above West would reply 6♣ to a 5♦ *queen ask*. This would show the trump queen and the club king and East would bid the good 6♠ slam. Without the trump

queen, West would bow out at 5♠, securing the game without risking the highly unlikely slam.

What would each of the hands below say with an agreed spade suit after a 5♦ *queen ask*?

<b>Hand 1</b> ♠ A J 8 5 ♥ Q 9 2 ♦ K Q 4 ♣ K 9 3	<b>Hand 2</b> ♠ A Q 9 4 ♥ K J 6 ♦ Q J 7 6 ♣ Q 3
<b>Hand 3</b> ♠ A Q J 9 5 ♥ Q 4 3 2 ♦ J 7 ♣ K 3	<b>Hand 4</b> ♠ Q 6 4 3 2 ♥ A Q J 7 ♦ J 10 2 ♣ J

**Hand 1** has no problem – it doesn’t have the queen of trumps – it simply stops by bidding 5♠. (Partner is likely to pass this but can bid a small slam if he has the rest of the key-cards).

**Hand 2** bids 5♥, saying to partner he does have the queen of trumps and also has the ♥K.

**Hand 3** bids 6♣, saying he does have the trump and the ♣K and denying the ♥K.

**Hand 4** bids 6♠ saying he has the queen of trumps but doesn’t have a king to show.

In each case the 5NT bidder should know what to do with the answers he has been given, otherwise he shouldn’t have bid RKCB in the first place!

### The Dos and Don’ts of using the *pass or correct* bids and *queen ask* with RKCB

- Do** be careful that you can cope with whatever response partner gives you before you launch into RKCB. You must have at least one key-card to bid RKCB yourself.
- Do** remember that using the *pass or correct* bid of 5 of the trump suit is a good way to find out more information about partner’s hand even if you are confident he has the higher number of key-cards.
- Don’t** bid a slam if you are missing two key-cards, or one key-card and the queen of trumps. (At best it will be on a finesse, often there will be no play at all).
- Don’t** assume partner has the higher number of key-cards just because you want him to, stopping out of a bad slam is just as important as bidding the good ones. □