

AN ACE-ASKING REVIEW

by Leonard McCormick

One of the most fascinating parts of the bidding process in bridge is the fact that a partnership gets to decide which language they want to speak. I have attempted to give you clear choices on finding a common language with your partner as to how to convey how many potential losers may exist in any given contract. I am fortunate to be able to play with quite a few partners. Each one of these partnerships employs different methods of finding out the number of aces, kings, trump queen, etc. Highly distributional hands further complicate the process. My “suggestions” are just that--“suggestions.” The most critical element is making sure that you and your partner are speaking the **same** language.

Standard Blackwood (not key card)

4NT is generally ace-asking when NT has not been mentioned in the auction and a suit has been agreed upon.

Ex. 1S, 3S, 4NT(ace-asking) with simple 5C showing 0 or 4 aces, 5D showing 1 ace, 5 Hearts showing 2 aces, and 5 spades showing 3 aces.

A 4NT opening bid is ace-asking.

Ex. 4NT, 5D is one ace. 4NT, 5C shows zero aces. Opener would not ask for aces holding all four aces. The next bid by the opener establishes the contract. 5NT at this point is not King-asking. Whatever the opener bids at this point is the final contract.

Standard Gerber

4C is generally ace-asking when NT has been bid in the

auction.

Ex. 1H, 2NT (Jacoby 2NT), 3D (singleton diamond), 4C (how many aces), 4D (0 or 4 aces), or 4H=1 ace, or 4S=2 Aces, or 4NT=3 Aces.

Normally, one does not ask for aces when he does not have at least one ace. If one goes on to ask for kings, he is confirming that the partnership has all four aces between the two hands. Often I hear “I didn’t know if the 4C bid was Gerber or a cue bid.” Just agree that 4C is ace-asking when NT has been bid, and it is not when NT has not been bid. Just decide to be consistent.

Key Card Blackwood

This convention is used when trying to obtain more specific information about your partner’s holdings while searching for slams. There are pitfalls into which you can fall if you reach slam missing really key ingredients. Key cards are the four aces and the trump king (total of five key cards). The two versions of key cards are **14-30** (5C=one or four key cards, and 5D=three or zero key cards) or **30-14**(5C= three or zero key cards, and 5D=one or four key cards). You and your partner need to agree on which version to play. There are arguments for both.

Ex. 1S, 2D, 3S, 4NT, 5D (1430=three or zero key cards).

When looking at your hand, you should be able to know whether it is three or zero key cards. As a safeguard, if your partner asked for your key cards and then stopped below slam, you pass if you have zero key cards and bid the slam if you have three keycards.

The next level in the key card bidding system is the same for 14-30 or 30-14. 5H shows two key cards **without** the queen of trumps. 5S

shows two key cards **with** the queen of trumps. This information can be invaluable since you cannot know this from a standard Blackwood auction. Knowing this information may propel you to the seven level or keep you from bidding six.

If you bid 5NT at this point in the auction, it asks for kings. There are at least two ways to respond to 5N. Players generally show the number of kings just as the traditional way of showing the number of aces (5C=0 or four kings, 5D shows one king, 5H shows two kings, 5S shows three kings and 5NT shows 4 kings. Other players prefer to show “specific” kings (name the suit). For example, 5NT, 6C would show the king of clubs. It does not deny holding other kings. After the bid of 6C, the ace-asker will show possession of the king of the next level suit up that is not trump. To bid the trump suit would ask the partner to pass.

Ex. When spades is the agreed upon trump suit, 5NT, 6C (king of clubs), 6D (King of diamonds), 6H (King of hearts).

If you have no kings, you bid 6S. Specific kings has the advantage of locating a critical king in a side suit. One might be able to add up to 13 tricks, knowing that the side suit will probably run. This is an example of when “points” are not the most important information in slam bidding. Hands with “wacky” distribution can take many tricks if a side suit is solid. You could be missing two key cards and go ahead and bid ahead knowing that you are not in danger.

As with any convention, it is critical to agree to play the whole convention. For example, there is no point in agreeing to play the Flannery Convention if you don't know what to do after your partner bids 2NT when you have opened 2D.

The Queen Ask

Holding 2 key cards, one is able to let partner know if they hold the queen of trumps. The opener can find out using “the Queen ask.” It employs the concept of finding the cheapest non-sign off bid.

Ex. 1H, 4C (splinter confirming hearts as trumps)
4NT (RKCB)
5D (3 key cards)
5S (cheapest non-sign off bid-Queen ask)
6H (denies the Queen of trumps)

5NT would have shown the Queen of trumps.

If the situation is correct, you can show both the Queen of trumps and the suit of an outside king.

5NT (Queen of trumps, but no side-suit king)
6C (Shows Queen of trumps and King of clubs)
6D (Shows Queen of trumps and King of Diamonds and denies King of clubs)
6H (Denies Queen of trumps and says nothing about side-suit kings)
6D (Shows Queen of trumps and the King of spades and denies both minor suit Kings)

If you choose to use the Queen-ask bid, it is imperative that you read more about the system, including the “extra-length provision.”

Void-Showing Responses For Roman Key Card Blackwood

When partner bids 4NT, a response of 5NT shows an even number of key cards and an unspecified void. 6C shows an odd #of key cards and a club void. If clubs are trumps, then it shows a void in another suit. 6D shows an odd # of key cards and a diamond void if hearts or spades are trumps. If hearts are trumps, then it shows a spade void. 6H shows an odd # of key cards and a heart void, if spades are trumps. If hearts are trumps, then it shows a spade void.

“Minorwood”

This convention was invented to be able to ask for key cards at as low a level as possible.

Ex. 1D, 3D (invitational), 4D is Minorwood, asking for key cards in diamonds. The reponses are based on the same premise as 14-30 or 30-14:

Using 14-30, 4H would show 1 or 4 key cards, 4S would show 3 or 0 key cards. In 30-14, 4H would show 3 or 0 key cards, and 4S would show 1 or 4 key cards. Bidding 4NT would show 2 key cards without the queen of trumps, and 5 clubs would show 2 key cards with the queen of trumps. Bidding 5D would ask for kings in the same manner as previously described when asking for key cards.

Most experts tend to play 14-30 in Minorwood sequences.

If a bidding sequence has gone 1C, 4C (Minorwood), and the next response is 4S (2 key cards without the trump queen), requestor bids 5D to ask for kings, and 4NT or 5C to play there.

However, if the sequence has gone 1C, 4C (Minorwood), 4H (3 or 0 keycards) requestor bids 4S to ask for kings.

“Kickback Blackwood”

This bid was created to attempt to keep the bidding at a lower level. Some other systems would get the bid too high before there would be time to correct. The problem with this bid is that the partnership must agree exactly when “Kickback” is in force. It can easily be mistaken for a control cue bid. It requires that the partnership agree upon a trump suit at a low level. If that is possible then the following applies:

- 4D is key card for clubs
- 4H is key card for diamonds
- 4S is key card for hearts
- 4NT is key card for spades

An example would be 1S, 3S (invitational). Then the above bids would apply if the opener has a really good hand. 1S, 3S, 4S is key card for spades.

The answers to these requests correspond to the 30-14 form of Roman Key Card.

“Exclusion Blackwood”

Also known as “Voidwood,” this bid was invented by Bobby Goldman to cover the situation when the Blackwood-asker has a void, often in a suit bid by the opponents. The asker with the void wants to know about key cards in all of the other suits using Roman Key Card Blackwood as the guide. There are only 4 key cards (the three aces outside the void suit and the King of trumps).

The asker jumps to the five-level of the void suit. A typical sequence would be 1S, 3S, 5C. The steps would be as follows:

1st step – 0 or 3 key cards (1 or 4 if playing 14-30)

2nd step – 1 or 4 key cards or (0 or 3)

3rd step – 2 key cards w/o trump queen

4th step – 2 key cards with trump queen

The whole system can be quite complex, but sticking to the above guidelines can give you a valuable tool.

“Baby Blackwood”

This bid is an easy and useful tool. The assumption is that the partnership has agreed upon a trump suit below the four level. For example, 1S, 3S (when 3S is invitational) 3NT now becomes a key card asking bid. The responses follow either 14-30 or 30-14 by partnership agreement.

The only thing that would be sacrificed would be a weak 3S bid.

“Pre-emptive Blackwood”

How many times has your partner opened 3 clubs and you hold a powerful hand? If you knew that the trump suit were solid, you would be able to bid game, slam, or grand slam. Pre-emptive Blackwood can be useful when your partner opens 2 diamonds, 3 diamonds, three clubs, two or three hearts, or two or three spades. The following step bidding is very precise:

After the opener bids any of the above, the bid of 4 Clubs by the responder initiates the Pre-emptive Blackwood sequence:

Step 1 – No key card or trump queen

Step 2 – One key card

Step 3 – One key card and trump queen

Step 4 – Two key cards and no trump queen

Step 5 – Two key cards and trump queen (how nice!!)

This bid is especially useful when you play with partners that pre-empt with virtually anything!

I hope that this review may help you to improve your slam bidding. I recommend that you and your partner read more about these bids before you experiment with them. You especially need to agree how to use these conventions when those pesky opponents interfere.

Good luck!!

