

## Kickback: A Better Blackwood

While we take Blackwood and its variants for granted today, its inventor, Easley Blackwood (1903 – 1992) received a less-than-enthusiastic reception at first, as this 1992 article from the New York Times recounts:

*[The convention] was to make him famous all over the world, but he had some difficulty in publicizing it. When he wrote an article about it in 1933 and sent it to Ely Culbertson's Bridge World magazine, he received a polite rejection letter. The readers, he was told, would have no interest in the Blackwood Convention, and would continue to use the more complex [Culbertson Four-Five No-Trump Convention](#).*

*By the middle 40's, almost everyone was playing Blackwood, and the Culbertson variety disappeared into the dustbin of history.*

Ironically, when Culbertson, just the year before, had proposed *his* convention (widely considered the first conventional bid in contract bridge), London's Portland Club promptly disallowed it because it provided too much information and should be considered playing with exposed cards! It wasn't until 1935 that the laws reluctantly allowed conventional bids, giving rise to the modern game we know and love today.


Blackwood, himself, famously said he “devised the convention, not to bid slam, *but to know when not to bid slam.*” This concept was extended by the legendary Italian Blue team of the 1960's, who recognized that the king of trump was just as important as an ace in a trump slam: thus Roman Keycard Blackwood was born. Originally, 5♥ showed 2 keycards without extra values, while 5♠ showed the extra values; our current practice of showing or denying the queen of trumps was yet another refinement, one that seems to have developed organically in the bridge community.

### Avoiding Slam

If Blackwood and its variants are intended to avoid bad slams, it's critical the convention doesn't risk forcing the auction into a bad slam. That's not an issue with the following:

1♠ 2N\* Jacoby 2NT  
3♦\* 4N Singleton ♦

No matter what opener responds, the auction can stop below 5♠ if slam is out of reach. But now, consider the following:

♠		♠ AQ9	1♦ 2♣
♥		♥ AK2	3♣ ?
♦		♦ 97	
♣		♣ KJT43	

We're definitely interested in slam here, and all we really need to know are partner's aces, but good bidders follow the principle: *don't ask a question if you're not ready for any response.* Suppose we bid 4NT, playing 1430, and partner responds 5♦. We are now committed to slam missing *two* key cards. If you'd rather play 3014, 5♦ still commits us to slam missing a key card and possibly the Q♣. This is exactly the situation Easley had in mind to avoid when he invented Blackwood in the first place.

## The Minors: The Poor Stepchildren of Bridge

It's clear Blackwood works perfectly when spades are trump, reasonably well for hearts, but is very risky for the minors. In some ways, RKC makes the problem worse, because the higher bids no longer promise more aces, which mitigates the risk of being forced to slam. Minor suits already have to bid higher than the majors, and score less for bidding the same. Even trying for slam, they get short shrift.

To address this, other conventions have been developed. One in common use is *minorwood*. In this convention, a *voluntary* bid of 4 of the agreed minor is ace-asking; responses are step-wise the same as whatever version of Blackwood the partnership uses. For example, if we're playing 1430:

Key Cards	4♣ (♣ trump)	4♦ (♦ trump)	4NT (Majors)
1 – 4	4♦	4♥	5♣
0- 3	4♥	4♠	5♦
2	4♠	4N	5♥
2 + Q	4N	5♣	5♠

This clearly solves the problem of forcing ourselves into a questionable, or even bad slam, but there are tactical problems when those pesky opponents get into the auction and chew up our precious bidding space. For example:

1♣ 1♥ 2♣ 3♥  
4♣                    ???

Like any convention, handling interference is a matter of partnership agreement. In this sequence, perhaps 4♣ is just competitive, and a maximal double invites, but if partner bids 4♣ after the double, is it sign-off or minorwood?

### Useful Space Principle (USP)

The Useful Space Principle (USP) was expounded in a series of Bridge World articles by Jeff Rubens published from November 1980 through April 1981. The Bridge World glossary succinctly describes USP as “a partnership's assigning meanings to actions so that the remaining bidding space matches the needs of the auction.” In practical terms, it means reordering bids to leave the most space for when it's needed.

Some examples of USP conventions are Jacoby transfers, inverted minors (even though these were developed long before USP was codified), structured game-tries, relay Drury, transfers after take-out doubles, transfer responses to overcalls, and, one of my favorites, Vasilevsky.

### [Kickback \(1981\)](#)

Kickback is a contribution from Jeff Rubens based on USP. It's basic structure is: *a 4-level bid one step over the agreed trump suit is ace-asking*<sup>1</sup>. Responses are, step-wise, exactly the same as whatever flavor of Blackwood your partnership plays; if spades are trumps, it's exactly the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless 4N is the ace-asking bid, these bids and subsequent bids are *delayed alerts* and *must* be announced to the defenders *before* the open lead is faced.

So, playing 1430, the asking bids and responses would be:

Key Cards	Asking Bid			
	4♦ (♣ trump)	4♥ (♦ trump)	4♠ (♥ trump)	4N (♠ trump)
1 – 4	4♥	4♠	4N	5♣
0 – 3	4♠	4N	5♣	5♦
2	4N	5♣	5♦	5♥
2 + Q	5♣	5♦	5♥	5♠

Regardless of the trump suit, we never get above the 5 level, which is especially important for the minors. Unlike minorwood, using the bid above the agreed suit is much less likely to be ambiguous, even in a contested auctions.

### Asking for Kings

Now that you've taken the first step, let's assume you want to investigate further. Naturally, the king-ask bid is the suit above the trump suit at the 5 level. I strongly prefer *cheapest king*:

- ✓ The responses pinpoint which king responder has, whereas a response of 1 king is maximally ambiguous.
- ✓ The higher responses are unlikely to be used when giving count: how often will responder have 2, and even less likely, 3 kings?
- ✓ Responder can show and deny kings in one well-defined bid.

Normally, we would just bid the lowest-suit king. However, an adjustment necessary after certain asking bids. Consider the following Kickback sequence with diamonds as trump:

4♥ 5♣ Kickback in ♦, showing 2 w/o the queen  
 5♥ ?? King ask; responder wants to show K♥

Obviously, responder cannot bid 6♥ to show the king since it bypasses 6♦, so we apply USP and use the otherwise-idle 5N bid instead! It does take some getting used to, but the specific king-ask rules are:

1. The king of the kickback suit is shown with a bid of 5N
2. The “cheapest” king is the king which can be shown by the *lowest sufficient bid*, not necessarily the lowest suit.

Of course, since the kickback “suit” for spades is no-trump, the first rule does not apply when spades are trump. Let's look at the possible responses in the above auction:

4♥ 5♣ Kickback in ♦; shows 2 w/o the queen  
 5♥ Specific-king ask:  
 5♠ Responder has K♠  
 5N Responder has K♥, *denies* K♠  
 6♣ Responder has K♣, *denies* K♥ or K♠  
 6♦ Responder has no outside kings

Let's revisit the earlier hand as see how these new tools help us reach the right contract:

♠ 2	♠ AQ9	1♦ 2♣
♥ T754	♥ AK2	3♣ 4♦ Kickback in ♣
♦ AK86	♦ 97	5♣ 5♦ 2+Q; King Ask
♣ AQ97	♣ KJT43	5N 6♣ K♦, denies K♥ and K♠

After partner's 5N response, the captain knows to stop in 6♣, expecting one loser in the majors.

### Asking for the Queen

When the Kickback response doesn't show or deny holding the queen of trumps, there are one or two bids available for the *queen ask*. I favor always using the bid *one below the trump suit* because it's the same bid each time<sup>2</sup>. This is based on a corollary to USP: the higher the bid, the more specific the meaning. For example:

- 4♠ 4N Kickback in ♥; showing 1 or 4
- 5♦ Queen ask:
  - 5♥ Denies holding the queen
  - 5♠ Q♥ + K♠
  - 5N Q♥ + K♦, denies holding K♠
  - 6♣ Q♥ + K♣, denies holding K♠ or K♦
  - 6♦ Q♥, no outside K

Note here that we've once again applied USP and used the idle bid of 5N to show the king that would otherwise require us to jump 5 levels.

### When the Opponents Interfere

If you're using any form of ace-asking, you and your partner should agree how to handle interference. The suggested method to use with Kickback, or any step-wise response structure, is DOPI: **D**ouble for the 1st step, **P**ass for the 2<sup>nd</sup> step, *then bid up the line*.

If the opponents double for lead direction (more likely over Kickback), [Billy Miller](#) suggests the following<sup>3</sup>: *pass* without a 1<sup>st</sup>- or 2<sup>nd</sup>-round control in the Kickback suit, respond normally with one. After a pass, the Kickback bidder can sign-off at the 5-level, or *redouble* to show control and re-ask partner to show keycards.

Regardless of your methods, practice handling interference *before* you try it at the table.

### Grand-Slam King Ask<sup>4</sup>

Frequently, the difference between a small slam and taking all 13 tricks is whether the partnership holds a specific outside king. Using Kickback, the king-ask and queen-ask structure gives us the useful space to to exactly that without getting above the 6 level.

<sup>2</sup> This also leaves the second step (e.g. 4♠ - 4NT - 5♣) for future treatments

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Joe Pieper for this reference

<sup>4</sup> The author is unaware of any previous discussion of this treatment

From the previous example:

- 4♥ 5♣ Kickback in ♦; shows 2 w/o the queen
- 5♥ 5N King ask; responder has K♥, *denies* K♠
- 6♣ Grand-slam ask for the K♣
- 6♦ denies holding the K♣
- 7♦ Holding the K♣

Like the king- and queen-asking responses, the cheapest NT is used to ask about the king of the kickback suit. Here's an example from the unit game where the original lecture was delivered:

♠ AKQ53	♠ J9	1♠ 2♣
♥ 65	♥ AKJ	3♣ 4♦ Kickback in ♣
♦ KJ	♦ A62	4♥ 5♦ 1 Keycard; King Ask
♣ J875	♣ AKQ42	5♠ 6N K♠; GSKA for K♦
		7♣ 7N K♦; I can count to 13

### Good-er Gerber<sup>5</sup>

In some ways, the Gerber convention (John Gerber, 1938) is Kickback: it uses the 4-level bid above the trump suit (none, in this case) as the asking bid. However, its traditional ace-only responses don't allow the elegant continuations available to Kickback-RKC (try it and see).

The key to the effectiveness of RKCB king-ask is information about a king, and possibly queen, is included in the first set of responses. If we analyze the continuations with that in mind, and apply USP, the logic choice is the *king of clubs*.

For the 4♠ (3<sup>rd</sup> step) and 4N (4<sup>th</sup> step) responses, it is probably more useful in a no-trump contract to go back to showing (4N) or denying (4♠) extra values, rather than showing/denying the Q♣. This also opens up useful space over the 4♦ and 4♥ steps to clarify the 1-4 and 0-3 holdings.

Here's an example of a keycard-style Gerber auction from a local club game:

♠ K63	♠ AT	P 2♣ Strong
♥ 7	♥ AKQJ2	2♦ 2♥ Positive response
♦ 7542	♦ AQT	3♣ 3♥
♣ A8652	♣ KQ4	3N 4♣ Gerber
		4♦ 5♣ 1 or 4; King ask
		5♠ 6N K♠, denies K♦ and K♥

Here we see the advantage of counting the K♣ as a keycard: opener knows the disposition of all the kings, and has reason to believe partner has a singleton heart, so 12 tricks in NT is the right contract, even though 7♣ might be cold. If responder had shown the K♦ (5♦), we still have the grand-slam king ask available to confidently bid grand slam when others are guessing, or avoid that tempting, but ultimately doomed, 7-level contract when others are lured by the siren's song to the rocks of disaster.

<sup>5</sup> The author is unaware of any previous discussion of this treatment