

ROMAN KEY CARD BLACKWOOD

**“Roman Key-Card Blackwood is no longer a convention of the experts;
all players should understand it and play it.”**

History

Ordinary Blackwood was developed in the 1930's by an American - Easley Blackwood.

During the 1960's the famous Italian Blue Team then adapted the convention – **Roman Blackwood** - whereby specific aces could be shown.

The next significant improvement was **Keycard Blackwood**, which included the King of trumps as a 'fifth' ace.

This was then further refined and popularized in the 1980's by Eddie Kantar, into **Roman Keycard Blackwood**, which also enabled the trump queen to be shown.

Why?

Ordinary and Roman Blackwood only determine the number of aces, whereas (Roman) Keycard Blackwood also give some indication as to the quality of the trump suit. This treatment of Blackwood has now become the cornerstone of modern slam trump-bidding; in particular as to the presence/absence of the king and queen of the trump suit.

Any form of Blackwood should be considered as a 'checking' process, having established what suit should be trumps, and in the case of Roman Keycard Blackwood, also the ability to check on the 'king' and/or 'queen' of the trump suit.

Blackwood should not be used to determine the level of a no-trump contract (although a possible 'trump' slam can subsequently be converted into a no-trump contract).

Consider the following hand when playing Ordinary Blackwood:

a)	West	West	East
	♠ 6		1♠
	♥ AJ1073	2♥	4♥
	♦ A9	4NT	5♦ (ord Blackwood – 1 ace)
	♣ KQJ32	??	

Partner – East - could have either of the following hands, but both of which would respond 5♦ (1 ace) to 4NT:

b)	♠ AKQ75	c)	♠ AQ753
	♥ 9862		♥ KQ8
	♦ KQ		♦ K74
	♣ KQJ32		♣ 96

With a-b) the partnership wants to stop in 5♥, whereas with a-c) 6♥ is highly probable.

Roman Keycard Blackwood enables players to differentiate between these types of hand.

General Guidelines

Practical guidelines as to whether or not to be in a trump suit slam, have changed alongside the development of Blackwood:

Using Ordinary/Roman Blackwood (i.e. only the aces considered), it was usual to bid a slam with **4 out-of 4** (or for 'bolder' players **3 out-of 4**, and hope for the best).

With Keycard Blackwood (which included the King of trumps), you should probably bid the slam with a combined holding of **4 out-of 5**.

With Roman Keycard Blackwood (which also includes the Queen of trumps), the modern approach is to bid a slam with **5 out-of 6**. Of course other factors, like singletons/voids, and good second suits can influence the decision. A grand slam should only be considered if holding all 6 keycards.

Trump Agreement

It is of the utmost importance for the partnership to have agreed upon the trump suit before initiating Roman Key Card Blackwood. To overcome any ambiguity, apply the following rules in sequence (to assist in understanding the sequences, the eventual RKCB bidder is shown underlined).

1. Any **explicit** suit agreed

1♠ - 3♠ - 4NT is RKCB with **spades** as trumps

1♣ - 1♦ - 3♦ - 4NT is RKCB with **diamonds** as trumps

2. Any **implicit** suit agreed

1NT - 2♣ (Stayman) - 2♥ - 4NT is RKCB with **hearts** as trumps

1♠ - 4♦ (splinter) - 4NT is RKCB with **spades** as trumps

1♥ - 2NT (Jacoby) - 3♥ - 4NT is RKCB with **hearts** as trumps

Since a 1NT or 2NT opener effectively has all the suits, you should also include any transfer suits following a 1NT or 2NT opening bid

1NT - 2♥ (transfer to spades) - 2♠ - 4NT is RKCB with **spades** as trumps

....2NT - 3♦ (transfer to hearts) - 3♥ - 4NT is RKCB with **hearts** as trumps

3. The last **naturally** bid suit (some players define this as the weaker hand, but this definition can become confusing)

1♦ - 1♥ - 1♠ - 3♥ - 4NT is RKCB with **hearts** as trumps (the last naturally bid suit)

1♠ - 2♥ - 3♠ - 4♥ - 4NT is RKCB with **hearts** as trumps

2♣ - 2♦ - 2♠ - 3NT - 4NT is RKCB with **spades** as trumps

3(a). Instead of (3), some players use the last suit bid by **responder**, and if that person has not bid a suit, it then reverts to the last suit bid by the **initiator**. In most cases these approaches are the same (as in the three examples above), but if not playing any alternative method of investigating a minor suit slam, this alternative approach, although non-standard, is better – important to agree with partner).

For example, in a sequence such as 1♦ – 1♥ – 2NT – 4NT. The 4NT is more useful in agreeing diamonds, rather than hearts. ('Expert' players would probably not use this sequence, instead using 3♦ as forcing).

Note – the agreed trump suit doesn't necessarily mean that this is the suit of the final contract. It can be used solely as a means of finding out about the king of that suit, with.

Responses - (0314)

The responses **include the king of trumps as a fifth ace**. For less experienced players new to RKCB, it is **easier to play 0314**. However with **more experience it is preferable to play 1430**. (We shall assume **0314**)

5♣ - 0 or 3

5♦ - 1 or 4

5♥ - 2 (or 5) **without** the queen of trumps

5♠ - 2 (or 5) **with** the queen of trumps (**or its equivalent** – e.g. a 5-card suit implying a probable 10-card fit))

The usual situation is that the stronger hand is the initiator, so a response of '5' is very rare.

In these responses there can be ambiguities (e.g. 1 or 4), but either the previous bidding, or the 4NT bidder's holding itself, usually makes it clear which is the more probable alternative.

To progress to a slam, when using Roman Keycard Blackwood, players should ensure that they have at least 5 out-of-6 key-cards (see also 'Queen Ask), (unless there are useful voids).

If holding all 6 key-cards between the partnership, the 4NT bidder can then ask for kings by bidding 5NT. Remember that in response to this bid, **the king of trumps** is ignored – it has already been accounted for in response to the 4NT bid (experienced partnerships still use the bid if missing one key-card, primarily to assess whether 6NT would be a better contract at pairs).

Examples (North the opening bidder):

(The bidding sequences take a simplistic approach up to the 4NT bid. Better sequences are available by way of cue bids etc. The examples concentrate solely on the use of RKCB).

a) ♠ AK87	b) ♠ A10982	c) ♠ A10982	d) ♠ AQ7643	e) ♠ AQ7643
♥ A	♥ Q	♥ Q	♥ AKQ7	♥ AKQ7
♦ A87654	♦ KQ3	♦ KQ3	♦ 8	♦ 8
♣ K6	♣ AK82	♣ AK82	♣ AK	♣ AK
♠ 54	♠ KQ75	♠ K7653	♠ 1095	♠ K95
♥ K85	♥ J1043	♥ AJ43	♥ 83	♥ 83
♦ KJ32	♦ A62	♦ 76	♦ KQ952	♦ QJ952
♣ QJ54	♣ 54	♣ Q4	♣ Q74	♣ Q74

- a) $1\spadesuit - 3\spadesuit - 4\text{NT}$ (diamonds) – $5\spadesuit$ (1 ace or $\spadesuit K$) – $6\spadesuit$. To bid $3\spadesuit$, North knows that South will have 4-card support. The 10-card fit is the equivalent of having the $\spadesuit Q$. The slam should be bid.
- b) $1\spadesuit - 3\spadesuit - 4\text{NT}$ (spades) – $5\heartsuit$ (2 aces/ $\spadesuit K$, with $\spadesuit Q$) – $6\spadesuit$
- c) $1\spadesuit - 3\spadesuit - 4\text{NT}$ (spades) – $5\spadesuit$ (2 aces/ $\spadesuit K$, with equivalent $\spadesuit Q$) – $6\spadesuit$. Exactly the same sequence as (b). In response, the 5-card spade suit is the equivalent to holding the $\spadesuit Q$.
- d) $2\clubsuit - 2\spadesuit - 2\spadesuit - 4\spadesuit - 4\text{NT}$ (spades) – $5\clubsuit$ (0 or 3, obviously 0) – $5\spadesuit$. Two key-cards are missing – at best the slam depends on a finesse.
- e) $2\clubsuit - 2\spadesuit - 2\spadesuit - 4\spadesuit - 4\text{NT}$ (spades) – $5\clubsuit$ (1) – $6\spadesuit$. Only one key-card is missing – the slam should be bid.

f) \spadesuit AQ753 \heartsuit KQ8 \diamondsuit K74 \clubsuit 96	g) \spadesuit AKQ75 \heartsuit 9862 \diamondsuit KQ \clubsuit 96	h) \spadesuit A \heartsuit A87654 \diamondsuit K6 \clubsuit AK87	i) \spadesuit A \heartsuit A87654 \diamondsuit K6 \clubsuit AK87	j) \spadesuit AQ87432 \heartsuit 9 \diamondsuit AK106 \clubsuit A
\spadesuit 6 \heartsuit AJ1073 \diamondsuit A9 \clubsuit KQJ32	\spadesuit 6 \heartsuit AJ1073 \diamondsuit A9 \clubsuit KQJ32	\spadesuit K5 \heartsuit KJ32 \diamondsuit QJ54 \clubsuit 652	\spadesuit K5 \heartsuit J932 \diamondsuit QJ54 \clubsuit Q52	\spadesuit 965 \heartsuit AK854 \diamondsuit 52 \clubsuit K54

- f) $1\spadesuit - 2\heartsuit - 4\heartsuit - 4\text{NT}$ (hearts) – $5\spadesuit$ (2 with Q) – $6\heartsuit$. North knows South has 5-hearts, so can bid $4\heartsuit$. South checks on ‘aces’ with hearts as trumps. North shows 2 together with the $\heartsuit Q$
- g) $1\spadesuit - 2\heartsuit - 4\heartsuit - 4\text{NT}$ (hearts) – $5\spadesuit$ (1) – $5\heartsuit$. Similar to (f) but now with two keycards missing South settles for $5\heartsuit$.
- h) $1\heartsuit - 3\heartsuit - 4\text{NT} - 5\spadesuit$ (one) – $6\heartsuit$. The $5\spadesuit$ shows 1 or 4 (obviously 1). With the known ten card fit (equivalent to the $\heartsuit Q$), the slam is bid.
- i) $1\heartsuit - 3\heartsuit - 4\text{NT} - 5\clubsuit - 5\heartsuit$ - whereas, two key-cards missing.
- j) $1\spadesuit - 2\heartsuit - 3\spadesuit - 4\spadesuit - 4\text{NT}$ (spades) – $5\spadesuit$ (1 or 4, obviously 1) – $6\spadesuit$. With one key-card missing the grand slam is not attempted.

Queen Ask (this can be adopted at a later stage)

Following $5\clubsuit$ or $5\spadesuit$, which have not indicated the presence/absence of the Queen of trumps, a bid of the next suit up is the queen-ask (usually used in investigating the possibility of a grand slam). (**Special case if playing 1430 – if hearts is the agreed trump suit, following a $5\spadesuit$ bid (0 or 3), $5\heartsuit$ is now the queen-ask opposite ‘3’, but must be passed opposite ‘0’**).

The responses to the queen ask are: (by the trump queen we mean the queen **or its equivalent** e.g. a 5-card suit – i.e. a 10+ card fit):

Without trump queen, bid the trump suit at the lowest level.

With trump queen, bid 5NT with no other control (i.e. king).

With trump queen and another king, bid the suit containing the king as long as it ranks below the intended trump suit if at the 6-level (otherwise bid the trump suit)

If the trump suit is available at both the 5-level and the 6-level (usually the case with a major), then with the trump queen and no other king bid 5NT, but bid the 'king' suit at the lowest level.

Queen-Ask examples:

k) ♠ AKJ1043 ♥ AJ105 ♦ 8 ♣ AK	l) ♠ AKJ1043 ♥ AQJ6 ♦ 9 ♣ AK	m) ♠ A5 ♥ 10963 ♦ A7 ♣ AQ854	n) ♠ AK752 ♥ J9764 ♦ A7 ♣ A	o) ♠ AJ1043 ♥ AKJ ♦ 9 ♣ AK94
♠ Q52 ♥ 874 ♦ AK62 ♣ 1073	♠ Q52 ♥ K87 ♦ A1062 ♣ 1073	♠ 6 ♥ AK852 ♦ KQ862 ♣ K3	♠ 6 ♥ AK852 ♦ KQ862 ♣ 53	♠ K52 ♥ Q3 ♦ KQ7542 ♣ J6

- k) 2♣ - 2♦ - 2♠ - 3♠ - 4NT (spades) - 5♦ (1 or 4, but obviously 1) - 5♥ (queen ask) - 6♦ - 6♣. The 6♦ shows both the ♠Q and the ♦K.) The reasonable slam probably depends on split honours in hearts.
- l) 2♣ - 2♦ - 2♠ - 3♠ - 4NT (spades) - 5♦ (1 or 4, but obviously 1) - 5♥ (queen ask) - 6♥ - 6♣. With this hand, South shows the ♥K as well as the ♠Q, so North can confidently bid the grand slam.
- m) 1♣ - 1♥ - 3♥ - 4NT (hearts) - 5♣ (0 or 3, obviously 3) - 5♦ (queen ask) - 6♥ (denies ♥Q) - pass
- n) 1♠ - 2♥ - 4♣ (cue, agreeing hearts) - 4NT (hearts) - 5♣ (0 or 3) - 5♦ (queen ask) - 5♠ (shows the equivalent of the queen, and also ♠K.) - 7♥
- o) 1♠ - 2♦ - 3♣ - 3♠ - 4NT - 5♦ - 5♥ (queen-ask) - 5♠ - pass. North's 5♥ (next suit up) is the Queen-ask. South bids his spades at the lowest level - denying the Queen, so North settles in 5♠

0314 v 1430

Probably about 80% of players play 1430 (where 5♣ is 1 or 4, 5♦ is 0 or 3), as against 20% who play 0314 (where 5♣ is 0 or 3, 5♦ is 1 or 4).

The main reason is because in some sequence where hearts is the trump suit, using 0314 it can be difficult to enquire about the trump Queen, in order to decide whether to stay out of a slam.

Statistically, a response of '1' is more likely than a response of '0', so with **hearts** as trumps:

03144NT - 5♦ (1 or 4) -	you cannot now bid 5♥ to enquire about the Queen
1430 4NT - 5♣ (1 or 4) -	5♦ is still available for the Queen-ask

Note: this does not inhibit the Queen-ask if looking for a grand-slam, since the initiator can bid 5♠ as the queen ask (the lowest non-trump suit).

Conversely, with Clubs as trumps, after 4NT, responder to show 1, bids 5♦ (1430), and 5♣ (0314). Hence 1430 goes beyond the ‘safe’ 5♣, whereas 0314 allows the partnership to play in 5♣.

Players largely overcome this by not necessarily using Blackwood for minor suit slam investigation (Minorwood is very popular, whereby most 4♣ and 4♦ bids in a non-competitive auction, become the RKCB bid themselves). Alternatively some choose 1430 for major slam enquires, and 0314 for minor slam enquiries) –but this can be confusing).

For players who are unfamiliar with RKCB, I would suggest that they start with 0314, and when they have overcome the ‘club’ problem (via use of Minorwood etc.), then consider moving to 1430.

Asking For Other Kings

When considering a grand-slam, all six key-cards should be held (between the two players). It then requires the initiator to ask for other kings.

Various methods exist, but initially just use the standard approach, i.e. 5♣ = 1 king, etc. But remember there are **only three kings available**, since the trump king has been accounted for (or not) in response to the original 4NT bid.

With experience other responses are better, my preferred choice being:

- bid six of the agreed trump suit with no other king;
- with one king, bid the suit of that king as long as it is lower ranking than the agreed trump suit (otherwise bid as if no other king);
- with two kings, bid the suit that **doesn’t have** the king, as long as this is below the agreed trump suit – otherwise bid the lower-ranking king. If considering a grand-slam, all 6 key-cards should be held.

Partner can usually determine which of the two above is the actual situation.

The following examples make use of my preferred methods – others are available.

<p>p) ♠ AJ7 ♥ AK62 ♦ KJ4 ♣ A105</p> <p>♠ 4 ♥ QJ43 ♦ AQ985 ♣ K87</p>	<p>q) ♠ AK7 ♥ AK62 ♦ J4 ♣ AK105</p> <p>♠ Q ♥ QJ43 ♦ AQ985 ♣ 987</p>	<p>r) ♠ QJ854 ♥ Q642 ♦ A3 ♣ A7</p> <p>♠ A ♥ AKJ9 ♦ KQ984 ♣ 532</p>
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- p) 2NT - 3♣ - 3♥ - 4NT (hearts) – 5♦ – 5NT - 6♦ - 7♥. The 5♦ (1 or 4, but obviously 4) confirms all five keycards. South’s 5NT asks for kings, and North’s response (showing the ♦K), enables the grand-slam to be bid.

- q) 2NT - 3♣ - 3♥ - 4NT (hearts) - 5♦ - 5NT - 6♦ - 6♥. As above, but now 6♦ shows the other two kings. The absence of the ♦K makes the grand-slam less attractive.
- r) 1♠ - 2♦ - 2♥ - 4NT (hearts) - 5♠ - 5NT - 6♥. North's response to the 5NT shows no other kings.

Void Showing (by responder) (only when more experienced)

In the build-up to 4NT, players can usually show voids via cue-bids. However if this is not the case, various modifications to the responses to 4NT can show voids. The method I prefer, is to start the responses at 5NT when holding a **useful void** (judgement required – but a void in say opener's first suit would probably not be useful). The responses are **1, 2(without Q), 2(with Q), 3**. Note that if 0 'aces' don't show the void. (Care is needed with this approach if the agreed suit is a minor).

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>s) ♠ AJ8754
♥ K8642
♦ A3
♣ --</p> <p>♠ K
♥ AQJ9
♦ KQ984
♣ 853</p> | <p>t) ♠ K
♥ J764
♦ AQJ1072
♣ AKJ</p> <p>♠ AJ8754
♥ --
♦ K83
♣ Q1064</p> |
|--|---|

- s) 1♠ - 2♦ - 3♥ - 4NT - 6♥ - 7♥. (Instead of 3♥, many players would play 2♥ as forcing – this wouldn't affect the subsequent auction). In response to 4NT, North shows 3 + void (if the void was in diamonds this would not be useful).
- t) 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - 3♣ - 3♦ - 4♦ - 4NT - 6♦ - 7♦. After North's 2♥ reverse, South's fsf 3♣ is now forcing to game. Correctly North shows his 6-card diamond suit in preference to 3NT. In response to 4NT, South shows 2 + void (if the void was in club this would not be useful).

Void Showing (by initiator) (only when more experienced)

If the initiator has an outside void, he is not interested in partner possibly having the ace of that suit. To tell partner to not include the ace of that suit in his responses, a jump to the five level (or equivalent), is Roman Keycard Exclusion Blackwood (sometimes known as Voidwood – developed by the American world champion Bobby Goldman). The responses and subsequent queen and king ask are the same as 'normal' RKCB – but responder should realise that 4NT must be included in the sequence of responses.

Effectively, the 5-suit replaces the 4NT, and so 6-suit is the King ask, and initiator may have to bid 5NT as the Queen-ask.

u) ♠ AK10982 ♥ KQJ ♦ AKQ4 ♣ --	v) ♠ AK10982 ♥ KQJ ♦ AKQ4 ♣ --	w) ♠ AK103 ♥ AJ ♦ 97642 ♣ 84
♠ Q43 ♥ 987 ♦ 83 ♣ A652	♠ Q43 ♥ A87 ♦ 83 ♣ 9652	♠ QJ982 ♥ KQ76 ♦ -- ♣ AK53

- u) $\underline{2\clubsuit} - \underline{2\diamond} - \underline{2\heartsuit} - 3\spadesuit - \underline{5\clubsuit} - 5\diamond - \underline{6\heartsuit}$. The $5\clubsuit$ is Exclusion RKCB. South must ignore his $\clubsuit A$, so responds $5\diamond$ with '0' aces (the next step up from $5\clubsuit$). North settles for the small slam.
- w) $\underline{2\clubsuit} - \underline{2\diamond} - \underline{2\heartsuit} - 3\spadesuit - \underline{5\clubsuit} - 5\heartsuit - \underline{5NT} - 6\clubsuit - \underline{7\heartsuit}$...whereas South shows his non-club ace. $5\heartsuit$ - queen-ask; $6\clubsuit$ - has the Queen; what more for the grand-slam.
- x) $1NT - \underline{2\clubsuit} - 2\heartsuit - \underline{5\diamond} - 5\heartsuit - \underline{6\heartsuit}$. After a spade response to Stayman, South's jump to $5\diamond$ is Exclusion RKCB. North's $5\heartsuit$ (the first step) shows '0' or '3' excluding diamonds. South can now bid the slam.