

MR BRIDGE LIBRARY

CONVENTIONS by JEREMY DHONDI

ROMAN KEYCARD BLACKWOOD

Most players enjoy the feeling they get from bidding a successful slam. When bridge first started, there wasn't much science to it until an American, Easley Blackwood, invented a convention which checked for the number of aces held and, in theory, avoiding those occasions when a slam was bid and someone cashed two aces against it. Unfortunately, 4NT became used too often as an expression of joy rather than one way of checking on whether a slam might be making. This is an example of what I mean:

A hand diagram showing North and South hands. North has ♠ AKQ1053, ♥ AJ2, ♦ K7, ♣ Q4. South has ♠ J7, ♥ KQ10753, ♦ AQ6, ♣ J10. A diamond-shaped compass rose is centered between the hands. Below the hands, the bidding sequence is shown: North bids 1♠, 4NT, 6♥; South bids 2♥, 5♦ (1 ace).

Of course, you might get away with this if the opponents don't find a club lead but it isn't sound bridge to ask a question when you don't know what to do with the answer. You established that you weren't missing two aces, but it didn't make a slam a good bet and, although you may gloat (silently, I hope) if it makes, it isn't winning bridge to bid like this regularly.

Bidding 4NT to ask for aces was regarded with some suspicion early on with letters to Contract Bridge Journal in the late 1940s wondering, out loud and in print, whether asking for aces was not, in fact, cheating as it used a code to find out what was in partner's hand. How about the perfect hand? Partner opens 1♥ and you hold:

A hand diagram showing a hand with ♠ KQ, ♥ KQJ105, ♦ KQJ103, and ♣ 9.

You respond 4NT. Partner bids 5♠ (3 aces) and you can bid 6♥ safely. Even if you bid 4NT only on suitable hands, there are still pitfalls. Perhaps the most obvious is when is 4NT actually Blackwood? For example, most players holding:

A hand diagram showing a hand with ♠ AJ4, ♥ KQJ, ♦ AQJ4, and ♣ J109.

would raise 1NT (12-14) to 4NT, meaning it as quantitative and hope that partner would pass with a minimum, raise to slam with a maximum and show impeccable judgement if he had something in between. There is also the problem of what happens if the opponents dare to come in, but we will return to that later. Slam conventions such as the Culbertson 4-5NT precede Blackwood and there were plenty of others in England during the 1950s and 1960s with names such as Norman and Byzantine. None of them acquired much popularity, not least because they were complicated and no-one much wanted to learn them

MR BRIDGE LIBRARY

CONVENTIONS by JEREMY DHONDI

ROMAN KEYCARD BLACKWOOD

apart from their inventor and the odd train spotter. Sometimes, a good idea comes along and gets adopted because it is both simple and better than what preceded it. Even when you have a hand where you have established there aren't two aces missing, your slam can go down if the trump holding is not good enough, so the idea of Roman Keycard Blackwood is to include the trump king as a fifth ace and also be able to show or ask for the trump queen. I have a friend. He's a fine player. He absolutely refuses to play this version of Blackwood. I'll give you his reasons later in this article and you can decide for yourself whether you agree with him. Here is a hand where it makes a difference:

North	South
1♣	1♣
2♣	3♥
4♣	4NT
5♥	?

Of course, a traditional 4NT didn't really solve all your problems, but at least you did know you weren't missing two aces. If you guessed to bid 6♣, hoping that partner had the spade ace or perhaps the spade king as well as the aces he had shown, all might be well but, if you could ask for the ♠K as well, you would know that 6♣ was not going to be a good contract. When you are responding to 4NT, you bid: 1 5♣ to show 0 or 3 of the five aces | 5♦ to show 1 or 4 of the five aces | 5♥ to show 2 of the five aces without the trump queen | 5♠ to show 2 of the five aces and the trump queen So, very easily, you have added

some science to your slam bidding. If partner responds 5♣ or 5♦, you can ask for the trump queen if you haven't got it. You might decide that you want to be in a small slam missing one of the five aces, but not if you are also missing the trump queen. Here is an example of how you ask for the trump queen to help you decide on whether slam is likely to be good and, of course, whether a grand or small slam is to be bid.

North	South
1♣	1♣
3♣	4NT
5♣ ¹	5♦ ²
5♠ ³	6♣

¹0 or 3 of the five aces with spades agreed
²Have you got the queen?
³No

You return to the trump suit without the queen. With the queen, you can show a king along the way in case partner is hoping for a grand slam. I'm sure you are convinced by now that is a better tool than ordinary Blackwood, so we had better return to the obstinate friend who won't play it. What are his reasons? His reasons are mostly to do with the fact that you may have some undiscussed situations in unfamiliar partnerships. The first is what is the agreed trump suit? If it goes:

North	South
1♥	3♥
4NT	

MR BRIDGE LIBRARY

CONVENTIONS by JEREMY DHONDI

ROMAN KEYCARD BLACKWOOD

no one will be in any doubt.

How about:

North	South
2♣ (Acol)	4NT

No one has bid a suit. Presumably, responder has a lot of points and is going to bid 7NT having checked there isn't an ace missing. There is a good case for playing this as standard Blackwood, but now you have at least one exception. Similarly if it goes:

North	South
1♠	2♥
3♥	3♠
4NT	

You agreed hearts first but spades more recently so which suit is agreed? Of course, you can have agreements, but this means you are going to have to do some work to avoid an accident. You sit down to play with an occasional partner, but unfortunately and unbeknownst to you, he has read an article in the latest magazine which says it is better to play 5♣ as 1 or 4 aces and 5♦ as 0 or 3 aces. It may well be better, but if he has neglected to tell you to read the same article, something unfortunate is likely to happen.

So, what if the opponents decided to enter the auction?

In the recent Gold Cup Final, there was a horrible misunderstanding. Everyone at the table was a top player.

The auction went:

West	North	East	South
	3♣	Dbl	Pass
4♣ ¹	Pass	4♥	Pass
4NT ²	Dbl	? ³	

¹Showing a good hand
²RKCB with hearts agreed
³Do we ignore the double or do we play something like ROPI?

East bid 5♣, intending it to mean what 5♣ would have always meant. The 4NT bidder thought that they played ROPI, which meant that a Redouble would show 0 aces and a Pass 1 ace. With two aces or more, you bid 5♣ or higher. The result was a contract of 6♥ missing two aces, which were cashed. There are a couple of tournament players who quite like doubling 4NT to find out if the opponents know their methods. The perfect defence to this is to ignore them. If they choose to bid, you need to know what to do next. The common solution is to play DOPI, so if they wander in with 5♥ and you have diamonds agreed, you can Double to show 0, Pass to show 1 and bid 5♠ to show 2 without the queen. RKCB is a definite advance on what preceded it, but it requires a little work if it is to show a profit and, like all other slam conventions, it pays to ask for aces only when you know what to do with any answer.