



## Bungling Blackwood

BIDDING SLAMS is one of the most enjoyable parts of the game, but judging when to try for slam can be a tricky process. Once the partnership decides to try for slam, it is likely that there will come a point where one player will take control and enquire for aces using some form of Blackwood – the two most popular forms being the traditional form where 5♣ = 0 (or 4 aces), 5♦ = 1, 5♥ = 2 and 5♠ = 3, and Roman Key-Card Blackwood (RKCB), where 5♣ = 0 or 3 key cards (out of the four aces and the trump king), 5♦ = 1 or 4, 5♥ = 2 without the queen of trumps and 5♠ = 2 with the queen of trumps. Whichever method is employed, there are common pitfalls which it is wise to avoid!

### Avoiding Embarrassment

When considering the prospects of making a slam, a crucial factor is the number of aces held by the partnership, hence the need for an ace-asking convention. However, given that the most common way to ask for aces involves bidding 4NT, the enquirer needs to be aware that following his partner's response there may be no choice but to bid a slam.

Consider the example below:

#### Hand A

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

You hold Hand A. You open 1♣, and partner makes a (game) invitational raise to 3♣. What next?

**Mistakes People Make:**  
Failing to anticipate an Awkward Response

If partner has just two aces, then you would expect to have a great chance of winning twelve tricks and making a small slam. It is therefore very tempting to bid

4NT over partner's 3♣ response. If partner bids 5♥, then you can happily bid 6♣. Hearing that partner has no aces will always be disappointing, and in this case will mean that bidding 4NT has already led to likely defeat in 5♣. However, learning that partner has one ace is usually expected to be relatively good news. In this case though, even one ace will be bad news. Partner's 5♦ response will then force you to bid a slam despite the knowledge that you are missing two aces. This must lead to the conclusion that *when clubs are trumps, it is unwise to use Blackwood unless the enquirer has at least two aces in his own hand.*

It should also be noted, that when using RKCB, a similar problem needs to be anticipated when clubs, diamonds or hearts are trumps. The risk to avoid in these cases is that partner has two aces with the queen of trumps and makes a response that forces us too high. Since the response to show this is 5♠, the enquirer needs to make sure that a 5♠ response will not force the partnership to bid a slam when missing two key cards.

A second scenario that needs to be considered arises with the next example:

#### Hand B

♠ Void  
♥ A K J 6 4  
♦ K Q 7 2  
♣ K Q 8 6

You hold Hand B. You open 1♥, and partner raises to 4♥. Your call?

**Mistakes People Make:**  
Not Knowing whether Partner's Ace Will Be Useful

In this case, finding partner with one ace is likely to be good enough, as long as it is a minor-suit Ace. Finding partner with just the ace of spades will, however, lead to a slam missing two cashable aces. Thus, a

5♦ response will leave the enquirer needing to guess whether to bid the slam or not.

This is generally going to be the case when a player wishing to try for a slam has a suit in which he is void. In these cases, there is a risk that bidding Blackwood will not allow the enquirer to make a winning decision. It is therefore wiser to make use of control showing cue-bids instead. Here a control-showing bid of 4♠ will allow the responder to show a minor-suit ace, or sign off in 5♥.

A similar trap to avoid occurs in my last example:

#### Hand C

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

You hold Hand C. You open 1♠, and partner raises to 4♠. Now what?

**Mistakes People Make:**  
Having to Guess How Many Tricks the Opponents Can Cash

As with Hand B, finding partner with one ace will probably lead to success if it is the ace of diamonds, but if he only has the ace of hearts, there is a chance that the defenders will be able to win the first two tricks if they lead a diamond. Thus, bidding a slam via Blackwood will force the enquirer to guess whether to bid the slam or not if he hears a 5♦ response. Holding a suit in which there are two or more immediate losers is another common case where control-showing cue-bids can be more effective. If the opener bids 5♣, and the responder bids 5♦, then the opener can consider bidding the slam, but if the responder bids 5♥ or 5♠, then the opener can avoid the risk of bidding a slam that may have two top losers in diamonds. □