

Key Card Blackwood

Blackwood is the best method for slam exploration. It is no coincidence that almost all bridge players use some form of this convention: it is simply one of the best ideas in bridge – without the aces, slams cannot be made.

Key Card Blackwood (KCB) works exactly like normal Blackwood except that you count the *king of trumps* as an *ace*. The idea is that the king of trumps is a very important card (as important as any ace) so that it should be included in your Blackwood calculations, e.g. with spades as trumps the key-cards are: ♣A, ♦A, ♥A, ♠A and ♠K.

The beauty of this convention is that the responses are almost exactly the same as normal Blackwood:

5♣	0 or 4 key-cards
5♦	1 (or 5) key-cards
5♥	2 key-cards
5♠	3 key-cards

This addition to the Blackwood convention is invaluable for accurate slam bidding and yet, at the same time, there is nothing new to learn other than to remember to count the king of trumps in the responses!

There are two common fears with taking on this new convention:

1. How do you know which suit is trumps?
2. How do you know whether partner has the aces or the king of trumps?

The trump suit should be obvious; in fact, you should never use Key Card Blackwood unless you have agreed a suit, or unless you are happy to play in the last-bid suit.

For example, in the auction 1♥ – 4NT, hearts would be trumps, but more usually there will be explicit agreement when both sides have bid the same suit: in the sequence 1♠ – 3♠ – 4NT, spades are trumps. So, if there is doubt about the trump suit, then the last-bid suit should be the one you use. Remember that if you are aiming for a no-trump slam, then aces and kings are not so important and you very rarely need to ask about them. More important is the number of points you hold, in which case you should use quantitative bidding rather than a Key Card asking convention.

The answer to question 2 is that it doesn't matter! The king of trumps is just as valuable as an ace so if you are missing *any* two of the five key-cards, you would not want to be in a slam.

Blackwood Key cards = aces and king of trumps.

5♣ = 0-4 key cards 5♦ = 1-5 key cards 5♥ = 2 key cards 5♠ = 3 key cards

Asking for Kings

5NT after partner's response to 4NT is asking for King. Use only when partnership has all five key cards.

Do not count the trump king – it has already been counted in response to the 4NT key card asking bid.

6♣ = 0 king 5♦ = 1 king 5♥ = 2 kings 5♠ = 3 kings

Example:

West	East	West	East
♠ 10 3 2	♠ 4		1♥
♥ K 9 5 3	♥ A Q J 7 2	3♥	4NT
♦ A 7 6 4	♦ K Q J 5	5♠	6♥
♣ A 6	♣ K Q 4		

East opens 1♥ and after his partner's 3♥ response he re-evaluates his hand: 18 high-card points, a strong five-card suit (worth one extra point) and a singleton (with the long trumps, worth two points). That makes 21 points; adding this total to his partner's 10-12 means East is definitely excited about the prospects of a slam.

Here East is missing four important cards: the ace of spades, the king of hearts, the ace of diamonds, and the ace of clubs. He can find out about all these cards by using Key-card Blackwood. If partner has two, he will sign off in 5♥; if partner has three, he will go for 6♥, and if West has four, East would go for a Grand Slam (this last option is not really likely as West has limited himself to 10-12 points).

Responding to 4NT, West must remember to include the king of trumps (here hearts) in his response. He has three key-cards: the ace of clubs, the ace of diamonds and the king of hearts, and so he responds 5♠. Now East carries out his plan and bids 6♥. He bids it with great confidence because he knows about the king of trumps as well as the number of aces.

Compare the above with this next auction, where the only difference is that West's king is in the spade suit rather than the heart suit :

West	East	West	East
♠ K 3 2	♠ 4		1♥
♥ 10 9 5 3	♥ A Q J 7 2	3♥	4NT
♦ A 7 6 4	♦ K Q J 5	5♥	Pass
♣ A 6	♣ K Q 4		

Once again East starts a Blackwood sequence, but this time West only shows two key-cards (5♥): the king of spades does not come in to the reckoning, it is only the king of trumps that is included.

Over 5♥ East passes; missing two key cards, slam is not a good proposition. It might appear that the slam will make half the time, but the chance of a void in diamonds brings it just below 50% and therefore not a good slam. You should try to avoid a slam if you are missing two key-cards.

Summary

Only used when a **suit** contract has been agreed, explicitly or implicitly:

- If both partners have bid a suit naturally, that suit is trumps:
1♥ - 2♣ - 3♦ - 3♥ - 4NT is Blackwood, with the contract in Hearts
- If the suit has not been agreed then the last naturally bid suit below 3NT is trumps. 1♣ - 1♦ - 1♥ - 4NT is Blackwood, with the contract in Hearts, by inference.
- If a new suit is bid at the 4 level it is a cue bid showing a control, and the last suit bid below 3NT is the agreed trump suit. 1♠ - 2♣ - 3♥ - 4♦ - 4NT is Blackwood. Hearts is the agreed trump suit. 4♦ is showing a first round diamond control.
- If the last natural bid was No Trumps then 4NT is not Blackwood but is a quantitative bid with the final contract in No Trumps. 1NT - 3♠ - 4NT is Blackwood with Spades as Trumps.
- Only bid 5NT (king ask) if you know you have all five key cards.