

Roman Key Card Blackwood (RKCB)

Roman key Card Blackwood is an improvement on Key Card Blackwood because it takes fully into account the honour strength of the combined trump holding. Consider this situation:

West	East	West	East
♠ A 7 4	♠ K Q	1♣	1♦
♥ J 8 6 3	♥ A 7 4 2	1♥	4NT
♦ 10	♦ A K 8 5	5♥	6♥
♣ A K J 6 2	♣ Q 9 8		

Using Key Card Blackwood, and with only one key card missing, it is reasonable to bid a small slam. Unfortunately the only missing key card is the trump king, and the trump queen is missing too. One off!

Roman Key Card Blackwood (RKCB) creates space at the 5 level to either show the trump queen or to ask about its whereabouts.

Responses to 4NT (RKCB)

- 5♣ = 0-3 key cards (KC);
- 5♦ = 1-4 KC;
- 5♥ = 2-5 KC & no trump queen ;
- 5♠ = 2-5 KC & trump queen.

Note that there is an alternative version of RKCB which reverses the meaning of the 5♣ and 5♦ responses. The 0-3:1-4 version described here (and recommended by Andrew Robson) is more natural so easier to remember, and is commonly referred to as the "Thirty Fourteen" version, while the alternative 1-4:0-3 version is marginally superior in certain situations and is commonly referred to as the "Fourteen Thirty" version. More detail on the two versions is provided at the end of this handout.

If the partnership is missing two (or more!) key cards, slam should be avoided. If the partnership is missing a key card and the queen of the agreed suit, slam should not be pursued unless the combined trump holding is 10 cards or longer (where there is a good chance that the queen will drop.)

If the response to RKCB 4NT is 5♥ or 5♠ then the RKCB bidder knows the whereabouts of the trump queen. If the response is 5♣ or 5♦ then the RKCB bidder does not know the whereabouts of the trump queen, but if the response shows that the partnership has all five key cards, then a grand slam may be on provided one or other partner has the trump queen. Without it you should sign off in a small slam without asking for Kings.

West	East	West	East
♠ A Q 9 8	♠ K 4 3	2NT	3♦
♥ Q 8	♥ A J 9 6 5 4	3♥	4NT
♦ K Q 7	♦ A 10 9	5♥	6♥
♣ A K 7 6	♣ 5	P	

5♥ shows two key cards and the ♥Q. One key card is missing but with a club singleton and a combined minimum of 32 HCP East is happy to bid 6♥.

Trump Queen Ask (Grand Slam Try)

If the response to the RKCB bid is 5♣ or 5♦ and the RKCB bidder does not have the trump queen she can ask partner about the trump queen by bidding the cheapest non-trump suit. This bid should normally only be made when the partnership has all five key cards. The responses to the 'queen ask' commit the partnership to a small slam. The only exception is when the trump suit is hearts, when an unfavourable response permits the partnership to sign off at the 5-level.

If responder has the trump queen his response will also show whether or not he also has a side king.

There are several versions of the Trump Queen Ask. The method we describe here is the version recommended by Andrew Robson.

Responses to the Trump Queen Ask:

- Bidding the trump suit at the lowest level denies the trump queen
- Bidding the trump suit at the 6-level shows the trump queen but no 'non-trump' kings
- Bidding any other non-trump suit shows the trump queen AND the king of that suit. Bid the cheapest king if you have two or more.

For example:

South	North
2♣	2♥
4NT	5♣
5♦	5♥
6♥	P

South's 5♦ (next suit up) confirms all five key cards are held and asks North if he has ♥Q.
North's 5♥ denies the ♥Q.

South	North
2♣	2♥
4NT	5♣
5♦	6♥
P	

South's 5♦ (next suit up) confirms all five key cards are held and asks North if he has ♥Q.
North's 6♥ confirms the ♥Q but denies any non-trump kings

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

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

West's 5♦ is queen asking. East's 6♥ bid shows the trump queen and the ♥K, and denies the K♣ (would have bid 6♣) and denies K♦ (would have bid 6♦)

West	East	West	East
♠ A 10 9 8 7 6	♠ K 4 3		2NT
♥ Q 7 6	♥ A K J	3♥	3♠
♦ K Q J	♦ A 3 2	4NT	5♣
♣ A	♣ K Q J 6	5♦	6♠
		6NT	P

West knows that the partnership has at least 36 HCP so a grand slam is on provide that there is not a missing Ace and that one opponent is not holding ♠Qxx. East's 5♣ confirms that the partnership has all five key cards

West's 5♦ is queen asking. East's 6♠ denies the ♠Q so there are at most two jacks plus the ♠Q missing.

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

West	East
	2♣
2♦	2♠
2NT	3♥
4♥	4NT
5♣	5♦
6♥	

West shows a very weak hand but four hearts. East can see a possible 11 tricks including one club ruff if West has the ♥Q, so bids RKCB. When West bids the expected 5♣ East's 5♦ asks about the ♥Q. A response of 5♥ (next step) would deny the ♥Q so West bids 6♥.

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

West	East
	1♣
1♠	3♣
3♥	4♣
4NT	5♣
5♦	7NT

West bids 4NT agreeing clubs. As East has only shown seven clubs, he takes West to have at least two clubs.

West asks about the ♣Q indicating that he is willing to go to 7♣ if East responds positively. East does not have the ♣Q but has one more club than he has shown, so bids a grand slam. It is very likely that the ♣Q will drop.

Occasionally the Trump Queen Ask can be used to help decide whether to bid a slam or settle for game:

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

West	East
1♠	2♥
3♥	4NT
5♣	5♦
5♥	

East's 2♥ shows 5+ hearts so West's 3♥ bid may well have been made with only three hearts. With possibly only eight hearts a small slam should only be risked if West has the ♥Q. East asks with a bid of 5♦ and partner's one step response denies the ♥Q. West settles for game.

King Ask (Grand Slam Try)

Once it has been established that the partnership holds all five key cards AND the trump queen, a bid of 5NT (if still available) asks how many non-trump kings partner holds. This may help determine whether the grand slam should be in a suit or in the higher scoring 7NT.

Partner may have already shown an outside king in responding to the Trump Queen Ask, but he should still include it in his response. The trump king is not counted.

Responses to 5NT (King ask):

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

Bidding RKCB after interference (DOPI : Double = 0, Pass = 1)

W	N	E	S
	1♣	P	1♥
2♦	2♥	4♦	4NT
5♦	?		

A double by North shows no aces. A pass shows one key card. 5♥ shows two key cards. 5♠ shows three key cards.

Bidding RKCB when the agreed suit is a major

Don't use Blackwood if the response might go too high: For instance, if hearts are agreed as trumps, and you have one key card so need three key cards from partner for slam, then a 5♠ reply showing two key cards is a disaster. You are forced to bid 6♥.

- If the agreed suit is hearts, the Blackwood bidder needs 2 key cards
- If the agreed suit is spades, the Blackwood bidder needs just one key card.

Bidding RKCB when the agreed suit is a minor

Don't use Blackwood if the response might go too high:

Playing KCB or RKCB (3014)

- if clubs are agreed as trumps, and you need two key cards from partner for slam, then a 5♦ reply showing only one key card is a disaster. You are forced to bid 6♣.
- if diamonds are agreed as trumps, and you need three key cards from partner for slam, then after a 5♥ reply showing only two key cards you are forced to bid 6♦.

If the agreed suit is diamonds, the Blackwood bidder needs 3 key cards

If the agreed suit is clubs, the Blackwood bidder needs 2 key cards.

Alternative methods include Cue bidding and the Losing Trick Count.

3014 or 1430?

Often the RKCB bidder has the trump queen. And often, when he doesn't have it, partner will respond 5♥ or 5♠, so the location of the trump queen is known. The only time that the RKCB bidder needs to make a 'trump queen ask' is if he doesn't have it and partner has one, three, four or no key cards.

Most of the time it is the strong hand that bids RKCB. So by far the most likely responses will show one, two or no key cards. If the response shows no key cards the RKCB bidder will sign off, and if the response shows two key cards than almost certainly the partnership holds all five key cards and the possession or lack of the trump queen is known.

Far and away the most critical response will be the one that shows just one key card. It is therefore sensible that the bid that shows one or four key cards is the one immediately above the 4NT bid, i.e. 5♣, to leave as much space as possible for showing side suit kings. This allows the 'queen ask' to be made by bidding 5♦. When playing the 'Step System' (see above), if partner has the trump queen and the ♥K he can show it by bidding 5♥, provided hearts are not trumps. Playing 3014 responder would bid 5♦ to show one key card, and the RKCB bidder would bid 5♥ to make a 'trump queen ask'. Responder would lose the ability to show his ♥K.

So 1430 is more efficient when the strong hand is the RKCB bidder. An additional advantage is that if clubs are trumps and responder shows just one key card when two are needed, the RKCB bidder can sign off by passing, whereas playing 3014 the lowest sign off level is 6♣!!

When the weak hand bids 4NT (RKCB), the situation is reversed, and 3014 is more efficient than 1430. But as this happens less frequently, 3014 is more popular among to players.

Grand Slam Force

The Grand Slam Force is a convention that uses an artificial 5NT bid to ask partner about the quality of his trumps, for the purpose of probing for a grand slam. After a trump fit has been found (or implied; 1♥:5NT would indicate a heart fit), any 5NT bid that does not conflict with other conventional meanings a pair has agreed on (i.e. a 5NT Blackwood rebid) **asks partner to bid a small slam with less than two of the top three honour cards in his suit, and to bid a grand slam with two top honours.**

The grand slam force is usually used when one player has one top trump honour and is certain all the other suits are completely stopped, but needs to find the other two top trump honours in partner's hand in order to count 13 tricks.

For example:

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

1♥	3♥
5NT	6♣ (ace or king)
6♥	

