

Roman Keycard Blackwood, Delayed Kickback and Crosswood

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Asking for aces or keycards is a major tool for bidding sound slams at bridge, and Roman Keycard Blackwood (RKB) is the prominent such tool. In 2011, I introduced Crosswood, where the other minor is used to ask for keycards when a minor suit is trump. In 2016, I introduced Delayed Kickback, permitting 4♠ to be used to ask for keycards when hearts are trump, in specific, easy to remember cases. Other systems may be technically superior, but the intent of this plan is to be superior in practice.

Roman Keycard Blackwood

When spades are trump, we use 4NT as the Roman Keycard Blackwood asking bid, the *RKB Ask*. The five keycards are the four aces and the king of trump. The first four responses are well known. The **void-showing responses** are mainstream methods. (Never count a void as an ace, lest partner decide to play NT.)

Step	Bid	3014 Responses [recommended]	1430 Responses
1	5♣	0 or 3 keycards	1 or 4 keycards
2	5♦	1 or 4 keycards	0 or 3 keycards
3	5♥	2 or 5 keycards, <i>without</i> the queen of trump (or extra length that guarantees a 10-card fit)	
4	5♠	2 or 5 keycards, <i>with</i> the queen of trump (or extra length that guarantees a 10-card fit)	
		<i>With a useful void and values for slam:</i>	
	5NT	Even: 0 (unlikely), 2 or 4 keycards (always 5NT, no matter what the RKB ask or void is)	
	suit	Odd: 1 or 3 keycards with a void in the bid suit	
	6 trump	Odd: 1 or 3 keycards with a void that would require a bid higher than 6 trump to show	

4NT might be used as the RKB ask when another suit is trump, but usually some other suit will be used. In those cases, the same step responses apply. (For example, if 4♦ is the RKB ask, then the third step of 4NT shows “2 without.”) First I’ll describe the full system of responses, with only occasional mentions of the trump suit or the RKB ask. After that, we’ll get into the details of Delayed Kickback and Crosswood, which determine the RKB ask.

You may play either 3014 or 1430 responses with the methods described here. You’ll see that 3014 responses are better with Exclusion Keycard Blackwood (EKB) and huge game-forcing heart hands. See the Appendix for more information on this topic.

Don’t roll into RKB just because a slam is possible. Use it when you plan to bid a small slam – only stop short if losing two tricks is likely. Also use it any time a grand slam is possible, even if unlikely. A *powerful technique* is to find out your side has all the keycards, and then tell partner about it: he may have an *undisclosed source of tricks* and be able to drive to a grand slam. Follow this thread through the following sections.

If all five keycards are held between the two hands, asker must use either the Queen Ask or King Ask, as appropriate, even if intending to sign off at six. Responder may choose to leap or drive to a grand slam.

Warning: If hearts are trump, and you ask with 4NT holding only one keycard, partner could respond 5♠. That would commit the partnership to a bad slam, missing two keycards. Holding the ♥Q is no protection, if partner shows extra length. ***Do not ask with 4NT in hearts, when holding only one keycard.*** Curiously, it may be safe to bid 4NT when holding no keycards, such as with a long suit opposite a huge balanced hand: bid the slam (or ask for the trump queen!) opposite a 4 response, but sign off opposite 3 keycards.

The Queen Ask

Note: The bold star (★) indicates an improvement to commonly played responses, as described in the Appendix. Be sure to discuss these methods with your partner.

When the response to the RKB Ask does not indicate whether the queen of trump is held, asker may choose the cheapest available non-trump suit bid below 6NT, to ask for it. The responses are:

Cheaper NT or trump ★	Neither the queen of trump nor extra trump length.
Suit below 6NT	Cheapest king, with the queen or extra length. Seldom show a king above 6 trump.
Higher NT or trump ★	Queen or extra trump length, but no side king.
Jump to 6 trump ★	Queen or extra trump length, <i>plus a source of tricks (or three side kings and extra values)</i> : if all keycards are held, asker must bid a grand slam.

Exception: When clubs are trump and the response to Crosswood (see below) is 4♠, 4NT is the Queen Ask, since no suit bid is available below 5♣. Sorry, you cannot play 4NT in this case.

When hearts are trump, and 4NT is the RKB ask, and the RKB response was 5♦:

- 5♥ is a signoff.
- The Queen Ask is 5♠, which commits the partnership to at least 5NT (the “no” response).
- In this one case, there is no jump to 6trump available.

This SNAFU is only part of the reason for playing Delayed Kickback, which is described below.

When the response to the RKB Ask shows a void, asker may still inquire for the trump queen, if interested in a grand slam, by making the next available non-trump suit bid (or 5NT over 5♠ with clubs trump):

Cheaper NT or trump ★	Neither the trump queen nor extra trump length.
Higher NT or trump; or 7♣ ★	Have either the queen or extra trump length. <i>Always bid 7♣, not 7trump, in case asker intends to play in a solid suit different from the asking trump suit.</i>

The King Ask

Kantar calls this the Specific King Ask: asker’s bid of five of the RKB ask strain (e.g. 5NT with spades trump) promises that all keycards and the trump queen (or extra length) are held:

Cheaper NT or trump ★	No side king to show.
Suit	Cheapest king: showing a king above 6 trump is optional.
7♣	Promises an undisclosed source of tricks, or all three side kings and undisclosed values.

At any time, of course, responder may bid 7NT, if confident this is the correct contract.

General Grand Slam Try

After a void-showing response, there is no King Ask. However, the cheapest non-trump suit bid between the Queen Ask and 6NT is used to indicate possession of all four operative keycards, in case responder has a source of tricks and can bid a grand slam. Responder usually signs off in 6trump (or 6NT).

The Second King Ask

If asker bids a new suit, after a king-showing response to either the Queen Ask or King Ask, he is asking for the king of that suit. If either of two is enough, ask for the cheaper.

Cheaper NT or trump ★	No king to show.
Bid below trump	No king of the ask suit, but the king of the bid suit.
7♣	King of the ask suit.

Unexpected Bids

Offer to Play, or Pick a Slam

By default, an undefined bid by asker is an offer to play. If that meaning makes no sense, then it asks partner to pick a slam. Here's a deal from the 2015 Charlotte Regional:

Opener: ♠ A4 ♥ QT965 ♦ 3 ♣ KQJ64

1♥

3♣ [extra values, game force]

3♠ [cue bid]

4NT [RKB Ask in hearts]

6♣ [offer to play]

Responder: ♠ ?? ♥ KJ3 ♦ AT85 ♣ AT72

2♣ [game force, unless rebid]

3♥ [hearts are trump]

4♦ [1 or 2 round ♦ control, only 1 of 3 top clubs]

5♣ [0 or 3 keycards]

Pass

When pushing to a thin slam, it's best to play in the strongest contract, even at matchpoints. As opener, I could see that playing in clubs would likely produce an extra trick. 6♥ makes only if we get a second spade or diamond trick (e.g. responder holds the ♠K). In contrast, 6♣ will make, unless the opponents establish a spade winner on the opening lead, clubs split 4-0, or the opponents negotiate a heart ruff.

Compared to the Third-Round Control Ask (below), this method is simpler and improves small slam bidding (more frequent), at the cost of grand slam bidding (less frequent). At matchpoints or IMPs, a small slam should be bid when better than 50%. A grand slam requires odds up to 75%, since you risk a small slam that might be missed.

The Third-Round Control Ask [optional, not recommended]

Any bid by asker that has no defined meaning may be defined as a grand slam try, asking for third round control of the bid suit. Once you ask for kings or the trump queen, there are only a few of these. However, immediately after the response to your RKB ask, there are a bunch of potential Third-Round Control Asks. In addition, a Second King Ask in a suit where responder has already shown or denied a king becomes a Third-Round Control Ask. Our responses are consistent with the rest of this system:

Cheaper NT or trump *	No third round control.
Higher NT or trump *	Queen of bid suit.
Non-trump suit or 7♣	Doubleton or shorter in bid suit.

If responder has shown the suit: respond in steps, skipping the "no" response (above): **1=Q, 2=K, raise=KQ.**

Here is an example that I concocted with a Third-Round Control Ask after a queen ask:

Opener: ♠ AJTx ♥ x ♦ KQx ♣ AKxx

1♠

3♥ [singleton or void]

3NT [serious 3NT: serious slam interest]

4NT [RKB Ask in spades]

5♥ [Queen Ask]

6♣ [Third-Round Ask in clubs (king was denied)]

Responder: ♠ KQxx ♥ ATx(?) ♦ Ax(?) ♣ xx(?)

2NT [Jacoby: 4-card forcing raise, usually balanced]

3♠ [nothing to say yet] or 4♦ [courtesy cue]

4♦ [first or second round ♦ control, no ♣ control]

5♦ [0 or 3 keycards]

5NT [yes, but no king]

?

Responder then bids 6♠ with no third round control, 6NT with the ♣Q, or 6♦ with club shortness. 7♠ will be great opposite the ♣Q, and if asker held the ♣J, he could stick it in 7NT. A doubleton club will usually produce 13 tricks in spades as well.

Here is a modification of the Charlotte deal from above:

Opener: ♠ AK ♥ AQT65 ♦ 3 ♣ KJ764

Responder: ♠ 73 ♥ KJ3 ♦ AT85 ♣ A??2

1♥

2♣ [game force, unless rebid]

3♣ [extra values, game force]

3♥ [hearts are trump]

3♠ [cue bid]

4♦ [1 or 2 round ♦ control, at most 1 of ♣ AKQ]

4NT [RKB Ask in hearts]

5♣ [0 or 3 keycards]

6♣ [Third-Round Control Ask in clubs]

6♥ [no]

There are two problems with this auction: [1] grand slams are rare, so this is not very likely, and [2] partner already denied holding two of the top three club honors (failing to cue bid his own suit), with the 4♦ cue bid (part of the Serious 3NT convention). While a positive response to the Third-Round Control Ask would have produced a laydown grand slam, this was not actually possible. If you push the cards around some more, you can probably come up with a true example for a useful Third-Round Control Ask.

In his book, Eddie Kantar offers more options and details on the Third Round Control Ask. He also has methods for asking in two suits (which could apply to the example above).

D0P1, R0P1, and DEPO

What if those pesky opponents interfere over your asking bid? If they bid below 5trump, play “Roman D0P1”, pronounced dopey, which stands for *double zero, pass one*:

Step	Bid	Roman D0P1 & R0P1	Gerber ...
	[Re-]Double	0 or 3 keycards	0 or 4 aces
	Pass	1 or 4 keycards	1 ace
1		2 or 5 keycards, <i>without...</i>	2 aces
2		2 or 5 keycards, <i>with...</i>	3 aces
		<i>With a useful void...</i>	
	5NT	Even: 0 (unlikely), 2 or 4 keycards (but steps above have priority)	
	suit	Odd: 1 or 3 keycards with a void in the bid suit	
	6 trump	Odd: 1 or 3 keycards with a void that would require a bid higher than 6 trump to show	

Double takes the place of the response that includes 0 keycards or aces. Pass takes the place of the response that includes 1 keycard or aces. The cheapest bid shows the third step, etc. If they interfere with a double, then “Roman R0P1” applies: *redouble zero, pass one*, and the cheapest bid shows the third step, etc.

Finally, if they bid at 5trump or higher, play DEPO: *double even, pass odd*, by count of keycards or aces, ignoring steps and the trump queen. Only these two non-Roman responses are used. This allows you to stop below slam when you can figure out the somewhat ambiguous response.

If they interfere over a Gerber Ask, play the same way, treating NT as the trump strain: DEPO applies at NT of the Gerber level, or higher.

The Queen Ask (top priority), King Ask, and Second King Ask are still operative on RKB auctions, space permitting. *In competition, only show a void in a suit that the opponents have shown.* The void-showing responses begin just higher than responses described above. For example, if spades are trump and an opponent bids 5♦ over 4NT, then the four normal steps are, in order, Double, Pass, 5♥ and 5♠; 5NT and higher bids are void-showing. However, if they interfere with 5♥, then 5NT shows “2 with the trump queen”, not a void.

When Hearts Are Trump: Delayed Kickback [optional, recommended]

As we have seen, when hearts are trump, using 4NT as the RKB ask can blow up when asker has fewer than two keycards. Also, there is no Queen Ask when the response is 5♦. To solve these problems, when possible, we'll try to use 4♠ as the RKB ask. This invention by Jeff Rubens is called *Kickback*; Delayed Kickback¹ is our version.

When **Delayed Kickback** applies, hearts are trump, and 4NT takes on the meaning of the displaced 4♠ bid (often a cue bid in spades). These are the specific cases when Delayed Kickback applies:

1. **Two delays:** if hearts have become trump and the partnership made at least two bids below 4♠, *after* the fit has been confirmed, even if one partner has shown a spade suit. An extreme example:

1♠ - 2♥; 3♥ [trump] - 3♠ [cue bid]; any - 4♠ [RKB ♥, even after 3♠]

2. **One delay:** if hearts have become trump and the partnership made one bid below 4♠, *after* the fit has been confirmed, so long as neither partner has shown a spade suit. Example:

2♣ - 2♦; 3♥ [sets trump & demands cue bidding] - 4♥; 4♠ [RKB]

3. **No delay:** after a jump to the 4-level makes hearts trump. Examples:

Preemptive raise: 1♥ - 4♥; 4♠ [RKB]

Bid to make: (2♠) - 4♥ - (Pass) - 4♠ [RKB]

Texas transfer: 1NT/2NT - 4♦; 4♥ - 4♠ [RKB] -OR- 2NT - 4♦; 4♠ [RKB]

Our preempt: 4♥ - 4♠ [RKB] -OR- 4♣ [NAMYATS, good hand with hearts] - 4♠ [RKB]

A 2NT response to our 2♥ opening bid sets hearts as trump. After that, it is no longer possible to play in 4♠, so bid a suit, if you need to keep that possibility open. (If they overcall our 2♥, set hearts trump with a cue bid.)

In all other cases, 4NT is the RKB ask for hearts; and 4♠ has some other meaning, be that an offer to play, picture bid, cue bid, splinter, or EKB.

When Kickback applies, using 4NT as a spade bid may not be easy to remember. A practical approach would be to use 4NT as a second RKB ask: "training wheels" until you are fully comfortable with Delayed Kickback.

¹ You could agree that, if hearts become trump, spades can never become trump, and 4♠ is always the RKB ask, by either partner. Unfortunately, this causes problems. For example, a *picture bid* of 4♠ is the best way to bid this hand:

Opener: ♠ Qxxxxx ♥ AJx ♦ Ax ♣ Ax

Responder: ♠ AKxx ♥ KQxxx ♦ xx ♣ xx

1♠

2♥

3♥ [forcing]

4♠ [great hearts and spades, no minor controls]

7NT [6 spades + 5 hearts + 2 aces = 13]

[You may not get to any slam, if you play the abomination called *fast arrival*, where bidding game immediately is required for any minimum hand, once a fit is confirmed in a game-forcing auction. See my forthcoming article on Serious 3NT.]

You could instead play that, if hearts are trump, and neither partner has shown a spade suit, then 4♠ is the RKB ask. This turns out to be both unwieldy and too restrictive, at the same time. As we have seen, 4♠ might have some other useful meaning. While 4NT could be assigned the displaced meaning, good luck remembering that!

When a Minor Suit is Trump: Crosswood

4NT is excellent as the RKB Ask when spades are trump, and 4♠ or 4NT usually works out when hearts are trump. However, when a minor suit is trump, several responses to a 4NT RKB Ask go past five of the minor and thus could get the partnership too high. In our plan, **4♦ will usually be the RKB Ask when clubs are trump, and 4♣ will usually be the RKB Ask when diamonds are trump.** I call this plan **Crosswood**.

Crosswood reduces the disaster potential of alternative methods, by **dedicating** four of the other minor as the RKB Ask. This bid is seldom needed to be natural, although you might miss having it as a cue bid. This does not prevent you from playing in a major suit – a bid of four of partner’s major would be an offer to play there in a likely 7-card fit. Plenty of space is available for the full range of keycard responses.

Exception [optional, recommended]: When diamonds are trump, the 4♣ RKB Ask may be a little too low: when diamonds become trump because of a 4♦ bid, **4 of the cheaper major not shown by either partner, or 4NT if neither, becomes the RKB ask.** This exception also applies when either minor is trump, and bidding by the opponents prevents us from asking with the Crosswood minor. (Crosswood has worked very well since 2011 without this exception.)

- The same step responses and follow-up asks are used as over 4NT. The King Ask is five of the RKB ask suit.
- When a minor suit is trump, asker’s simple bid of NT is to play, unless it is the only possible Queen Ask (4NT over a 4♠ response, with clubs trump).
- Asker’s *jump* to 5NT is “pick a slam.”
- Before deciding to play the Third-Round Control Ask after Crosswood, consider that asker may wish to offer to play in an unsupported major suit, or to offer a choice of slams when 5NT is no longer a jump.

For different methods, see “Alternative Minor Suit Methods” in the Appendix.

Exclusion Keycard Blackwood (EKB)

Exclusion Keycard Blackwood (EKB), also called *Voidwood*, is a *jump* into a suit above either game or the RKB asking bid. It promises a void in the bid suit. The responses are Roman Keycard Blackwood, in steps, excluding the ace in the void suit. For purposes of EKB only, if no trump suit has been agreed, and the last bid was a suit, that suit is trump. You may need to strike fast, or lose the opportunity to make an EKB Ask. Kantar gives the example: 1♠ - 2♥; 5♦. If you raise hearts, partner may bid 4♥, and now 5♦ is a cue bid. Further examples:

1NT – 2♦; 2♥ – 4♠ [EKB, though below 4NT]

1♠ - 2♦; 4♥ [EKB, though below game].

EKB for the other minor [optional, recommended]: If you play *inverted* or *criss-cross* minor raises the immediate jump to four of the agreed suit asks for keycards with a void in the other minor, for example:

1♣ – 2♣ [limit raise or better]; 4♣ [EKB, diamond void]

1♦ – 3♣ [criss-cross raise]; 4♦ [EKB, ♦ are trump, club void]

This is useful because four of the other minor is the RKB Ask, not EKB. There are plenty of forcing natural bids available, so the jump in the agreed minor is not needed to be natural.

After EKB at four of the agreed minor, bid the cheaper of the void (other minor) and the suit above trumps, to ask for kings. Returning to the minor or bidding NT is a signoff.

Directly Over Our Own Preempt

When partner preempts with two or three of a suit, 4♦ asks for keycards over clubs, and 4♣ asks over all other suits. The responses are 0, 1, 1+, 2, 2+. In detail, here are the responses to the 4♣ ask:

Step	Bid/4♣	Meaning
1	4♦	0 keycards
2	4♥	1 keycard, without the trump Q
3	4♠	1 keycard, with the trump Q
4	4NT	2 keycards, without the trump Q
5	5♣	2 keycards, with the trump Q

Responses to 4♦ range from 4♥ to 5♦. A shapely hand with three keycards should be opened at the one level.

4NT Opening

A 4NT opening asks responder to bid an ace, if he has one. With no aces, respond 5♣; with two aces, bid 5NT. Opener will then place the contract. If they bid over 4NT, modified DOPI applies: respond normally at the 5-level, if possible; double with no aces; also double with the ace of the enemy suit, if higher than clubs; and pass with one ace that cannot be shown. (The enemy suit will usually be opener's void, so only show that ace in clubs.)

4NT Quantitative

A quantitative 4NT bid is a natural, non-forcing slam try. If partner accepts the slam try, he bids potential trump suits, up the line.² Such a bid is often a four-card minor, but it could be any suit with playable, undisclosed length. For example:

1NT – 4NT [quantitative, no major suit]; 5♥ [5-card suit, because responder denied four]

1NT – 4NT [quantitative, no major suit]; 5♣ [4+-card suit] - 5♦ [4+-card suit]; 6♣ [fifth club]

When pushing to a thin slam, it's best to play in the strongest contract, even at matchpoints.

Sign Off – Overruled [optional, not recommended]

When asker determines that the partnership is likely to lose two tricks, he signs off, usually by bidding 5 of the trump suit. When the cheapest NT bid has no defined meaning, that bid is to play. In rare cases, asker may pass a NT response.

When holding 0, 1 or 2 keycards, or having denied the trump queen, responder always passes the signoff. If your partnership is concerned that asker may have doubts about what a "0 or 3" or "1 or 4" response means, you may decide that responder should always overrule a signoff when holding 3 or 4 keycards.³ When overruling the signoff, respond as to a Queen Ask.

Rule: If responder may overrule a signoff, asker must hold at least one keycard, lest a "3-overrule" get you to a bad or hopeless slam.

You could agree to play this rule and the "3-overrule" only when asker has shown an opening hand.

² One intuitively attractive method is to treat a quantitative 4NT as "optional Blackwood", responding with the number of aces, 0 or 4, 1, 2, 3. Experience has shown this to be an inferior method.

³ Kantar says, "It is assumed that a player of your caliber will know from the bidding which number partner has. If your partner has trouble differentiating, gin rummy is a viable option."

Gerber, Super-Gerber and Reverse Baze [optional]

When **no trump suit** has been set for asking purposes, 4NT is natural, and there is **no RKB Ask!** Gerber can provide a fall-back position:

- When the last bid was a natural 1NT opening or natural 2NT opening, response or rebid, 4♣ is Gerber for aces. Many extend this to cover all 4♣ bids following a 1NT or 2NT opening. A follow-up 5♣ is Gerber for number of kings, using the same step responses, usually with all the aces. 6♣ is then Gerber for queens.
- Otherwise, a jump to 5♣ is Super-Gerber for aces. 6♣ is then Super-Gerber for kings, with all the aces.

Step	Bid	Meaning
1	4/5♦	0 or 4 aces
2	4/5♥	1 ace
3	4/5♠	2 aces
4	4/5NT	3 aces

Any bid by the Gerber asker other than the noted club bids is natural and non-forcing. RKB asks do not apply.

Since starting to play Crosswood in 2011, I have not used Gerber. You won't miss much if you do not play any form of the convention, but Gerber does have advantages. In appropriate circumstances, when partner opens 1NT, 2NT or the equivalent, Gerber can reveal less to the opponents than setting up for and using Crosswood.

Crosswood and Super-Gerber are not completely compatible when one player has (or might have) both minors. Here is an example from Marty Bergen's column in the July, 2016, *Bridge Bulletin*:

Partner	Opponent	You	Opponent
1♠	2♥	3♦	Pass
3NT	Pass	?	

If you play that 3NT raises diamonds, your 4♣ bid here would be Crosswood. This is quite playable. If you have a 5-5 minors hand, you would jump to 5♣ (or make a responsive double in the first place). There is no room (or need) for Super-Gerber in this situation. The problem with this: it improves slam bidding at the cost of bidding games, violating the "game over slam" principle.

The recommended alternative is to play 4♣ as natural. Without Crosswood available, 5♣ is Super-Gerber, as many experts (but few at a lower level) would play in this situation. Rule (5) in "Setting Trump" below applies, since 3NT after an opponent has bid a suit may not be balanced: 4♣ is natural and 5♣ is Super-Gerber.

If you don't play Super-Gerber, then you might as well play that 3NT always raises the minor.

Slamming after Opener Shows a Major in Response to Stayman

The old standard method for the Stayman bidder to set opener's major as trump is to bid an artificial three of the other major (or 4♥ over 3♠). You should continue to use this method after a 2NT opening, as there is not enough space for the methods that follow.

The modern methods after a 1NT opening are called Reverse Baze, or just Baze, after Grant Baze. (Note: if you want Gerber in this situation, bid your minor suit [play this forcing] and then ask in it; or use Super-Gerber.)

3♠	4+ card support for opener's major, with an unspecified singleton or void. Opener bids the next step, and responder bids the short suit.
4♣	4+ card support, balanced slam try (maximizing space for cue bidding).
4♦	RKB ask in opener's major (these 4♣/4♦ meanings are <i>Reverse Baze</i>).

An adjunct attributed to Mike Cappelletti allows distinguishing a void when spades are trump:

Opener's step is 3♠; responder's 3NT shows a void; then 4♣ asks where [4♠ = ♣].

Setting Trump for RKB, Delayed Kickback and Crosswood

Now we have the full system laid out, except the key part. What suit is trump?

1. If the bidder had an opportunity to set trump, and failed to do so, a bid of 4NT is natural, and often quantitative. However, under pressure from the opponents, 4NT asks for keycards in the last bid suit.
2. When a minor suit is bid and raised, including a preference, that minor is trump, and the other minor cannot be trump for asking purposes. 4NT would usually be a natural slam invitation.
3. If a major suit is bid and raised, that major is trump for asking purposes, and a minor suit cannot be trump for asking purposes, even if previously raised. Similarly, the other major cannot become trump. This does not prevent you from actually playing in the other major, a minor suit or no trump.
4. A suit is presumed to have been raised, if a probable eight card fit exists in the suit. Example:
1♣ - 1♠; 1NT - 2♦ [NMF]; 2NT - 3♠; 3NT - 4NT [RKB ask ♠: responder has six cards, opener has two]
5. A natural NT bid raises or pre-raises partner's lone minor suit. However, when an opponent has named a suit and our side has already bid, a NT bid does not raise partner's minor [optional]. (This NT bid primarily shows a stopper, not a balanced hand). Partner's bid of the other minor below the 4-level turns off any NT raise.
1♣ - 3NT; 4♦ [Crosswood: responder has raised clubs with the 3NT response]
1♠ - 2♥; 2NT - 3♦; 4♣ [Crosswood: opener has pre-raised diamonds]
1♦ - 1NT; 3♣ [the second minor cancels diamonds – a raise (3♦ or 4♣) is required to set trump]
6. Responder's suit becomes trump if raised, or if he bids it twice. A weak two bid becomes trump if responder bids 2NT or raises. Examples:
2♠ - 4NT [natural, invitational]
2♠ - 2NT; 3any - 4NT [RKB ♠] -OR- 2♦ - 2NT; 3any - 4♣ [Crosswood]
7. A suit bid naturally by responder over partner's preempt becomes trump, superseding the preempt.
8. If they overcall our major suit opening at the 3- or 4-level, 4NT asks for keycards on responder's next turn to call. Example:
1♥ - (3♠) - 4NT [RKB ♥; 4♠ would be a cue bid, not Kickback; 5♣ and 5♦, being jumps, would be EKB]
9. For purposes of EKB only, if no trump suit has been agreed, and the last bid was a suit, that suit is trump.
10. After a one-level response, opener's jump rebid sets trump, unless responder immediately rebids his suit, which then becomes trump. (If this is also a misfit, NT is the likely destination.)

Summary

1. Basics: When a spade fit is agreed or implied, 4NT is the RKB Ask. With no fit, 4NT is natural, with [optional] Gerber (jump to 4♣ over NT) and [optional] Super-Gerber (jump to 5♣, not over NT) for aces. Roman DOP1 & ROP1, with plain DEPO if they bid 5trumps or higher. 4NT opening asks for specific aces.
2. Delayed Kickback (4♠ is the RKB ask with hearts trump) [optional, recommended] applies: if the partnership made at least one bid (two bids if either partner showed spades) below 4♠, **after** the fit has been confirmed; or when hearts becomes trump as a result of a jump or raise to the 4-level. Other than when we open 2♥ or 3♥ (see below), in all other cases, 4NT is the RKB ask for hearts.
3. Crosswood: the RKB Ask, when a minor fit is agreed or implied, is four of the other minor. Exception: If competition prevents asking with the other minor, or if diamonds are set as trump by a 4♦ bid; then the cheaper major that has not been shown by either partner, or 4NT if neither, becomes the RKB ask.
Asker's subsequent jump to 5NT is "pick a slam." Asker's simple NT bid is natural and to play, except when it is the only possible Queen Ask (see below).

4. Holding a useful void in response to the RKB Ask:
Even: with an even number of keycards (seldom 0), bid 5NT, no matter what the RKB ask was.
Odd: with an odd number of keycards, bid the void suit above the “two with” bid, but below 6 trumps; bid 6trumps with a higher void. For example, if hearts are trump, bid 6♥ to show a spade void.
5. The Queen Ask is the next available non-trump suit bid, but is 4NT when the response was 4♠ with clubs trump. (Otherwise, if 4NT is not the King Ask, 4NT is to play.) Select the first applicable response:
 - a. Lacking the trump queen (or extra length), always bid the cheaper of NT and the trump suit.
 - b. With a source of tricks (or three side kings and undisclosed extras), jump to 6trump, which demands a grand slam, if all keycards are held.
 - c. Bid the cheapest side king, if any.
 - d. Bid the higher of NT or trumps, holding no side king.
6. The King Ask is five of the RKB Ask strain, with cheapest king responses. Between the response and 6NT, a non-trump bid is the Second King Ask: holding that king, bid 7♣; otherwise, bid an intervening king, or sign off in the cheaper of NT and trump. Responder is not required to bid beyond 6trump to show a king.
7. EKB is a jump into a void above either game or the RKB ask: Roman responses, excluding the ace of the void. The Queen Ask is on, but no King Ask – asker’s cheapest undefined bid above the Queen Ask is used as a General Slam Try, confirming all keycards are held. With no trump suit, partner’s last bid is trump.
8. Directly over our 2- or 3-level preempt, 4♣ [4♦ over 3♣] asks for keycards, with responses: 0, 1, 1+, 2, 2+.
9. **After a 2NT opening** bid or equivalent (e.g. 2♣ - 2♦; 2NT), responder’s 3♠ bid is a relay to 3NT. Responder’s 4♣ or 4♦ is then Crosswood, asking about the other minor. Responder’s 4♥ and 4♠ promise both minors, with a singleton or void in the bid suit (opener’s 4NT natural), and 4NT is non-forcing with both minors but no singleton.
10. **After a 1NT opening**, responder’s 3♦ bid is game forcing, with at least 5-5 minors. Opener often bids a double-stopper, or 3NT to play (responder may remove to a 3-card major). Opener’s 4 of a minor is Crosswood for the other minor, and 5 of a minor is a signoff.

Options (check those you choose; recommended options *in bold italics*)

☐ **3014 (03-14) responses** ☐ 1430 responses ☐ Gerber ☐ ***Super-Gerber***

An undefined bid by asker is:

- ☐ ***An offer to play; or if that makes no sense, “pick a slam.”***
 - ☐ Third-Round Control Ask, a grand slam try. These responses also replace a Second King Ask for which the answer has already been implied. Select the first applicable response:
 - a. With no third round control, bid the cheaper of trumps and NT.
 - b. With the queen of the suit, raise the ask suit, if below 7 trump, or bid 7♣.
 - c. With useful shortness in the suit, bid trumps higher than the negative response in (a).
- If responder has bid the suit, respond in steps, skipping the “no” response: 1=Q, 2=K, raise=KQ.

Crosswood Exception: ☐ ***under duress, 4♥, 4♠ or 4NT is the RKB ask*** ☐ only the other minor asks

A NT bid raises partner’s lone minor: ☐ ***unless NT primarily shows a stopper (use Super-Gerber)*** ☐ always

☐ ***Delayed Kickback***. When 4♠ is the RKB ask: ☐ ***4NT also asks for keycards*** ☐ 4NT is a spade cue bid or other

When the RKB asker signs off:

- ☐ ***Responder must pass.***
- ☐ Responder must respond to a Queen Ask when he knows the partnership holds four keycards.
 - ☐ If asker has not promised opening values, he might not hold a keycard (use 3014 responses).
 - ☐ Asker must always hold a keycard.

☐ Over an inverted or criss-cross minor raise, a jump to 4 of the agreed minor is EKB, void in the other minor.

After Stayman, other major sets trump: ☐ always ☐ ***Reverse Baze over 1NT***: 3♠=splinter, 4♣=bal, 4♦=RKB

Appendix

Alternative RKB Methods

3014 and 1430 responses: Originally, 5♣ showed 0 or 3 keycards, and 5♦ showed 1 or 4. These responses, now called 3014, retained similarity to the original Blackwood responses (0 or 4, 1, 2, 3). When hearts are trump, and the response is 5♦, there is no queen Ask below 5♥. 1430 responses swap the meanings of the 5♣ and 5♦ responses. The hope is to get a 5♦ response only when you intend to sign off: when the strong hand asks, you would usually sign off after a zero response of 5♦, and would often continue after a one response of 5♣.

A heavy majority of experts appear to use 1430 responses, but it's important to understand that 1430 responses do not solve the problem, only push it around. That's part of why we recommend Delayed Kickback.

Eddie Kantar's simplified rules for using *both* variants:

When the opener asks, it is a 1430 Ask—period.

When the responder asks, it is also a 1430 Ask unless opener has shown extras by:

- *Opening 1NT, 2NT or 2♣*
- *Has made ANY jump bid previous to the Ask*

In each of these scenarios when responder asks it is a 3014 Ask.

5NT Methods: In old standard, 5NT asked for the number of kings. Since the trump king is covered by the RKB ask, a count of kings has less utility. Knowing about specific kings, and having the Second King Ask available is more powerful.

Queen Ask Methods: When holding the trump queen, everybody bids a side king, if they have one. The original queen-showing response without a side king was 5NT. That's fine when the RKB ask is 4NT. We have adopted a space-saving recommendation: bid the cheaper of trumps and NT when not holding the trump queen, and bid the higher of those with the queen and no side king. Gary Schwartz proposed this innovation, and I have since discovered he got it from Mike Diesel.

Then, let's consider what it means to jump to 6trump. Originally, this bid was undefined. Kantar says it shows the trump queen, but no side king or third round control: "this combination of events is unlikely to happen in your lifetime." (The other queen-only bid would promise a third round control or singleton.) This scheme fits with Third-Round Control Asks. An expert local proponent of fast arrival uses 6trump to show a weak hand with the queen; the lower bid "shows extras" – this might work, if asker is not permitted to sign off, when we have them all.

We use the jump to 6trump to show a source of tricks. (This great invention by my friend Richard Lee allows blasting into RKB without the trump queen as soon as you intend to bid a small slam, yet bid an obvious grand when available.) The space consumed is not needed; it is a command to asker: bid on, if we have them all. Such a treatment is essential to bidding some obvious grand slams. It's not unusual for one partner to take control with RKB, when partner has undisclosed extras. This treatment is a key adjunct to the rule that asker tell partner, if "we have them all". This plan can still be used with the Third-Round Control Ask.

Void-showing responses: The *Encyclopedia of Bridge* lists schemes for showing a void in response to Blackwood, including:

1. "Make the normal response, but at the level of six, to show the indicated number of [keycards] and an unspecified void. Thus 6♣ shows [the first step] with a void."
2. 5NT shows the first step, 6♣ shows the second step, etc. (The preceding scheme wastes the 5NT response, but is "old standard".) Holding a useful void in response to the RKB Ask, make the normal keycard response, four steps higher. In competition, the void must be in a suit shown by the opponents. We recommended this version in the original version of this article.
3. The basis of the mainstream scheme employed in the body of the present document originated with Alfred Sheinwold in the 1950s, was refined in the Kaplan-Sheinwold system, is the only scheme I found on the web, and is in Kantar's book: 5NT promises an even number of keycards with a useful void; 6 of a suit below trump promises an odd number of keycards and a useful void; 6trump shows a void above the trump suit. This method has problems:

- Opener may only want to know about the trump queen, and the void-showing response may prevent the Queen Ask. Plan 2 always permits the Queen Ask after a void-showing response, even when hearts are trump.
- You may misunderstand the number of keycards by two, and land in a silly grand slam. Plan 2 prevents that, at the cost of being uncertain where the void is.

Alternative Minor Suit Methods

Sign off in 5NT: If you use 4NT as the RKB Ask when a minor suit is trump, an old fashioned 5♠ bid could be used by asker to relay to 5NT for signoff (assuming the response was not 5♠). Perhaps 5NT is not a safe target, or 5♠ is a logical target. Our plan usually allows asker to sign off in 4NT, 5NT, or 5 of the minor.

Kickback and Redwood: One solution is to use four of the denomination above trump as the RKB Ask. Jeff Rubens proposed this for all suits, according to his “Useful Space Principle”, naming it Kickback. Applied only when a minor suit is trump, Kickback is known as Redwood, so named because the RKB Ask is always a red suit. A major problem with Kickback and Redwood: an RKB Ask that is a major suit might be a logical final contract – stopping in a 7-card fit. According to Eddie Kantar, Bobby Goldman and Paul Soloway had many pages of system notes, on how to play 4♠ as the RKB Ask with hearts as trump. The problems are similar when diamonds are trump, although 4♠ is available in addition to 4♥, to complicate the solution. Our specific rules for Kickback should keep things simple.

Minorwood: Four of the minor trump suit can be used as the RKB Ask, known as Minorwood. This seems generally, but not always, superior to Redwood. People have various rule sets to define when the bid is asking and when it is natural. Eddie Kantar devotes over 100 pages to minor suit auctions his latest book on RKB. Clearly, his approach is beyond all but dedicated partnerships. At the other end, Steve Willner and Alex Ogan played Minorwood with these rules:

1. The suit must be bid and raised (not 1♣ - 4♣).
2. A natural no trump bid pre-raises a minor.
3. You may compete to four of a minor naturally.
4. Minorwood may not be bid by a limited hand.

References

Roman Keycard Blackwood, The Final Word, Eddie Kantar, © 2008.

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http://www.bridgeaholics.com/articles/classics/kantar_rkb.html, Eddie Kantar, *ACBL Bulletin*, January, 2003, updated January, 2006.

“Roman Keycard Blackwood”, <http://www.clairebridge.com/textes/romankeycard.pdf>, Fred Gitelman.

Official Encyclopedia of Bridge, 7th Edition, Brent Manley, et. al., Ed., © 2011.

Roman Keycard Blackwood, Level IV: For All Suits, Mike Diesel, © November 5, 2016.

Discussions with Gary Schwartz – this is our plan.

Changes from the Prior Version

- Switch to using EKB (Exclusion Keycard Blackwood) as the primary name for that ask, instead of Voidwood. Improve the wording of EKB info.
- Use the bold star (★) to indicate variations in RKB responses that are discussed in the appendix. Some text moved.
- Use “Third-Round Control Ask” (Kantar’s term) instead of “Specific Suit Ask.”
- Replace DOPI and ROPI with DOP1 (pronounced dopey) and ROP1, respectively.
- The special asking methods directly over our preempt apply to weak two bids as well as three bids.
- Replace Roman Keycard Gerber with Reverse Baze, which is now recommended.
- Repair point 9 on page 9 and point 7 on page 10 to agree with the main text.
- Attribute the cheaper/higher responses to Mike Diesel, and reference one of his planned six books on RKB.
- Remove reference to <http://wednesdaygame.com/ba/slam/rkcb3.htm>, which is no longer available.
- Some wordsmithing. Change title font from Cambria to Arial.