



Modern Ace Asking

lecture notes for Regina Redcoat Regional



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Blackwood on Blackwood

by Easley Blackwood

The following rubber bridge hand resulted in the birth of Blackwood:

	North	South
	♠ K Q 6 2	♠ A J 10 8 7 4
	♥ K Q J 8 3	♥ 9 2
	♦ K Q J	♦ A 7
	♣ 6	♣ K Q 5
Bidding	North	South
		1♠
	3♥	3♠
	4♠	6♠

The defenders had no difficulty in cashing their two aces and North-South were at each other's throats. North reflected in no uncertain terms upon South's ability; South pointed out that North could easily have held AQxxx in hearts in which case the slam was cold.

North-South were using the Culbertson 4-5 notrump convention. As the Culbertson bid of 4NT guaranteed either two aces and the king of a bid suit or three aces, South was precluded from using it. Instead, he gambled and lost.

The Blackwood Convention has become the most universally used convention in contract bridge.

I felt that it was asking too much for the 4NT bid to be both an asking and a telling bid. Why not let this bid ask a question and let it go at that? Let the question be, specifically, "Partner, how many aces do you have?" The responses would be simple:

5♣0 or 4 aces
5♦1 ace
5♥2 aces
5♠3 aces

The fact that the 5♣ response shows either no ace of all four should not bother you. It always is possible to distinguish which – if partner responds 5♣ and you have even one ace in your hand, he must have none. If you have no aces, he should have four. If you are investigating slam off all four aces, perhaps your bidding system needs an overhaul.

After a Blackwood 4NT and an ace-showing response, a bid of 5NT guarantees that your side holds all the aces and asks partner to show his kings in steps similar to the responses over 4NT.

The Blackwood 4NT bid starts a captain and mate relationship. Your duty as responder is to tell partner how many aces you hold, and if partner then decides to play at the five level, you need an exceptional reason to doubt his word and go on. Similarly, if partner bids a slam, that is where the hand should be played.

However, once partner bids 5NT, confirming possession of all four aces and showing an interest in a grand slam, you come into your own. No longer need you meekly respond with the number of kings you hold – you may exercise judgment. A solid suit of your own that will provide discards or a singleton in an unbid suit may be all that partner needs to make a grand slam, even if one or more kings is missing, and you may jump straight to the grand slam. Caution – danger!

The first thing to learn about the Blackwood Convention is that it is not suitable for all hands in the slam zone. Possession of a combined point count of at least 33 does not guarantee that a slam can be made. You cannot be missing two aces, but there is the possibility that you are missing the ace and king of the same suit, and the opponents can cash two quick tricks in that suit. The Blackwood Convention will not uncover this fact.

Consider this hand:

♠ K Q J 7 6 4 ♥ K Q 10 ♦ 7 6 ♣ A Q

You open the bidding with 1♠ and partner makes a forcing raise to 3♠. It is obvious that if partner holds the right cards, you should be able to make a slam, so you bid a Blackwood 4NT. Partner dutifully responds 5♥, showing two aces. Whither now? Partner could hold either of these two hands:

(a)	(b)
♠ A 10 5 3	♠ A 10 5 3
♥ A J 2	♥ 4 2
♦ 8 4	♦ A J 4
♣ K J 3 2	♣ K J 3 2

The point count and distribution pattern of the two hands are exactly the same. However, opposite hand (a) there are two quick losers; with hand (b) 12 tricks are there for the taking.

Thus we have discovered the first cardinal rule for not applying Blackwood: Do not use Blackwood with a worthless doubleton in an unbid suit.

An extension of the above principle brings us to the second cardinal rule: Do not use Blackwood with a void. Unless partner's response confirms that your side holds all of the aces, you will not know whether one of his aces is in your void suit. If it is, you might have too many losers in one of your side suits.

In summary: If partner's response to your 4NT inquiry for aces will not tell you whether or not to bid a slam, DO NOT employ Blackwood.

About Easley Blackwood

When the late Easley Blackwood first thought of the convention* that bears his name, he was a rising star in the insurance world. He submitted the original article to "The Bridge World" magazine in 1934 under the nom-de-plume Earnest Wormwood, as he was not eager for publicity. It was returned by the late Albert Morehead with a polite note that the Wormwood Convention would never become popular! Morehead was rarely wrong in these matters, but this time... The Blackwood Convention has become the most universally used convention in contract bridge. As a natural corollary, it also has become the most misused. Many players tend to overlook the fact that the Blackwood Convention was designed as much to stay out of unmakeable slams as to get to slams where the only information needed is the number of aces held by the partnership

From ACBL website:

<http://www.acbl.org/play/great-conventions.php?convention=blackwood&action=Go>

Rotman-Glubok had confusion over Roman key-card Kickback or whatever (O for the days when there were but four aces, and four notrump asked about them!)

“Edgar Kaplan - Baltimore Spingold, II”, TBW 11/1987, p. 8

Roman Keycard Blackwood

The King of the agreed suit plus the four aces are considered **key cards**, five in all. A slam should not be considered unless a minimum of four key cards are held jointly.

The queen of the agreed suit is shown in the response to 4NT, but only when 2 keycards are held. These are the responses to Roman Key Card Blackwood 4NT (*1430 Responses*):

5♣ = 1 or 4 key cards

5♦ = 0 or 3 key cards

5♥ = 2 or 5 key cards without the Q of trump

5♠ = 2 or 5 with the Q of trump

5NT = 2 key cards with a void

6 suit = 1 key card with a void in bid suit

6 trump suit = 1 key card with a void in higher ranking suit

(With 3 or 4 key cards and a void show your key cards and then decide what to do or bid 7 directly over 4NT)

Also, a 5th trump when the asker is expecting 4, or a 4th trump when asker is known to have at least 6, counts as the Q.

In normal Blackwood it was always assumed you could tell whether responder had zero or four aces, similarly with Key Card it is assumed the auction would reveal whether the answer was 0/3, 1/4 or 2/5. The French team proved even the original Blackwood assumption wrong in 1971:

Hands of Fate: The Blackwood Ambiguity

France v Brazil Taipei 1971

Imagine yourself sitting South as Dealer in the above match when the following collection arrives: ♠ Q ♥ KQJ83 ♦ Q ♣ KQJ1093.

Not bad, fourteen points and two singletons, a four-loser hand. Playing Acol, you open 1♣, partner responds 1♦ and you bid 1♥. Partner raises to 3♥ which you take as forcing and bid a Blackwood 4NT for Aces. Partner's 5♣ shows 0 or 4 and, with the opposition silent, you know that he holds all four aces. Your bid of 7♥ is a formality but now West doubles and when dummy goes down you know why. Partner's holding is ♠ KJ43 ♥ 10972 ♦ 109762 ♣ - and you have found a hopeless grand slam missing all four aces.

Until this hand, it had been considered impossible to misunderstand the 5♣ response.

Our conventions expert, Tog, rarely uses straightforward Blackwood, but reckons that those who do should hold two aces themselves before asking.

Postscript: There is no need to shed tears for the French pair as France had already qualified by the time this hand was played.

If two key cards are missing, sign off at the five-level. If one key card is missing bid six if you hold the trump queen. If not, check whether partner has it if you can do this without bypassing your trump suit at the five-level. If that is impossible, bid six if you hold the jack of trump or you know there are nine or more trumps between you. Otherwise, sign off at the five-level.

Here is some auction examples:

- 1) 1♠ (P) 2♥ (P) 4NT - must answer key card in ♥.
- 2) 1♠ (P) 2♥ (P) 2♠ P 4NT - must answer key card in ♠.

Partner	You
♠ Axxxx	♠ Kxxxx
♥ KQx	♥ xx
♦ AKQx	♦ xxx
♣ x	♣ AKJ

1 ♠	3 ♠ - limit raise
4NT - KCB	5 ♠ - 2 key cards plus the Q, counting 5 th trump
6 ♠	Pass

Give East 4 cards in spades, and the response to 4NT is 5♥, showing 2 key cards without the Q. West does best to sign off in 5♠. Missing an Ace plus four trumps including the Queen, avoid bidding a slam (unless holding the JT of trump).

Rebid of 5NT

After partner responds to RKB, a direct bid of 5NT asks for kings, excluding the King of the agreed suit, which has already been shown or denied. In most partnerships it also invites seven.

Responses to 5NT are: 6♣ = 0, 6♦ = 1, 6♥ = 2, 6♠ = 3 (alternatively specific Kings can be shown over 5NT: 6♣ = ♣ King, 6♦ = ♦ King, no ♣ King, etc ...).

The 5NT bid promises the joint possession of the five key cards *as well as* the Queen of trump; therefore responder, if he chooses, may forego the king response and leap to grand slam.

The Queen Ask

Whenever your partner responds 5♥ or 5♠ to RKB, the location of the trump Queen is shown or not. However, when partner responds either 5♣ (1 or 4) or 5♦ (0 or 3), those responses neither show nor deny the Queen of trump.

The cheapest bid outside trump now asks *do you have the trump Queen?* Five of the trump suit denies the Queen (It is like a signoff). Six of the trump suit says I have the Queen of trumps, but no Kings. With the Queen of trump and some Kings, responder makes the bid at the 6-level they would normally have made in response to a 5NT King ask.

You	Partner
1 ♠	2 ♥
4NT – KC in ♥	5♣ - showing 1 or 4 Keycards
5♦ - Asks for ♥ Q	5♥ - Don't have trump Q

When responding to the Queen ask, ♥ or ♠ will normally be the agreed suit. When the agreed suit is a minor, we can often ask for keycards lower than 4NT.

Apparently, there was confusion over whether the king of diamonds should be counted as an ace on their auction, or only the king of hearts (how much simpler life was back then when there were only four aces instead five or six!). Obviously, the grand slam had no play.

“Edgar Kaplan - Championships in Jamaica, III”, TBW 3/1988, p. 7

For Hearts:

When ♥ is the trump suit and the response is 5♣ (1 or 4), 5♦ is the Q ask; 5♥ is a sign off. <see page 13 for an explanation of why use 1430 responses>

When the response is 5♦ (0 or 3) it is assumed that partner knows whether you have 0 or 3 key cards from the bidding. It is very difficult to ask for the Q when ♥ is the trump suit if you have a 5♦ response to the Ace ask; so if you ask for the trump Queen (by bidding 5♠), it usually implies that you are interested in a grand slam.

For Spades:

When ♠ is the trump suit and the response is 5♣ (1 or 4), 5♦ is the Queen ask (just as when ♥ is the trump suit).

However, when the response is 5♦ (0 or 3), 5♥ is the Queen ask and 5♠ is to play. Any other response to the Queen ask other than 5♠ promises the Q.

If playing number of Kings, respond as you would to 5NT.

If playing specific kings, 5NT shows the Spade Queen and the King of the relay (5♥) suit – the king of hearts. 6♣ shows the king of clubs and not the king of hearts, 6♦ shows the King of diamonds and neither the King of hearts nor the King of clubs.

0314

There are some reasons to play 1430 responses, especially when hearts are trumps, but the most important thing is to play the way you best remember, so if your choice is the more standard 0/3, 1/4, 2 without and 2 with responses then that is *definitely what you should play*.

And another misunderstanding:

During the 1964 United States Pair Trials in Miami Beach, Florida, one board contained what was later to be proclaimed as one of the most famous examples of the Winkle Squeeze, and it is presented below. The board was played by **Mr. B.J. Becker - South**, **Dorothy Hayden - North**, **Mr. Samuel Stayman - West** and **Mr. Victor Mitchell - East** in the compass directions illustrated.

	♠ Q8	
	♥ 1063	
	♦ AQJ96	
	♣ AQ4	
♠ 543		♠ J1072
♥ A85		♥ KQ74
♦ K532		♦ 1087
♣ 1052		♣ 76
	♠ AK96	
	♥ J92	
	♦ 4	
	♣ KJ983	

South	West	North	East
Becker	Stayman	Hayden	Mitchell
1 ♣	Pass	1 ♦	Pass
1 ♠	Pass	3 ♣	Pass
4 ♣	Pass	4 ♠	Pass
6 ♣	Pass	Pass	Pass

In hindsight, it seems that the contract 3 No Trump would have been the better game. However, this contract would have been difficult to reach in view of no Heart stopper, and a possible 5-card Heart suit in the holdings of either opponent. ***The final contract***

of 6 Clubs was also based on a misunderstanding of the partnership agreement that a bid of 4 Clubs would always be the Gerber convention after a Minor suit opening. South therefore assumed that 4 Spades promised a singleton Heart, and bid the Club slam.

It seems that West, on lead, was also misled by the bidding and decided to lead a Diamond. Had West not been misled, West might have led a Heart, winning three Heart tricks, defeating the slam contract by two tricks before South could do anything. <See page 14 for discussion of the play>

[The auction: 1S-4NT/5S-7D, with one ace missing]

Sanborn intended her five spades to show two key cards plus the queen of trumps. McCallum understood two aces plus the spade king. Oh, for the simple days when the deck had only four aces!

" Edgar Kaplan - Bowls of Chile, IV", TBW 5/1994, p. 19

Minorwood

This is one of two modern methods to make ace asking more efficient. It attempts to solve the problem that a 4NT ace asking or KC asking response may get us past five of the trump suit. ***They are useful, but like any other convention, they are useless if there are going to be memory problems. It takes a long time to recover the points lost due to an "accident".***

Minorwood applies on auctions where a minor suit is agreed, the auction is forcing and a jump to four of the minor is available. You could agree to use it on some specific auctions without a jump, but you should agree on each exact situation. One such situation is when 3NT is pulled to the agreed minor. If the 4m bidder just wanted to avoid 3NT and play in the agreed minor then they should bid five. Another situation is when the minor suit is agreed at the three-level and now four of that minor is asking for Key cards in the minor. A third situation is where one bidder has rebid a minor at the three-level and now we could agree that 4m is RKC.

Examples:

1♣-2♣* * - Inverted raise
4♣

1♥-2♦* * - game force
4♦

1♠-2♣* * - game force
3♣-4♣

[On keycard disasters]

*Many with-it partnerships are up to six aces, plus several queens of trumps
-talk about inflation!*

"Edgar Kaplan - 1990 Spingold", TBW 11/1990, p. 9

Kickback

Kickback is a method that eliminates the need for 1430 responses, and totally solves the problem that brought about the invention of 1430. It assigns the bid above four of an agreed suit as Key-card asking. In other words the only time 4NT is asking is when the agreed suit is spades.

When we have an agreed suit, the bid of four above our agreed suit is now reserved as KC asking for the rest of the auction. It doesn't matter how we get there, that bid is always KC asking.

I find the most useful agreement is to play 4♠ as Kickback in hearts and when a minor suit is agreed, use Minorwood. The responses are 0/3, 1/4, 2/5 without the Queen and 2/5 with the Queen. A repeat of the Kickback suit is King asking.

Examples:

1♥-2NT* * - Jacoby: forcing raise
4♠

1♣-1♥
3♥-4♠

1NT-4♦* * - Texas Transfer
4♥-4♠

1 ♠-2 ♥* * - Game force
3 ♥-4 ♠

This one is tricky, but it is a forcing auction and if you want to get to spades, you must bid 3 ♠ first.

1 ♠-2 ♥
3 ♥-3 ♠
4 ♥-4 ♠

This last call is natural and to play. If you wanted to Key Card in hearts you had to do it a round earlier

1 ♣-1 ♥
3 ♥-3 ♠*
4 ♠

* - Cue bid

Once hearts are agreed, 4 ♠ is reserved for either partner to ask for key cards, no matter how you get there.

1 ♥-2NT*
3 ♦-4 ♠
5 ♣^

* - Jacoby: forcing raise

^ - 2nd step, 1/4 KC

Now 5 ♦ by responder is Queen ask; 5 ♥ is signoff and 5 ♠ is King ask

1 ♥-2NT*
4 ♠-5 ♠

* - Jacoby: forcing raise

Just like the response of 5NT to 4NT Blackwood, this shows 2 key cards and an unspecified void.

1 ♥-2NT
4 ♠-5NT

NT substitutes for the key card suit, so this shows a spade void and 1 key card

1 ♥-2NT
4 ♠-6 ♣

Club void and 1 key card. In this method you never need to jump to 6 of the trump suit to show a higher ranking void, because there is always room to show the specific void.

In an auction where 4 ♠ is Kickback, then 4NT is either natural or it becomes whatever 4 ♠ would normally have been (Q-bid, splinter, exclusion etc ...).

1♥-2♦
3♣-3♥
4NT Quantitative and natural (18-19 HCP)

1♥-2NT
4NT Since 4♠ is ace asking, 4NT is exclusion in Spades (see below)

Exclusion Blackwood

This is another modern treatment that is a more useful way to ask for aces. Let's say you have ♠ KQT864 ♥ – ♦ AKQ765 ♣ 4, and believe it or not, partner opens 1 Spade. All you care about is the black aces. The problem is that splinters or cue bidding auctions may not get partner to co-operate, and he could have ♠ J9753 ♥ AKQ4 ♦ 8 ♣ KQJ, a full 16 HCP with no slam, or ♠ A7532 ♥ AKJ9 ♦ J8 ♣ Q3 and a heart splinter would not turn him on, not to mention his poor trumps and lack of minor controls, but 6♠ is frigid.

The answer is bid Jacoby 2NT to set the suit, and on your next turn bid 5♥, asking for key-cards in spades, but ignoring the heart suit.

With the 1st hand:

1♠-2NT
3♦*-5♥ * - Shortness in diamonds
5♠-pass

With the 2nd hand:

1♠-2NT
3NT*-5♥ *- Some extra values, no short suits
5NT-6♠

I am reluctant to add this German auction to my vast list of KCB disasters (each one, Jeff assures me, was the fault of the players, not the method), since I do not really know what went wrong.

***" Edgar Kaplan - Swiss teams, III" (report on 1990 Rosenblum Cup),
TBW 4/1991, p. 8***

4♣ Key Card after pre-empts

This is one of the more useful ideas in this paper and less prone to memory problems. The main idea is taking a somewhat useless bid and replacing it with a useful one. I cannot remember the last time partner opened 3♥ and I wanted to bid four clubs natural.

Used over WTBs: 2♦, 2♥, 2♠ and 3-bids 3♦, 3♥, 3♠.

4♣ is 5-step key card (0,1,1+,2,2+)

1st step 4♦ – no key cards

2nd step 4♥ – 1 key card, no trump Queen

3rd step 4♠ – 1 key card + trump Queen

4th step 4NT – 2 key cards, no trump Queen

5th step 5♣ – 2 key cards + trump Queen

Only when the opening bid is 3♣, is 4♣ a useful bid, so here we play 4♦ is 5-step key card.

1st step 4♥ – no key cards

2nd step 4♠ – 1 key card, no trump Queen

3rd step 4NT – 1 key card + trump Queen

4th step 5♣ – 2 key cards, no trump Queen

5th step 5♦ – 2 key cards + trump Queen

Cavests, cautions, warnings and stipulations!

Why 1430 Responses?

The original RKC responses of 0/3, 1/4, 2/5 without and 2/5 with, have no problems when spades is the agreed trump suit. One problem arises when hearts is agreed. That problem is the 5♦ response makes asking for the Queen difficult. A “band-aid” solution to this problem was 1430 responses. This was done based on the frequency argument that responder was more likely to have 1 KC, than none. If they had three or four it didn’t matter (much).

The problem is, you still have a problem when responder makes a 5♦ response.

My belief is that the reason for the popularity is merely the mnemonic sound of “1430” as the same score as a major suit slam.

Aces Asking in a minor

Another “band-aid” that people use is that when a minor suit is agreed you need two aces to bid 4NT, to avoid the danger of getting past five of the trump suit. Either Minorwood or Kickback solves those problems.

Having said all that I’ve said I cannot emphasize enough the dangers of playing these devices. They are all extremely prone to memory problems and possibly to misunderstandings. Even the best players have had “accidents” with these tools.

Another Accident waiting to Happen

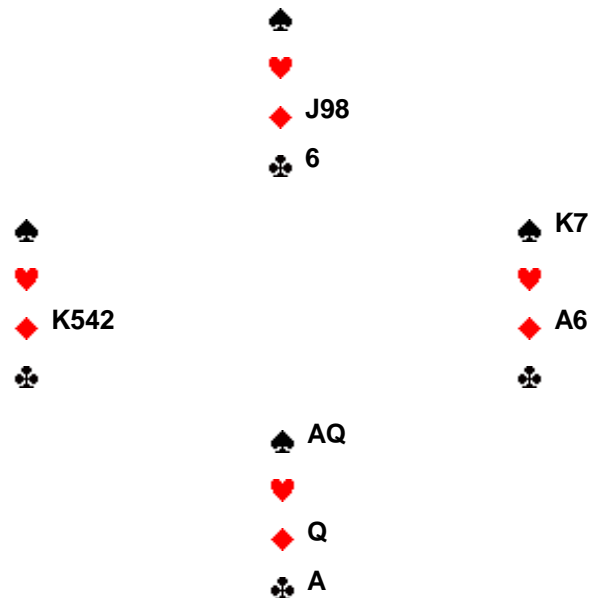
How do you ask for Kings? Using kickback it is easy, just bid five of the kickback suit. What about playing Minorwood? My agreement is that **4NT and five of our minor are always to play** after asking for Key Cards. To ask for Kings, bid the cheapest 5-level (5♦ when clubs is our suit, 5♥ when diamonds is our suit).

The North-South auction in the Open Room was confused. It ended, like most confused slam auctions, in six notrump.

"Edgar Kaplan - Tribulations, IV", TBW 12/1993, p. 33

WINKLE SQUEEZE

This term designates a secondary squeeze that forces the opponents to choose between a throw-in and an unblock, but which of each costs a trick. The Winkle Squeeze was analyzed and named by **Mr. Terrence Reese**. The situation of the Winkle Squeeze is such that the declarer has sufficient winners for all but one of the remaining tricks, but the declarer is in a position where he can not take all of his tricks because of entry problems. The following illustrations should clarify this situation.



The declarer is South and South leads the Ace of Clubs. East is immediately squeezed in two suits, Spades and Diamonds. In order to protect the King of Spades, East must discard a Diamond. In the case that East discards a low Diamond, then South will throw East in by leading the Queen of Diamonds. East wins and must return a Spade. If East decides to discard the Ace of Diamonds on the Ace of Clubs, then South plays the Queen of Diamonds giving West the lead, who must then lead a Diamond to the winning Jack of Diamonds in the dummy.

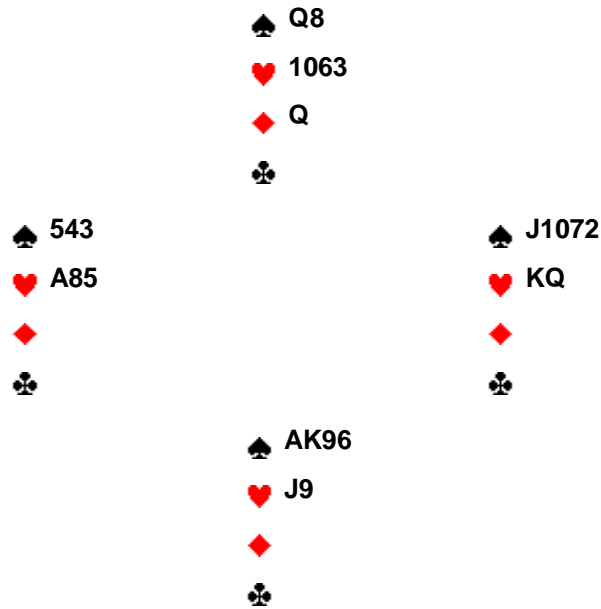
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It seems that West, on lead, was also misled by the bidding and decided to lead a Diamond. Had West not been misled, West might have led a Heart, winning three Heart tricks, defeating the slam contract by two tricks before South could do anything. South happily accepted the lead and finessed with the Jack of Diamonds. South then discarded a Heart on the Ace of Diamonds and ruffed a Diamond. South then entered the dummy with the Ace of Clubs, ruffed another Diamond, which felled the King of Diamonds, establishing the Queen of Diamonds as a winning trick. South then cashed the King and Queen of Clubs, eliminating all outstanding trumps. The lead was then, on the ninth trick, in the dummy and the position was as follows:



South leads the Queen of Diamonds from the dummy and East is squeezed. East must throw the Queen of Hearts. South throws the 9 of Hearts and West discards a Spade. South then leads the Queen of Spades, followed by the 8 of Spades, which East covers with the 10 of Spades. South covers and leads the Jack of Hearts. If East wins, then East must lead from his Spade holding. In this play, however, West, Mr. Stayman, decides to win with the Ace of Hearts, and in this particular case, end-plays himself. West had to surrender two Heart tricks to the dummy. In a later analysis, it was determined that had the 6 of Hearts, held by North, and the 5 of Hearts, held by West been interchanged, then the slam would not have been successful, despite the most favorable lead of a Diamond.

If you wish to include this feature, or any other feature, of the game of bridge in your partnership agreement, then please make certain that the concept is understood by both partners. Be aware whether or not the feature is alertable or not and whether an announcement should or must be made. Check with the governing body and/or the bridge district and/or the bridge unit prior to the game to establish the guidelines applied. Please include the particular feature on your convention card in order that your opponents are also aware of this feature during the bidding process, since this information must be made known to them according to the Laws of Duplicate Contract Bridge. We do not always include the procedure regarding Alerts and/or Announcements, since these regulations are changed and revised during time by the governing body. It is our intention only to present the information as concisely and as accurately as possible.

