



About Key Card Blackwood

After the partnership has agreed a suit, a bid of 4NT asks about key cards.

There are 5 key cards: the 4 aces and the king of trumps. The responses are as follows:

5♣ shows 0 or 4 key cards. If you cannot tell whether partner has 0 or 4, you shouldn't be using Blackwood.

5♦ shows 1 or 5 key cards.

5♥ shows 2 key cards.

5♠ shows 3 key cards.

♠ A Q J 10 7		♠ 6 4 3 2
♥ K Q J 8 7		♥ 10 9 6
♦ A K		♦ Q J 2
♣ A		♣ K 3 2

West	East
2♣ ¹	2♦ ²
2♠	3♠ ³
4NT ⁴	5♣ ⁵
5♠ ⁶	Pass

¹Game forcing. ²Negative: 0-7 points.

³No need to hurry. 2♣ was game forcing. 2NT would have been a second negative: 0-3 points

⁴Key card Blackwood.

⁵No key cards

⁶High enough

Generally speaking, you are happy to be in a small slam if the chances of making it are higher than 50%. Conversely, you would prefer to stay out of a slam if the prospects are less

than 50%. If it is genuinely 50%, you probably don't mind whether or not you bid it, however, in practice a slam that seems to be 50% is usually worse than that. West can certainly argue that if East has either the ♠K or ♥A the slam will be excellent. Superficially, it seems that if both of these cards are missing, it is on the spade finesse, but in practice, 6♠ is most unlikely to make even if the spade finesse is right. First, there are no entries to dummy to take the finesse. Second, it is quite possible that North will lead a singleton heart and find a ruff. As usual, if two key cards are missing, give up on the slam.

In the next hand, East gives a more helpful response to key card Blackwood.

♠ A Q J 10 7 2		♠ K 4 3
♥ K Q J 10		♥ 9 6 3
♦ A K		♦ J 4 3 2
♣ A		♣ 9 3 2

West	East
2♣	2♦
2♠	3♠
4NT	5♦ ⁷
6♠ ⁸	Pass

⁷One key card, the ♠K.

⁸West does not know whether East has the ♥A or ♠K, but either way, 6♠ will be excellent.

If East had the ♠K and ♥A, then it would have been easy to reach a grand slam.

♠ A Q J 10 7 2		♠ K 4 3
♥ K Q J 10		♥ A 6 3
♦ A K		♦ J 8 3 2
♣ A		♣ 10 3 2

West	East
2♣	2NT ⁹
3♠	4♠
4NT	5♥ ¹⁰
7NT ¹¹	

⁹2NT shows a balanced positive, 8 or more points.

¹⁰5♥ shows two key cards, the ♠K and ♥A.

¹¹West can count thirteen tricks.



If you use key card Blackwood, it is essential that both partners know the trump suit.

Key card Blackwood really concentrates the mind. Using ordinary Blackwood, you can get away with not knowing, but now the king of trumps is a key card there will be chaos unless trumps are known.

I can readily sympathise with partnerships that take a practical view that 4NT is always Blackwood. It may not be the best practice but it avoids ambiguity, a huge advantage. However, without more sophistication, you cannot effectively play key card Blackwood. I would suggest you might ▶

like the following simple guidelines.

- (i) If a suit has been agreed by both players bidding it, 4NT is key card Blackwood with that suit agreed.
- (ii) If no suit has been agreed, then the last bid suit is the agreed trump suit.
- (iii) If the last bid was no-trumps, then 4NT is not Blackwood.

Auction A		Auction B	
West	East	West	East
1♠	2♣	1♠	2♣
2♦	4NT	2NT	4NT

In Auction A, the agreed suit is diamonds. The ♦K is a key card.

In Auction B, 4NT is quantitative. West passes if minimum for 2NT or bids 6NT if maximum.



After the response to 4NT, a continuation of 5NT asks how many of the remaining kings partner holds (ie. excluding the king of trumps).

The responses are as follows:

- 6♣ shows 0 kings.
- 6♦ shows 1 king.
- 6♥ shows 2 kings.
- 6♠ shows 3 kings.

Common sense dictates that such a 5NT continuation must be a try for a grand slam because, whatever the response, you can never stop below a small slam. Therefore, it guarantees that all of the key cards are present.

♠ A Q J 6		♠ K 10 7 5 4 3 2
♥ A Q 2		♥ 8
♦ A K Q 3		♦ 7
♣ A 2		♣ K Q J 10

West	East
2♣ ¹	2♠ ²
4NT ³	5♦ ⁴
5NT ⁵	7NT ⁶

¹Game forcing.

²Positive. 8+ points. At least 5 spades.

³Key card Blackwood. Spades are agreed as trumps.

⁴1 or 5 key cards (here one, the ♠K).

⁵Asking for kings, but also guaranteeing all the key cards are present. ▶

⁶This doesn't answer the Blackwood question but it does show initiative. If partner has the 4 aces, East can count 13 tricks.



You should normally not use Blackwood without having some idea of how strong partner is.

The reason is that, when you use Blackwood, you are taking complete control of the auction. Partner will answer your questions, showing his key cards and maybe outside kings. He will never have a chance to show if he has extra points, or extra shape. The next hand illustrates some all too common horrible bidding.

♠ K Q 10 9 6 4		♠ A J 3 2
♥ Q J 8		♥ K 7
♦ K J		♦ A 8 7 6
♣ A Q		♣ K J 2

Auction C		Auction D	
West	East	West	East
1♠	4NT ¹	1♠	2♦ ⁵
5♥ ²	5♠ ³	3♠	4NT ⁶
Pass ⁴		5♥ ⁷	6♠ ⁸

At the table, Auction C was chosen.

¹East argued: I am an ace stronger than I might be to bid game, so I must use key card Blackwood to try for slam.

²Two key cards, the ♠K and ♣A.

³Oh dear, a key card is missing. I must think what to do now. Long hesitation, then sign off in 5♠.

⁴With considerable frustration. West had 18 points when he might have had 12. He had six excellent spades when he might have had only four. It is incredibly annoying to have a strong hand and be deprived of the opportunity to tell partner. The long hesitation had made West aware that two aces were not missing. This is

unauthorised information so West was ethically obliged to pass.

Just to make sure you understand: 4NT was a truly awful bid. East virtually admitted it when he hesitated after the reply before bidding 5♠. If you use Blackwood properly, you should know what to do after all possible responses.

I can give you very specific advice:

If you use Blackwood, you should have worked out what to do next without needing to hesitate.

If your partner uses Blackwood, hears your answer and then hesitates before signing off at the 5 level, you should almost certainly pass.

A far better auction would have been Auction D.

⁵Far too early for Blackwood. If all partner can do is rebid 2♠, I have no reason to venture beyond game.

⁶Partner is now known to have a strong hand with 6 spades. We certainly have the values for slam, I will make sure 2 key cards are not missing.

⁷2 key cards, the ♠K and ♣A.

⁸Obvious.



You should normally not use Blackwood without having given the partnership every opportunity to find a fit.

Below, you see two possible auctions for the layout shown. I think you will agree that Auction F is far superior.

♠ A Q J 6 5		♠ 3
♥ 8 7		♥ A K Q 2
♦ A 8 6 2		♦ K Q J 4
♣ 9 2		♣ A K Q J

Auction E		Auction F	
West	East	West	East
1♠	4NT ¹	1♠	2♣ ⁴
5♥ ²	6NT ³	2♦ ⁵	4NT ⁶
		5♥ ⁷	7♦ ⁸

Auction E:

¹Key card Blackwood with spades as the trump suit. Certainly, a slam is inevitable with 25 points opposite an opening bid. However, to use Blackwood now makes it certain that ▶

the correct contract of 7♦ can never be reached.

²2 key cards

³Stuck. A key card is missing. For one thing, East has no idea whether it is an ace or the ♠K.

Auction F:

⁴Wait to see what partner does. If the best he can do is 2♠, I will know more (ie partner is minimum without a second suit) and can always bid Blackwood then.

⁵4 diamonds as well as 5 spades. Just what East wanted to hear.

⁶Key card Blackwood with diamonds (the last bid suit) as the trump suit.

⁷2 key cards.

⁸East can count 13 tricks. That includes a ruff in dummy.



You should normally not use Blackwood if you have 2 top losers in an unbid suit or a side suit void.

In these situations, it is important to know not how many aces partner has, but which aces. Cue bidding is more helpful and we cover this in the next edition of BRIDGE. ■

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Things You Should Know About Key Card Blackwood Quiz

by Andrew Kambites

(Answers on page 47)

1 What would you bid with Hands A,B,C and D if your partner opens 1♠? If you use key card Blackwood consider your continuations after all possible replies.

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	Hand D
♠ A 6 5	♠ K J 5 2	♠ A Q 10 3 2	♠ A Q 10 3
♥ A K 9 6 5	♥ A 6	♥ 7	♥ Q J
♦ A K 8	♦ K 7 6 3	♦ A K Q J 10 9	♦ A K Q J 10
♣ K 8	♣ A Q 2	♣ 9	♣ A K

2 You are East. The bidding starts as shown.

West	East
1♠	2♣
2♦	4NT
?	

- (i) What is your next bid with Hands E, F, G and H?
- (ii) If your partner hears your answer and continues with 5NT, how do you respond to that?

Hand E	Hand F	Hand G	Hand H
♠ A 8 6 5 4	♠ A K 8 6 4	♠ A 8 6 5 4	♠ A K 6 5 4
♥ 8 7	♥ 8 7	♥ K 8	♥ K 8
♦ K J 7 6	♦ K J 7 6	♦ J 10 7 6	♦ J 10 7 6
♣ K 6	♣ K 6	♣ K 6	♣ K 6

3 You are South. You have Hand J.

Hand J
♠ A J 7 6 5
♥ 8
♦ K Q J 10 3
♣ K Q

The bidding starts as shown below.

West	North	East	South
3♥	4♣	Pass	4NT
Pass	?		

How should you continue if partner responds:

- (i) 5♣? (ii) 5♦? (iii) 5♥? (iv) 5♠?

Better Hand Evaluation

Bernard Magee

Introduction

Better Hand Evaluation is aimed at helping readers to add greater accuracy to their bidding. It deals with auctions in which you and your partner, against silent opponents, can describe your hands fully to each other and, by evaluating them accurately, find the best final contract. The emphasis of all good, accurate bidding is on hand evaluation.

There are two general types of auction: a) a fit is found and b) no fit is found.

When you do not have a fit, you are aiming to describe the strength of your hand as soon as possible, most often using no-trump bids. This book begins by discussing balanced hand bidding in Acol, as it is very important that both members of a partnership have an accurate knowledge of how to show hands of different strengths.

When a fit is found, there is much re-evaluation of the hand to be done; point count, though still important, needs to be evaluated together with distribution. The best way of reaching an accurate assessment is to use the Losing Trick Count; this is an important method of hand evaluation and takes up a number of chapters.

Finally, we move on to different forms of evaluation including game tries and splinter bids. You can never know enough methods of hand evaluation; the more you learn, the better you get at judging your hand.

Although the Losing Trick Count is used more easily in tandem with your partner, a large proportion of the ideas in this book can be used by an individual. For example, evaluating your hand to be worth an extra point is going to help anyone you partner – as long as you get it right.

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See Mail Order Form on page 7.

Answers to Key Card Blackwood on page 36

1 What would you bid with Hands A,B,C and D if your partner opens 1♠? If you use key card Blackwood, consider your continuations after all possible replies.

Hand A	Hand B
♠ A 6 5	♠ K J 5 2
♥ A K 9 6 5	♥ A 6
♦ A K 8	♦ K 7 6 3
♣ K 8	♣ A Q 2

Hand C	Hand D
♠ A Q 10 3 2	♠ A Q 10 3
♥ 7	♥ Q J
♦ A K Q J 10 9	♦ A K Q J 10
♣ 9	♣ A K

Hand A: You are almost certainly going to play in a slam but you don't yet know the denomination. Start with 2♥ and see what partner rebids. If he rebids 2♠, showing a minimum opening bid with at least five spades, you can jump to 4NT, key card Blackwood, and try 6♠ unless two key cards are missing.

Hand B: You are hopeful of slam, but it is too early to jump to 4NT because you don't know how strong partner is. Your correct call is the waiting bid of 2♦. If partner rebids 2♠, showing a minimum opening bid, you should settle for 4♠.

Hand C: 4NT, key card Blackwood. Of course you don't know how strong partner is, but it hardly matters because you know what to do whatever his answer. The five key cards are the four aces and the ♠K.

In the unlikely event that he answers 5♣, which shows 0 or 4 key cards, you will know he has none (because you have two). You will then just have to sign off in 5♠ and hope the spade finesse is right.

If he answers 5♦, showing one key card, you will sign off in 5♠. Note that, if the partnership is missing an ace and the ♠K, a slam is at best 50%.

If he answers 5♥, showing two key cards, then jump to 6♠.

If he answers 5♠, showing three key cards, you can count 13 tricks so you can bid 7NT confidently.

Hand D: 4NT, key card Blackwood. Yes,

I know you have two losing hearts, but you have 26 points. If partner was missing the ♥A-K, he would have opened the bidding on seven points, hardly likely.

It is inconceivable that partner will show no key cards with 5♣.

If he answers 5♦, showing one key card, you will jump to 6♠.

If he answers 5♥, showing two key cards, you should make 7♠ or 7NT easily. Note that partner cannot have a balanced hand too strong to open 1NT, so he will have five spades, enabling you to count 13 tricks: 5 spades, the ♥A, 5 diamonds and the ♠A K.

2 You are East. The bidding starts as shown.

West	East
1♠	2♣
2♦	4NT
?	

(i) What is your next bid with Hands E, F, G and H?

(ii) If your partner hears your answer and continues with 5NT, how do you respond to that?

Hand E	Hand F
♠ A 8 6 5 4	♠ A K 8 6 4
♥ 8 7	♥ 8 7
♦ K J 7 6	♦ K J 7 6
♣ K 6	♣ K 6

Hand G	Hand H
♠ A 8 6 5 4	♠ A K 6 5 4
♥ K 8	♥ K 8
♦ J 10 7 6	♦ J 10 7 6
♣ K 6	♣ K 6

Before answering to partner's key card Blackwood, you must know the agreed trump suit. You and your partner have not agreed a suit by both of you bidding it, but in that case the last suit bid is assumed to be the agreed trump suit. Diamonds are trumps so the five key cards are the four aces and the ♦K.

Partner's follow up bid of 5NT asks

how many kings you have, excluding the king of trumps.

Hand E: (i) 5♥, showing two key cards, the ♠A and ♦K.

Hand E: (ii) 6♦, showing one additional king, the ♠K.

Hand F: (i) 5♥, showing two key cards, the ♠A and ♦K.

Hand F: (ii) 6♥, showing two additional kings, the ♠K and ♣K.

Hand G: (i) 5♦, showing one key card, the ♠A.

Hand G: (ii) 6♥, showing two additional kings, the ♥K and ♠K.

Hand H: (i) 5♦, showing one key card, the ♠A.

Hand H: (ii) 6♠, showing three additional kings, the ♠K, ♥K and ♣K.

3 You are South. You have Hand J.

Hand J
♠ A J 7 6 5
♥ 8
♦ K Q J 10 3
♣ K Q

West	North	East	South
3♥	4♠	Pass	4NT
Pass	?		

How should you continue if partner responds: (i) 5♣? (ii) 5♦? (iii) 5♥? (iv) 5♠?

It is not 100% safe to commit your partnership to the 5-level, but you would be very unlucky to fail, so using key card Blackwood is justifiable. The five key cards are the four aces and the ♠K.

(i) 5♣ shows 0 or 4 key cards. It is inconceivable that partner has no key cards for his jump to 4♠, so he has the ♠K and all the side suit aces. You can bid 7NT confidently.

(ii) 5♦ shows 1 or 5 key cards. He cannot have five because you have one, so he must have just one. You will just have to hope you can make 5♠.

(iii) 5♠. Partner has two key cards so two are missing.

(iv) 6♠. Partner has three key cards so only one is missing. ■