

Roman Key Card Blackwood

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Blackwood

Blackwood was invented by Easley Blackwood in 1933 and is the most popular slam convention. The modern variant has been expanded to include the king and queen of trumps as well and is called Roman Key Card Blackwood (RKC). 4NT is always blackwood when a major suit fit has been agreed and a game force has been established. With this convention 5♣ and 5♦ show 0 or 3 and 1 or 4 key cards. A response of 5♥ shows 2 without the queen and 5♠ shows 2 with the queen of trumps. Some partnerships reverse the meanings of the 5♣ and 5♦ where 5♣ would show 1 or 4 keycards and 5♦ would show 0 or 3 keycards.

The mechanics of RKC are relatively straight forward (i.e. 5♣ and 5♦ show 0 or 3 and 1 or 4 key cards and 5♥ show 2 without the queen and 5♠ shows 2 with the queen of trumps). However, it is much more complicated to realize when RKC is appropriate and what the logical implications are.

When one of the partnership bids 4NT (RKC) the following pre-conditions are recommended:

- The appropriate strength to take 12 or more tricks has been established
- There is reasonable assurance that 2 quick losers are not possible in a side suit
- The potential responses do not take you above safety of the five level with insufficient key cards (e.g. a response of 5♠ that shows 2 with the queen with ♥ as the agreed trump suit when the 4NT bidder only has 1 key card)

After the initial response the cheapest suit below the trump suit at the five level asks for the queen of trumps (if not already shown). A bid of 5NT promises all the key cards as well as the queen of trumps and asks for specific kings up the line and allows responder to bid a grand slam with the appropriate hand. A bid of 6 of a suit below the agreed suit instead of 5NT asks for third round control for a grand slam. Here are some examples assuming spades is the agreed suit:

4NT - 5♣ - 5♦ asks for trump queen (bid 5NT with trump queen and no kings. Bid a new suit with that king and the trump queen). You can show the trump queen with extra trump length (e.g. you promised at least 4 trumps but have 5).

4NT - 5♣ - 5NT asks for specific kings up the line and promises all the key cards and the trump queen. Responder generally bids any specific kings but needs to be careful if this would take the partnership above the 6 level of their suit (e.g. when hearts are trumps).

4NT - 5♥ - 6♦ asks for third round control of this suit and promises all the key cards and trump queen. In this case either the queen or a doubleton is adequate. Partner might have a hand with AKxxx of ♦, and all the key cards.

4NT - 5♣ asks for the diamond king for a grand slam.
5NT - 6♣ Partner can bid 6 hearts with the heart
6♦ king. Without the ♦ king partner bids 6 of the trump suit.

As you can see Blackwood has come a long way since 1933 with these modern enhancements mostly being developed over the past 30 years. Initially, the only information available was the number of aces and kings. **Finally, if you bid 4NT and get a response where you are missing no more than 1 key card and are still not sure if you should bid a slam you have asked the wrong question. You should have bid differently earlier in the auction.**

RKC

On occasion the opponents interfere in your RKC auction. For example, your suit is ♥ and they bid 5♦ over your 4NT bid. The following is recommended in this situation:

Double	0 or 3 key cards
Pass	1 or 4 key card
Next step	2 without queen
Second step	2 with queen

If the opponents interfere above the 5 level of your trump suit the following is recommended:

Pass	odd number of KC
Double	even number of KC

RKC

On occasion responder will have a void when responding to RKC. This presents a dilemma for responder as the void may be enough to make slam when the opponents have the ace of that suit even though 2 key cards are missing. I usually don't show the void as my experience has confirmed that it is usually opposite the Ace in partner's hand and is of no value and could lead to being in slam missing two critical key cards. Another problem occurs when partner may not be sure where the void is located making evaluation of grand slam prospects difficult. If you have made some previous bid confirming shortness (e.g. splinter) and you elect to show the void the following responses are suggested:

5NT	0 or 3 key cards with a void
6♣	1 or 4 key card with a void
6♦	2 without queen and a void
6♥	2 with queen and a void

RKC

A modified version of RKC is available when partner preempts. After a preempt by partner it is suggested that responses of 4♣ (or 4♦ when partner opens 3♣) be used as RKC with responses as follows:

1 st step	0 key cards
2 nd step	1 key card with no trump queen
3 rd step	1 key card with trump queen
4 th step	2 key cards with no trump queen
5 th step	2 key cards with trump queen

This allows the partnership to play at the four level when 2 key cards are missing which is highly preferred especially as many players do not wait for suits with 2 of the top 3 to preempt. Some of my partners preempt with suit quality ranging from J high to AKQ making this convention highly desirable.

RKC

While 4NT as key card asking is quite useful when the suit is a major, this treatment is not ideal when the agreed suit is a minor as the response could land the pair at too high a level when two key cards are missing. Fortunately, there is a solution to this problem which involves the use of 4 of the minor to ask for key cards. The responses to this bid should not land you at too high a level and will keep you out of slam when you are off 2 or more key cards.

There are some requirements for the proper use of 4 of a minor suit to ask for key cards as summarized below:

- A game force must have been established earlier in the auction (e.g. a two over one auction)
- The suit must have been bid naturally by either side earlier in the auction

Therefore, Minorwood would not apply in these auctions:

3♣ (pass) 4♣

1♣ (3♥) 4♣

RKC

However, Minorwood would apply in these auctions:

1♥ (pass) 2♦ (pass)
4♦

1♦ (Pass) 2♣ (pass)
3♣ (Pass) 4♣

1♥ (pass) 2♦ (pass)
3♣ (Pass) 4♣

RKC

After the initial response, a bid of 4NT by the Minorwood bidder is sign off while a bid of 5 of the minor is also sign off. New suit bids ask for either the queen of trumps or specific kings depending on the auction. **Finally, if you bid Minorwood and get a response and are still not sure if you should bid a slam you have asked the wrong question. You should have bid differently earlier in the auction.**

Minorwood follow up auctions:

4♦ (pass) 4♥ (pass)
4♠

The 4♥ response showed 0 or 3 key cards.
4♠ asks for the trump queen

4♦ (Pass) 4♥ (pass)
4NT

The 4♥ response showed 0 or 3 key cards.
4NT is signoff

4♣ (pass) 4♠ (pass)
5♦

The 4♠ response showed 2 without the queen.

5♦ asks for specific kings up the line.

While Blackwood as well as Roman Key Card Blackwood are excellent conventions, they are inadequate if the person wishing to ask for key cards has a void as partner might have the ace of the suit where you have a void while you are missing a key card in a suit where you have losers.

Fortunately, there is a tool available on some hands to ask for key cards outside of the suit you are void. This involves a jump to the five level in the suit for which you are void which asks for key cards outside of this suit. Care must be taken to not jump in a suit which could confuse partner. In general, a clear fit must have been established (normally in a major) before Exclusion would apply.

After the initial response to Exclusion Blackwood, bids of new suits below six of the agreed trump suit asks for specific kings up the line and promise all the relevant key cards. Care must be taken if the response takes you above six of the agreed trump suit.

Care must also be taken to not overuse Exclusion Blackwood. For example do not use this convention if there is a danger that a side suit could have two quick losers.

See examples of auctions where Exclusion Blackwood would apply”

1♥ - 2NT

3♦ - 5♣

2NT was a forcing raise. 3♦ showed a singleton and 5♣ is Exclusion.

1♥ - 2NT

3♦ - 3♠

2NT was a forcing raise. 3♦ showed a singleton or void. 3♠ showed a ♠ control and now 5♦ is Exclusion.

See additional examples of auctions where Exclusion Blackwood would apply”

1♦ - 2♦

4♠

4♠ in this case would be exclusion. Note, with 6-5 distribution, Opener should bid 2♠ followed by 3♠ later. This is a rare case where exclusion would apply with a jump to the 4 level.

1♥ - 2♣

2♥ - 3♥

5♦

2♣ created a game force and nominally natural, 3♥ shows 3 card support and 5♦ is Exclusion.

Please note that Exclusion **only applies** when there is a jump to the 5 level. If the suit bid is not a jump it is merely a cue bid. The only exception is when 1NT or 2NT is opened and responder then transfers to a major at the 4 level. New suits by responder after this start would be Exclusion.

You open 1♥ and partner bids 2NT (GF raise with 4+ trumps). What do you bid.

A)

♠5

♥AJ10952

♦AKJ52

♣A

Bid 4NT. If partner has 1 KC you are at worst on a finesse for slam. If they have 2 KC I will ask for 3rd round ♦ control for a grand slam.

B)

♠A9

♥A10873

♦AQJ107

♣10

Bid 4♦. Partner will understand that you have a good ♦ suit and controls in each suit. You will pass if partner only bids 4♥ over this.

C)

♠KQ87

♥KQ965

♦AK

♣Q3

Bid 3♥. You have a nice hand but lack a ♣ control. It would be a mistake to bid 4NT as partner may not have a ♣ control. Partner should show their controls over 3♥ as partner knows you are unlimited.

RKC

You and your partner have agreed on ♥ as the trump suit and your partner bids 4NT but the pesky opponent bids 5♦ interfering. What now?

A)

♠98765

♥AK52

♦J52

♣AK

Double showing 0 or 3 KC.
Partner will know from the previous bidding if you have 0 or 3.

B)

♠Q109

♥AJ873

♦QJ7

♣Q10

Pass. You have 1 KC. If partner doubles this bid it should confirm that we are off 2 KC's and offer the chance to defend.

C)

♠KJ87

♥KQ965

♦AK

♣QJ

Bid 5♠ showing 2 KC with the trump queen. This would anyway be your bid without interference.

You open 1♥ and partner bids 2NT (game forcing raise). You show your ♣ shortness and partner bids 4NT. You show your 2 key cards and partner bids 5NT. What now?

A)

♠98
♥AK532
♦KQJ102
♣2

You can temporize with 6♦ but you are surely bidding a grand slam with this hand. I would probably bid 7NT which I expect to be cold.

B)

♠K1097
♥AK873
♦Q973
♣2

Bid 6♥. You have the king of ♠ but can not bid 6♠ as this is above slam in ♥. You have nothing special other than what you have already shown.

C)

♠J87
♥KQ965
♦AK76
♣3

Bid 6♦ showing the king of ♦. Let's see what partner does next.

RKC

You open 1♠ and partner bids 2NT (game forcing raise). You show your ♣ shortness and partner bids 4NT. You show your 1 key card with a 5♦ bid and partner bids 5♥ asking for the trump queen. What now?

A)

♠KQ984

♥QJ52

♦KQ2

♣2

Bid 6♦ which shows the trump queen and ♦ king.

B)

♠KQ1097

♥KQ87

♦Q97

♣2

Bid 6♥. You have the queen of ♠ and the king of ♥.

C)

♠AQ987

♥QJ65

♦QJ7

♣Q

Bid 5NT showing the queen of trumps and no king outside of trumps.

Your partner opens 3♠. What now?

A)

♠J84

♥AKJ52

♦AKQ2

♣2

Bid 4♣. You will bid slam if partner has 2 key cards.

B)

♠97

♥AQJ7

♦AQJ97

♣KQ

Bid 4♠. Slam is not a good proposition even if partner has solid trumps.

C)

♠Q98

♥AKJ65

♦AKJ73

♣

Bid 5NT. This is grand slam force. Partner will bid 7♠ with the AK of trumps which should have a very good play. This is wrong hand to ask for key cards as the ace of ♣ has no value.

You open 1♠ and partner bids 2NT (game forcing raise). You show your ♣ shortness and partner bids 4NT. You show your 1 key card with a 5♦ bid and partner bids 5NT. You bid 6♦ showing the ♦ king. Partner bids 6♥. What now?

A)

♠AJ842

♥KJ52

♦KQ2

♣2

Bid 7♥. This should show the ♥ king.

B)

♠AJ987

♥Q97

♦KQ97

♣9

Bid 6♠. Partner is looking for the ♥ king for a grand slam.

C)

♠A9874

♥KJ65

♦K73

♣2

Bid 7♥. Yes you have a minimum but you must respect partner and commit to the grand slam. Partner will take into account that you might have a minimum.