

## **Roman Keycard Blackwood (Part 1)**

**By Fred Gitelman**

The Blackwood convention was developed about 60 years ago by **Easley Blackwood** of Indianapolis, one of the great Bridge players and theorists of his time. The purpose of the Blackwood convention is to find out how many Aces and Kings your partner holds in order to make slam bidding more accurate. Here's how it works: In most auctions a bid of 4NT is the Blackwood convention and carries the message, "I am interested in slam, partner, how many Aces do you have?"

The responses are:

5 Clubs = I have either zero Aces or all four Aces

5 Diamonds = I have one Ace

5 Hearts = I have two Aces

5 Spades = I have three Aces

Subsequently the 4NT bidder can bid 5NT to give this message, "We have all four Aces between our two hands, partner. I think we might have a grand slam, however, so please tell me how many Kings you have!" The responses are similar:

6 Clubs = I have either zero Kings or all four Kings

6 Diamonds = I have one King

6 Hearts = I have two Kings

6 Spades = I have three Kings

Over the years, Blackwood has gradually become accepted as part of "standard" bidding. Experts eventually developed ways for showing voids (which can be just as important as Aces) in response to Blackwood, and for responding to Blackwood when the opponents interfere over the 4NT inquiry. Several variations of Blackwood were also developed in which the responder was able to show the specific Aces that he held. In addition, other conventions have been developed in which bids other than 4NT and 5NT are used to ask for Aces and Kings (such as the popular **Gerber** 4 Club convention).

In the last 10 years or so, a relatively new version of Blackwood has become increasingly popular among serious Bridge players. This variation is known as Roman Keycard Blackwood (or RKCB) because it evolved from the Ace-asking mechanisms used by the great Italian teams of the early 1960s. **Eddie Kantar**, one of the top American Bridge players and writers, is widely credited with popularizing RKCB through a series of articles he wrote in *The Bridge World* magazine in the early 1980s. In my opinion, RKCB is clearly superior to old-fashioned Blackwood and it is quite easy to play. I strongly recommend RKCB to all Bridge players who have been playing the game for a year or more.

RKCB is also initiated by a bid of 4NT, but it is important to remember that RKCB only applies when a trump suit has been agreed upon (more about this later). The basic concept of RKCB is that this convention allows for the King and Queen of the agreed trump suit to be shown by the responder to the 4NT inquiry. Why is this a good idea? The King of trump is, in fact, almost as important as an Ace for slam purposes. If the partnership is missing both the King of trump and another Ace, a slam contract is very unlikely to be any better than on a finesse for the King of trump. Similarly, if the Queen of trump as well as an Ace is missing, slam rates to be a moderate

proposition at best (unless the partnership holds 10 or more trumps between the 2 hands).

In RKCB, the four Aces and the King of the agreed trump suit are defined as keycards. There are always five keycards in total. Note that although the Queen of trump is involved in RKCB (more on this later), she is not considered a keycard like her husband, the King! The responses to the 4NT inquiry are as follows:

5 Clubs = I have either zero or three keycards

5 Diamonds = I have either one or four keycards

5 Hearts = I have either two or five keycards, but I don't have the Queen of trump

5 Spades = I have either two or five keycards, and I have the Queen of trump too

It is true that there is some ambiguity in each of these responses (in that each response is used to show two different numbers of keycards). In practice, however, you almost always know (from the earlier bidding) exactly how many keycards your partner is showing when he responds to RKCB. You should probably know that there have been some spectacular disasters in the history of RKCB when the 4NT bidder thought the responder's 5 Club response was showing three keycards when, in fact, the responder held zero keycards! The result of such a disaster is usually a grand slam off several Aces, invariably doubled and down several tricks. It is my opinion that if you are careful about when you use RKCB, it is highly unlikely that this will ever happen to you!

Several experts these days prefer to switch around the 5 Club and 5 Diamond responses to RKCB:

5 Clubs = I have either one or four keycards

5 Diamonds = I have either zero or three keycards

This variation is known as **RKCB 1430** (because the 1 or 4 response comes before the 0 or 3 response). RKCB 1430 is a better name than the (perhaps technically correct) RKCB 1403 because 1430 is a number all duplicate Bridge players should be familiar with \* it is the number of points you receive for bidding and making a vulnerable slam in a major suit. 1403 is harder to remember than 1430! I prefer to play RKCB 1430 in my serious partnerships, but it should be noted that many experts still prefer the original 0314 responses to RKCB.

Regardless of which version of RKCB you choose to play, you will notice that the 5 Heart and 5 Spade responses identify the presence (or absence) of the Queen of trump, while the 5 Club and 5 Diamond responses do not. After a 5 Club or 5 Diamond response to RKCB, the 4NT bidder can then ask the responder about the Queen of trump. He does so by bidding the next step that is not the trump suit.

For example, if Hearts is the agreed trump suit and 5 Clubs is the response to 4NT, 5 Diamonds by the 4NT bidder asks about the Queen of trump.

Again assuming Hearts is the agreed trump suit, if 5 Diamonds is the response to 4NT, 5 Hearts by the 4NT bidder would be a signoff bid (that is, a statement that 2 or more keycards are missing), while 5 Spades would ask about the Queen of trump.

**There are several popular schemes for responding to the asking bid for the Queen of trump.**

Here is the one that I favor:

- To deny the Queen of trump, return to the trump suit at the cheapest possible level.
- To show the Queen of trump as well as one or more side Kings (that is, a King outside of the trump suit), bid the cheapest suit in which you have a side King.
- To show the Queen of trump but to deny any side Kings, bid 5NT

Here are some examples. In all cases we will continue to assume that Hearts is the agreed trump suit, that partner has bid RKCB, and that the partnership has agreed to play 1430 responses to RKCB.

Spades = K x  
Hearts = K Q x x  
Diamonds = x x x x  
Clubs = K x x

Respond 5 Clubs to 4NT to show your one (or four) keycard(s). If partner asks about the Queen of trump with 5 Diamonds, you should bid 5 Spades to show the Queen of trump along with the King of Spades. Do not bid 6 Clubs over the Queen ask (to show the King of Clubs as well as the Queen of Hearts). Bidding 6 Clubs (instead of 5 Spades) would also deny the King of Spades as you should always show your cheapest King first.

Spades = A x x x  
Hearts = K x x  
Diamonds = A x x  
Clubs = Q x x

Respond 5 Diamonds to 4NT to show your three (or zero) keycards. If partner asks about the Queen of trump with 5 Spades (remember, 5 Hearts by partner would be a signoff bid) go back to 6 Hearts (the trump suit at the cheapest possible level) to deny holding the Queen of trump.

Spades = A x x x  
Hearts = K Q x  
Diamonds = A x x  
Clubs = Q x x

This is the same hand as the previous example but with the Queen of Hearts in addition. Respond 5 Diamonds to 4NT as before. Over the 5 Spade Queen ask, you should bid 5NT to show the Queen of trump, but to deny any side Kings. The King of Hearts is not a side King, it is a keycard \* you have already shown that card over 4NT, so don't worry that you can't show it again! There are three important points to remember about asking for the Queen of trump. The first one is pretty obvious, but it should still be mentioned:

Do not ask for the Queen of trump if you hold that card!

Sometimes the Queen ask takes the partnership above five of the agreed trump suit (for example when Hearts is the agreed suit and 5 Diamonds is the response to RKCB). In this case, the Queen ask promises that the partnership holds all five keycards and that the 4NT bidder is interested in a possible grand slam.

Occasionally, it is correct to tell your partner you have the Queen of trump even when you don't! For example, if you partner opens 1 Spade playing five-card majors, and later bids RKCB after Spades are agreed, it is correct to show the Queen of trump anytime you have five or more Spades! The reason for this is that the Queen of trump is usually not relevant when the partnership holds 10 or more cards in the trump suit. Even if the trump suit is as weak as: A 9 8 7 6 opposite K 5 4 3 2

There is almost an 80% chance that the opponents' trump will divide two to one.

As with the Queen ask, there are several popular ways to ask for Kings using RKCB. Most of these (like regular Blackwood) use a subsequent bid of 5NT by the 4NT bidder as the King asking bid. There are four important things to remember about the King ask:

Asking for Kings promises that the partnership holds all five keycards as well as the Queen of

trump.

Asking for Kings is a grand slam try \* if you know that a grand slam is out of the picture, do not ask for Kings, just sign off in a small slam.

As the responder to the King ask, do not even think about trying to show the King of trump. The King of trump is a keycard which you have already shown in response to partner's 4NT.

There is no reason to use Roman responses to the 5NT King ask. Either agree to use "standard Blackwood responses" here, or agree to bid your specific Kings as cheaply as possible when partner bids 5NT. Either scheme is reasonable (I prefer specific Kings). One last important question about RKCB is: "How do you know what the agreed trump suit is?" In most cases this will be obvious, as there will be one suit that the partnership has bid and raised. If the partnership has bid and raised two suits, I suggest that the first suit bid and raised is the keycard suit. If there is no suit that has been bid and raised, there are two reasonable agreements you can make:

Asking for Kings promises that the partnership holds all five keycards as well as the Queen of trump.

**Asking for Kings is a grand slam try** \* if you know that a grand slam is out of the picture, do not ask for Kings, just sign off in a small slam. That should be enough information to get you and your partner started with RKCB.

Check out Part 2 of this article to learn more. Roman Keycard Blackwood (Part 2)

By Fred Gitelman

This **second part of my article on Roman Keycard Blackwood** is for two groups:

Those of you that have been playing Roman Keycard Blackwood (RKCB) for a while and would like to learn ways to improve your results with this convention.

Those of you that have read my introduction to RKCB and are dying for more. I should warn this group -- I think you should try to master my first article before trying the stuff in this one!

Several of the suggestions I will be making in this article are based on the following principle:

The one (or four) keycard response is more frequent than the zero (or three) keycard response.

This may seem absurd to you. In fact, I have no way to justify this claim except by experience \* the one or four keycard response just seems more common than zero or three.

This is the main reason that I prefer to play the **1430 version of RKCB**. In RKCB 1430, the 5 Club response to RKCB shows one or four keycards, while the 5 Diamond response shows zero or three keycards. In the original form of RKCB, it is the other way around.

**1430 has two main advantages** over regular (0314) RKCB:

When Hearts is the agreed trump suit and the response to 4NT is 5 Diamonds, there is no room to ask about the Queen of trump without committing to slam (5 Spades is the Queen ask in this auction). This leaves the RKCB bidder in a bind when exactly one keycard is missing and the RKCB bidder does not hold the Queen of trump. Since the zero or three response doesn't seem to happen as much as the one or four response, it is nice that 1430 uses 5 Diamonds to show zero or three (which minimizes the frequency that the described problem will arise).

1430 makes life much more comfortable for the 4NT bidder when Clubs is the agreed trump suit. Since the 5 Diamond response takes the partnership above 5 Clubs (which likely is the limit of the hand if two keycards are missing) it is a good idea to make sure this happens as infrequently as possible. 1430 RKCB achieves this (since 5 Diamonds show the less common zero or three response)

If you are an RKCB veteran, you have probably been involved in these kinds of situations just mentioned, where the RKCB response gets the partnership too high or when there is no room to ask about the Queen of trump. Perhaps the most common RKCB disaster takes place when a

minor suit is agreed and responder's 5 Heart or 5 Spade response to RKCB revealed that two keycards are missing \* the partnership is doomed to play in a poor (or impossible) slam contract. There are some solutions to these sorts of problems, which I will describe soon. First, I must mention what should be an obvious truth about RKCB that relates to this subject:

**DO NOT BID RKCB UNLESS YOU ARE PREPARED FOR EVERY RESPONSE YOUR PARTNER MIGHT MAKE!**

If it is possible that your partner's keycard response will get you overboard, then it is almost certain that RKCB is not the right bid to make. There is one other "getting too high" problem with RKCB of which you should be aware. Suppose that Hearts is the agreed suit, you have one keycard and you want to bid RKCB. You do not have the Queen of Hearts, however, and it is possible that your partner has that card along with two keycards. Do not bid RKCB as your partner's possible 5 Spade response (showing two keycards and the Queen of trump) will get you overboard! I have seen some excellent players with some serious egg on their faces after suffering this particular RKCB disaster. So I highly recommend not using RKCB (1430 or otherwise) if there is a danger that partner's response will get you too high. There is a good trick you can use in these circumstances that will sometimes help:

**IF YOU WANT TO BID RKCB BUT PARTNER'S RESPONSE COULD GET YOU TOO HIGH, TRY TO GET YOUR PARTNER TO BID RKCB.**

For example, take the situation where Hearts are agreed and you have one keycard and no Queen of Hearts. You want to bid RKCB but you fear the 5 Spade (two with Queen) response. Suppose partner has just cuebid 4 Clubs. Instead of bidding RKCB try cuebidding 4 Diamonds. Perhaps partner will bid RKCB. Then your 5 Club (1430) or 5 Diamond (0314) response will tell partner that two keycards are missing and the bidding will be low enough to stop in 5 Hearts. What if partner does not cooperate (by bidding RKCB) for you and just signs off in 4 Hearts? Well, now you can try cuebidding 4 Spades to give him one last chance! If partner still refuses to bid RKCB, you may be able to figure out why and judge accordingly. Also, partner will probably figure out why you, a great lover of RKCB, have failed to use the convention yourself.

Always think about the inferences that can be drawn from your partner's decision to cuebid when it seemed like he could have used RKCB instead. Some partnerships have gone so far as to define a 4 Spade cuebid when Hearts is the agreed suit as a virtual transfer to RKCB \* that is, cuebidding 4 Spades when Hearts is set as trump almost demands partner ask for keycards with 4NT. This approach has another nice benefit.

Remember I discussed how the 5 Diamond response to RKCB when Hearts are agreed does not allow the trump Queen to be resolved at the five-level? Suppose, playing 1430, you have four keycards but no Queen of trump (Hearts). If you bid RKCB and partner responds 5 Diamonds (showing zero keycards), you can't find out about the Queen of Hearts at a convenient level. If you can get your partner to bid RKCB, however, (say by using the 4 Spade "transfer to RKCB"), your response will be 5 Clubs (showing one or four) and partner will have room to ask about the Queen of Hearts at the five-level.

An even more popular (and probably more theoretically sound) way of dealing with all of the RKCB problems where Hearts are trump is to use the 4 Spade bid itself to ask for Keycards. The 1430-style responses are as follows (switch the first two for 0314 responses):

4 NT = one or four keycards

5 Clubs = zero or three keycards

5 Diamonds = two or five keycards without the Queen of Hearts

5 Hearts = two or five keycards with the Queen of Hearts

Notice that this variation of RKCB solves both of the problems with RKCB when Hearts is trump: The RKCB never gets you above 5 Hearts (which could be too high). When 4 Spades is used as RKCB, the highest responding step is 5 Hearts. Not so with 4NT RKCB where a 5 Spade response is possible. There is always room to ask for the Queen of Hearts below the 5 Heart level when 4 Spades is used as RKCB. The 5 Diamond response to 4NT RKCB does not allow this. There are many fine players that would claim that being able to cuebid 4 Spades when Hearts is trump is too valuable a bid to give up (which playing 4 Spades as RKCB forces you to do). The answer is simple when you think about it \* since you don't need 4NT to bid RKCB anymore when Hearts are trump, bid 4NT to show a cuebid in Spades! In other words, we are switching the meanings of 4 Spades and 4NT when Hearts are trump. In my experience, the only real problem with using 4 Spades as RKCB for Hearts is that sometimes it is not clear whether 4 Spades should be a natural bid or RKCB. For example:

Opener.....Responder

1 Spade.....2 Hearts

3 Hearts.....3 Spades

4 Hearts.....4 Spades

Is 3 Spades a cuebid in Spades, moving towards a Heart slam, or a bid that shows true Spade support? If 3 Spades is a cuebid, it is not unreasonable to use the subsequent 4 Spade bid as RKCB. If 3 Spades promises support then it makes much more sense to play 4 Spades in this auction as a suggestion of a final contract.

Strong suggestion: If you are going to play bids besides 4NT as RKCB, you and your partner should be very careful to define EXACTLY when these bids apply.

If you do not take the proper time to do this, I guarantee that it will just be a matter of time before your non-4NT RKCBs get you into trouble. Obviously if one partner thinks that a bid is RKCB while the other partner thinks that the same bid is natural, there is serious potential for disaster! You may have noticed that 4NT RKCB works fine when Spades is trump, but that 4 Spades RKCB is better when Hearts is trump. Not surprisingly, it turns out using 4 Hearts as RKCB when Diamonds is trump and 4 Diamonds as RKCB when Clubs is trump, are also big improvements. Again, please agree with your partner on clear definitions of when these non-4NT RKCBs apply before you start using them! The concept of using bids lower than 4NT to ask for Keycards has been given a few different names in Bridge literature. Kickback and Redwood are probably the two most common names that players use for such bids.