

# ROMAN KEY CARD BLACKWOOD

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## Original Blackwood

In its earliest form, Blackwood asked for Aces, the general idea being to make sure that you did not get to a slam missing two Aces, or to a grand slam missing one Ace. One Partner would bid 4NT and the other would show his Aces:

**5♣ 0 Aces (or 4)**  
**5♦ 1 Ace**  
**5♥ 2 Aces**  
**5♠ 3 Aces**

Note the doubling up of the 5♣ response, on the assumption that the 4NT bidder will be able to figure out from the previous bidding whether Partner's 5♣ showed zero or four, and that there could be no ambiguity. Surely not, eh?

Let's remember what Blackwood is and isn't:

- Blackwood *is not* used to determine if your side is in the slam zone, that determination needs to be made *before* using Blackwood.
- Blackwood *is* used when you already know you are in the slam zone but are afraid that there may be two missing Aces.

If we accept that, then it is completely illogical to launch into Blackwood and then, after finding out that there is only one Ace missing, to sign off at the 5-level.

## Roman Key Card (RKC)

RKC is a great improvement on the original Blackwood. RKC also uses 4NT to pose the question, and the responses are similar, at least in their style:

**5♣ 0 or 3 Key Cards**  
**5♦ 1 or 4 Key Cards**  
**5♥ 2 or 5 Key Cards**

How did that '5' get in there, when there are only 4 Aces? The responses refer to Key Cards, of which there are 5 ... these are the 4 Aces and the King of the agreed trump suit. But wait, there's more!

**5♣ 0 or 3 Key Cards**  
**5♦ 1 or 4 Key Cards**  
**5♥ 2 or 5 Key Cards, without the trump Queen**  
**5♠ 2 or 5 Key Cards, with the trump Queen**

Now, not only has the trump King been incorporated into the responses, but also the trump Queen.

We have described the so-called **3014 Responses**. Many use the **1430 Responses**, in which the 5♣ and 5♦ responses are reversed. We'll use **3014** throughout, primarily because they are more intuitive to RKC newcomers.

## An Awful Auction

What you are about to witness is not pretty, but don't blame Roman Key Card, blame the players.

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
♠ K Q 8 7 2	♠ A 6 5 4	1♠	2NT
♥ A 9 3 2	♥ K 8 5 4	3♦	4NT
♦ 7	♦ K Q	5♠	Pass
♣ Q J 8	♣ A 7 3		

What is your honest opinion of this auction? Let's go through this fiasco, bib by bib.

- 1♠ is pretty obvious, it's an opening bid with 5 Spades.
- East has 4-card support and game-going values, so he uses the Jacoby 2NT which shows precisely that type of hand.
- 3♦ is artificial, showing shortness in the bid suit.
- That 3♦ bid did not improve East's hand one little bit. KQ opposite a singleton constitutes wasted values. Sure, it's worth one trick, but that's a poor return on 5 HCP. East still thought of his hand as a 16-pointer, though, and further hoped that West had a little bit extra too. So East wheeled out good old RKC.
- West showed two Key Cards and the trump Queen.
- East sees that his side is missing only one Key Card. In a well-conducted auction, that should be enough for East to bid the slam. But, no doubt overwhelmed with shame at his earlier bidding, East passes.

Even 5♠ is dangerously high. The ♦A will be lost, and there is an inescapable Heart loser. That means that to make 11 tricks, E-W must hope that the Club finesse works, and that both majors split 3-2. That's an approximately 20% proposition.

That auction violated two principles:

- RKC was used prematurely. If East still liked his hand after learning about East's singleton, he should try a cue-bid first, to get Partner's opinion.
- RKC identified just one missing Key Card, yet East did not bid the slam (in this case wisely so, because to the appalling earlier bidding).

A better auction would be: 1♠ 2NT, 3♦ 4♠, Pass

## What's Trump?

As the RKC responses include the King and Queen of trumps, it is essential that both partners are in sync concerning the agreed trump suit. For example:

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
♠ A J 5	♠ K Q 10 4 3	1♠	
♥ A Q 9 8 6	♥ K J 6	2♥	4NT
♦ 8 6	♦ A K 9 7	??	
♣ Q 4 3	♣ 6		

When West responds 2♥, East can see that a Heart slam is likely. But she's missing three Key Cards (♠A, ♥A and ♣A) and also the trump Queen (♥Q). So she bids 4NT, which is the RKC ask.

Over to West. He has good support for Partner's Spades and may (erroneously) think that they are trump. In that case, West will respond 5♥, showing two Key Cards and no trump Queen (♠Q) when he should be showing two Aces and the real trump Queen which is the ♥Q. In the resulting confusion, East will think her side is missing the ♥Q and one of the Key Cards. That will prompt her to pass 5♥ in the mistaken belief that slam is a bit iffy (when actually it is ice cold).

How was West to know what trump suit East had in mind? The rules are simple:  
 (a) If a suit has been bid by one partner and raised by the other then obviously that is the agreed trump suit.

(b) Otherwise, the last suit bid naturally is the designated trump suit.

Those rules make things crystal clear. East's 4NT bid says "Make your RKC response based on the assumption that Hearts are trumps." Once West gets on the right page, he bids 5♠, showing two Key Cards and the Queen of trumps (♥).

Now, suppose that *West* is the dealer. In that case the auction may not go as smoothly as the one above. Look what happens. West raises Spades before East can raise Hearts. Now Spades is the agreed trump suit, so West responds

<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
1♥	1♠
2♠	4NT
5♥	??

5♥. East is the one who bid 4NT and who is in charge of the auction, but she is missing one key bit of information, namely the whereabouts of the ♥Q. If West does not hold that card then the slam depends on the Heart finesse.

It would have taken great foresight by East, but she'd have done better not to bother with the 1♠ bid, and to support Hearts immediately (say with a Jacoby 2NT bid). Now, with Hearts agreed and East in charge of the auction, it's easier for her to find out what needs to be found out. That's a complex example, but the moral of the story is simple ... plan the auction at the outset.

## The King Ask

♠ A K Q J 10 9 8	<i>West</i>	<i>East</i>
♥ 7	2♣	2♦
♦ A	2♠	3♠
♣ A Q J 10	4NT	5♦
	5NT	6♦
	??	

- 2♣ was artificial and strong
- 2♦ was waiting
- 3♠ was encouraging (with Spade support and a rotten hand, East would go straight to 4♠)
- 4NT was RKC
- 5♦ showed one Key Card, obviously the ♥A ... now West can be sure of making 6♠ and is hoping that East has the ♣K, in which case there's a grand slam.
- 5NT asks "How many Kings do you have?"
- 6♦ says "I have one King."

That auction did not work out so well, did it? West knows that East has one King, but is it the ♣K? The solution is for 5NT to ask for *specific Kings*. Now, if East responds 6♣, West will bid 7NT ... and, if East makes any other response, West will settle for 6♠.

Some points to remember:

- (a) The King Ask is an attempt to reach a grand slam, and using it *guarantees* that we have all five Key Cards (the 4 Aces and the trump King).
- (b) Be sure to agree with your Partner whether your King Ask is looking for the *number of Kings* or *specific Kings*. Just for the record, specific Kings is the more popular method and is superior. Persuade Partner that this is so.

Here's another thought. Your hand is **Axxxx, Kxx, Kxx, Kx**, Partner is dealer, and the auction goes: **1♥ 1♠, 3♦ 3♥, 4NT 5♥, 5NT**. Partner's 5NT is the King Ask, of course, and you are sensibly playing Specific Kings, and you happen to have been dealt the ♣K and ♦K. Which King do you show? Partner has shown a two-suiter in Hearts and Diamonds, so you can be 99% certain that it's the ♦K that Partner seeks. So, don't show the ♣K and then let Partner languish in 6♥. No, sirree! Bid the grand! If the King in Partner's second suit, *and* an extra King to boot, is not enough for 13 tricks then Partner's bidding needs to be examined closely during after-game drinks.

## The Queen Ask

The RKC responses partially include trump Queen information. If Responder has two Key Cards he will further indicate whether he has the trump Queen (5♠) or does not (5♥). But the 5♣ and 5♦ responses give no trump Queen information which is why they invented the Queen Ask. Here's a sample auction:

<i>West</i>		<i>East</i>	
1♠		2♥	
4NT		5♣	
5♦		??	

4NT was RKC, of course, and 5♣ said "0 or 3". 5♦ is now the cheapest non-signoff, and is used as the Queen Ask. The responses are:

- Return to trump suit (5♥) denies the trump Queen.
- Off-suit bids show the trump Queen *and* the King of the bid suit
- Bidding 5NT shows the trump Queen but denies any side-suit King.

## A Trump Queen Wrinkle

If we have a 9-card trump fit including the Ace, King and Queen then it's highly unlikely that we will lose a trump trick. But if our 9-card fit is missing the Queen then we are only about 50% likely to pick up the trump suit for no losers. That's why we include the trump Queen in the RKC responses.

But suppose that we have a 10-card fit. Now the Queen is hardly needed, as, for example, A10xxx opposite KJxxx plays for no losers about 90% of the time.

<i>West</i>		<i>East</i>		<i>West</i>		<i>East</i>	
♠ A 3 2		♠ K 7 4		1♥		2NT	
♥ 9 8 7 5 4 2		♥ A K J 10		3♣		4NT	
♦ A Q 4		♦ 7		5♠		7♥	
♣ 3		♣ A K 7 6 3		Pass			

- West rightly decided her hand was too good for a Weak Two
- East's 2NT showed at least 4-card support and game-going values (aka the Jacoby 2NT).
- 3♣ was conventional, showing shortness in Clubs
- 4NT was good old RKC
- 5♠ showed two Key Cards and the trump Queen.

That's strange, some will think. West claimed to have the ♥Q when it was clearly elsewhere. What's going on here? It's simple enough. West knew that her Partner had at least 4 trumps, and she had an extra trump herself. That gave the partnership a combined total of 10. So the trump Queen was strong favorite to drop on the second round. Put another way, West's extra trump was almost as good as having the Queen.

## No Trump Auctions

Let's assume a 15-17 1NT. It's almost universal that 1NT-4NT is *not* RKC (nor any other form of Blackwood). Instead, that 4NT invites slam, and Opener bids the slam if he is in the top half of his range. In the absence of long suits, 32 or 33 HCP is the usual standard for making 6NT, so Responder needs about 16 to make that slam invitation. That's an example of a 4NT bid which is not RKC. Now take a look at these two auctions:

1NT 2♥  
2♠ 3NT

1NT 2♥  
2♠ 4NT

The first auction is the same as 1NT-3NT, the only difference being that Responder uses a Jacoby Transfer along the way in order to show five Spades. And the second auction is best played in the same fashion ... it's the same as a 1NT-4NT auction except that it uses the transfer to show a 5-card suit along the way. That allows Opener to choose between game and slam, and also between No Trump and Spades.

That's great, but what if you pick up **QJ109762, 8, KQ4, AK**? Partner opens 1NT and your plan is to zoom slamwards. If Partner has all four missing Key Cards then 7♠ (or 7NT) is cold ... but if Partner has just two Key Cards then 11 tricks is probably the limit. It won't help to use Gerber (discussed later) because that only shows Aces, you'll never learn about the ♠K. There are two solutions, take your pick:

- If you play Texas Transfers, then you can use 1NT 4♥, 4♠ 4NT as RKC.
- Better (in our opinion) is to play 1NT 2♥, 2♠ 4♣ as RKC (and not Gerber)

Try some Stayman auctions:

(A)  
1NT 2♣  
2♦ 4NT

(B)  
1NT 2♣  
2♦ 4♣

(C)  
1NT 2♣  
2♥ 4♣

(D)  
1NT 2♣  
2♥ 4NT

- In (A) Responder looked for a 4-4 major fit, and when there was not one he invited a No Trump slam. 4NT is not RKC because no suits have been bid naturally.
- Similarly, in (B) there are no natural suit bids, and 4♣ therefore cannot be RKC. It's Gerber.
- In (C), Hearts have been bid naturally, and 4♣ can be RKC with Hearts as trumps.
- In (D), 4NT is inviting slam in No Trump. Presumably, Responder has no fit in Hearts but does have 4 Spades. This auction could end up in 4NT or 6NT or 5♠ or 6♠.

## RKC in the Minors

Have you noticed that in the examples so far the trump suit has been a major? That's because the minor suits and RKC have an uneasy relationship, as illustrated in the following deal:

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
♠ 8	♠ J 7 6		1♣
♥ A 7	♥ K Q J	1♦	2♣
♦ A K Q 7 6 2	♦ J 8	4NT	5♦
♣ Q 9 3 2	♣ K J 10 7 5 4	<b>Oops!</b>	

4NT was RKC, and 5♦ showed one or four Key Cards. West can count and recognizes that East has only one Key Card, and that the partnership is missing two Key Cards. But it's an "Oops" moment! The bidding is already at 5♦ but the highest contract that E-W can make is 5♣.

The problem with the minors is that there is no space between 4NT RKC and 5 of a minor. Therefore, as here, the response to 4NT RKC will often get us too high. The solution is for our RKC ask to be made with a lower bid, and some (advanced) pairs use four of the agreed minor for this purpose. This treatment rejoices in the name of Minorwood, and in the hand given earlier the auction would go ... 1♣ 1♦, 2♣ 4♣, 4♥ 5♣, Pass. 4♣ was Minorwood, and 4♥ said "One Key Card". No "Oops" moment on *that* auction.

A full description of Minorwood is beyond the scope of this document, but some googling will unravel its mysteries. Be forewarned that this is a difficult convention, and should be no higher than Number 50 in "List of Conventions I Really Must Learn."

## Gerber

Suppose that we pick up: ♠ Q 10 4, ♥ 7 2, ♦ K, ♣ A K Q 8 7 6 2

That's a pretty good hand, and it gets even better when Partner opens 1NT (15-17). Is slam possible? To make 6NT we usually need about 32-33 HCP when both hands are balanced. Here we have only 29-31 HCP, but thanks to those long Clubs, there might well be 12 tricks on this deal.

One danger is that the opponents have two Aces, but we cannot bid 4NT now, that is quantitative. Instead, we have Gerber for this hand. 4♣ now asks for Aces (*not* Key Cards), and the responses are what you would expect:

**4♦ 0 or 4 Aces**  
**4♥ 1 Ace**  
**4♠ 2 Aces**  
**4NT 3 Aces**

Let's say that Opener responds 4♠, showing two Aces, so there is no danger of the opponents cashing two Aces to defeat our slam. True, they might be able to cash two tricks in one of the suits, but we don't have any fancy gadget to help you find that out. So we'd just bid 6♣ or 6NT and hope for the best.

Gerber is not our favorite convention because opportunities to use it are quite rare. Not that that stops people from overusing it, or from having mishaps about when 4♣ is Gerber and when it is not. Try these rules:

- It's Gerber if our opening bid was 1NT or 2NT ...
- ... and Clubs have not been bid naturally ...
- ... and 4♣ has been defined as RKC in this particular auction
- ... and 4♣ was not bid in a competitive auction.

There's a more modern version of Gerber. 4♣ is the ask, and the answers are:

**4♦ 0 or 3 Aces**  
**4♥ 1 or 4 Aces**  
**4♠ 2 Aces, minimum hand**  
**4NT 2 Aces, maximum hand**

As you can see, these responses are very similar to RKC, except with hand strength replacing the trump Queen. This lets you have your cake and eat it too ... you can check on Aces ... and also on hand strength. Here's a possible auction:

**1NT 4♣**  
**4♦ 4♥**  
**6NT Pass**

4♣ was Modern Gerber, and 4♦ said "Zero or three Aces". Hopefully, Responder can tell that it is actually three Aces, so she makes the cheapest bid to ask "Min or Max?". This is analogous to the Queen Ask, of course.

### After Preempts

Once in a while, Partner will preempt, and you will want to inquire about Key Cards. You could use 4NT for this, but that won't always work out well, particularly if the preempt suit is a minor. So here are a few fancy RKC asks for your perusal:



**3♦ 4♣ and 3♣ 4♦:** Raising Partner's minor is furthering the preempt, so consider using 4 of the other minor as RKC.

**2♠ 4♣ and 2♥ 4♣ and 2♦ 4♣:** Just because we use 4♣ here does not make the bid Gerber ... it is better used as RKC in Partner's preempt suit.

The above is not a widely used treatment, and is by partnership agreement. Also by partnership agreement is a change in the responses to:

- |                      |                                      |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> step | 0 Key Cards                          |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> step | 1 Key Card, no Queen of trumps       |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> step | 1 Key Card with the Queen of trumps  |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> step | 2 Key Cards, no Queen of trumps      |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> step | 2 Key Cards with the Queen of trumps |

There is no need for any more steps because, in theory at least, the preemptor cannot have three (or more) Key Cards.