

Two Over One

Kickback & Wolff Signoff

Two New Conventions to Solve Some Old Woes

Kickback

When partners are driving toward a slam, the convention they use most often is 4NT as Roman Key Card. But a problem easily arises. The responses required by RKC use four steps: 0 - 3 (5 clubs), 1 - 4 (5 diamonds), 2 without (5 hearts), and 2 with (5 spades). These four levels can lead the partners to overshoot the correct stopping point whenever spades are not trump. This problem is most aggravated when our suit is clubs, since any response over 5 clubs commits us to slam, even though the number of key cards we actually possess may be inadequate. Diamonds are nearly as bad. In previous lessons we introduced the use of Minorwood as a solution to this problem in the minor suits. By using 4 of the agreed minor to ask for keycards, we are assured of having enough bidding room to give 4 levels of possible response without going higher than our controls will allow.

When our suit is hearts, the problem is not overly severe. The only response that overshoots a stop at 5 hearts is the answer of 5 spades, which at least promises 2 key cards plus the trump queen. But occasionally the answer of 5 spades does, in fact, overshoot a 5 heart stopping point when 2 key cards are still missing. On these occasions, the partnership will suffer defeat with good cards, when they would have done just fine with a stop at 5 hearts.

There is an answer to this problem. It is a convention called "Kickback for Hearts." All it means is that, when your agreed suit is hearts, you ask for key cards not with 4NT, but with a bid of 4 spades. Now there is room for all four

levels of response:

- 4NT shows 0 - 3;
- 5 clubs shows 1 - 4;
- 5 diamonds shows 2 without;
- 5 hearts shows 2 with.

Now 5 hearts cannot be overshoot. To ask for kings, use 5 spades. Let's look at a few auctions, to see Kickback at work.

you	partner
1♥	2♥
4♠	

you	partner
1♥	3♥
4♠	

you	partner
1♥	4♥
4♠	

you	partner
1♦	1♥
2♥	4♠

you	partner
1♥	2♣
2♦	3♥
4♥	4♠

In all of the sequences above, the partners have specifically bid hearts and supported hearts. When this is done, the trump suit has been agreed upon, so 4 spades cannot be to play. In fact, it is just Kickback, asking for key cards.

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Now checkout these auctions:

you	partner
1♥	4♠

you	partner
1♥	1♠
2♥	4♠

These auctions never show an agreement in hearts, and therefore they are not Kickback. Partner has a self-sufficient spade suit and wants to play in spades.

Some tricky ones

But now consider these:

you	partner
1♥	2♣
2♥	4♠

This is Kickback. Partner has not specifically agreed to hearts by bidding hearts, but how can he have self-sufficient spades when his first bid suit was clubs? He is agreeing on hearts by implication. Spades cannot be a real suit.

you	partner
3♥	3♠
4♥	4♠

Did you remember that 3 spades is forcing? Good, but now pass 4 spades. Partner has self-sufficient spades. If he had been willing to play in hearts, he had no business introducing spades.

you	partner
2♥	2♠
3♣	4♠

The 2 spade bid is forcing. Partner has shown spades and strength. Pass. It is not Kickback.

you	partner
3♥	4♠

This is Kickback. Usually when you preempt, your suit will be the trump suit. If partner had spades, he would have bid a forcing 3 spade bid prior to this to show his suit, as we just saw. By not showing spades in that way, partner doesn't have spades.

you	partner
2♥	4♠

This is Kickback. With spades, partner would have bid a forcing 2 spades first.

you	partner
1♥	2♦
2♥	3♣
3♦	4♠

This is Kickback. Partner is agreeing to play in hearts. Certainly partner does not want to play in 4 spades because he has bid the minors first. The fact that you have joined in diamonds is not relevant. Partner is correcting to hearts. If he had wanted to accept diamonds he could have bid 5 diamonds to stop or 4 diamonds as Minorwood, or he could have cuebid 3 spades.

you	partner
1♥	1♠
1NT	2♦
2NT	3♥
4♥	4♠

This is Kickback. Although partner has shown a spade suit, he subsequently agreed to your hearts. Partner's 3 heart bid is forcing because you showed maximum values with your 2NT bid. Partner has substantial extra values.

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Generally speaking, if partner bids 4 spades after having bid some other suit first, he is using Kickback; his spades cannot be self-sufficient if he has not bid them first.

But if partner has bid spades as his primary suit, 4 spades will not be Kickback unless he first bids hearts, agreeing to your suit. Once he agrees on hearts, 4 spades is always Kickback, even if partner has bid spades prior to joining your hearts.

If you preempt in hearts at the 2 or 3 level, then immediate bids of 4 spades by partner are Kickback. If you have preempted in hearts and partner wants to play in spades, he will first have to make a forcing spade bid below the level of 4 spades.

Cue bidding spades

Every once in awhile, you and partner will have agreed to play in hearts and one of you wants to cue bid spades instead of bidding RKC. Since the bid of 4 spades is clearly Kickback, the cue bid must be something different. The cue bid of spades is 4NT.

you	partner
1♥	3♥
4♣	4♦
4NT	

This is certainly not RKC because partner knows you are playing Kickback. Instead, you are cuebidding spades, and you want to hear more cuebids from partner. You initiated cue bidding, he continued it, and now you are prolonging it, seeking specific information from partner.

Wolff Signoff

Have you ever been in this situation? Imagine that you have this hand:

K1084 A10986 743 8

and the auction begins:

partner	you
1♦	1♥
2NT	

Partner has a balanced 18 or 19 HCPs, so a nice solid game must be bid. Let's examine our choices.

Of course you can always raise to 3NT. But if partner has 3 hearts, then 4 hearts would probably be better. Of if, instead, partner has 4 spades, then without doubt 4 spades would be better. Just bidding 3NT would give up on playing in either major suit, even though you clearly prefer to play in one.

You could, instead of raising to 3NT, choose to bid 3 spades. Now you can find your spade fit if it exists, but it gives you no chance at the heart fit if partner lacks 4 spades.

Or, instead of 3 spades, if you are very clever, you might think to try New Minor Forcing and bid 3 clubs, suggesting your 5-card heart suit. But will partner understand? Let's presume that your partner does, but he doesn't have 3 hearts. Will he think of bidding 3 spades to deny 3 hearts, but promising 4 spades? Or might he think that the bid of 3 spades would show a minimum 18 while 3NT would show a maximum 19? Chances are, you have never discussed this with partner and therefore cannot be sure if he will bid spades at all, or if you will both interpret a spade bid the same way.

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This is where Wolff Signoff comes in. Use Wolff Signoff instead of New Minor Forcing. Over the jump to 2NT, the bid of 3 diamonds is artificial and it asks partner to describe his major suit holdings, beginning with hearts.

partner	you
1♦	1♥
2NT	3♦ <i>Alert!</i>

Partner has already denied 4 hearts, so she will bid 3 hearts if she has 3. If she doesn't have 3 hearts, she will skip over hearts entirely to talk about spades. She will bid spades only if she has 4 of them. If she has neither 3 hearts nor 4 spades, she will bid 3NT.

partner	you
1♦	1♥
2NT	3♦ <i>Alert!</i>
	3♠ <i>Alert!</i>

Partner denies having 3 hearts and states that he does have 4 spades. If you held 5 hearts and 4 spades, as you did in the sample hand above, then you know to go to 4 spades, not 3NT.

Let's say you had this auction:

partner	you
1♦	1♥
2NT	3♦ <i>Alert!</i>
3♥ <i>Alert!</i>	3♠ <i>Alert!</i>
3NT <i>Alert!</i>	4♥ <i>Alert!</i>

Over your 3 diamond bid, partner says he has 3 hearts. Your 3 spade bid says, "Tell me if you have 4 spades." If partner did have 4 spades, he would raise to 4 spades. So when partner bids 3NT, he denies holding 4 spades. Now you put it back in hearts. This auction would be just right for the hand that we were talking

about all along:

K1084 A10986 743 8

When partner shows 3 hearts, you are pleased to learn of the major suit fit. But since 4 - 4 fits are better than 5 - 3, you can still check to see if you have that one. When partner denies spades by bidding 3NT, you can at least take it to 4 hearts.

Here's another auction to consider. This time imagine that you have 4 - 4 in the majors:

K1084 A1098 7432 8

The auction will go like this:

partner	you
1♦	1♥
2NT	3♦ <i>Alert!</i>
3♥ <i>Alert!</i>	3NT <i>Alert!</i>

Here partner has shown 3 hearts, but this doesn't interest you. You wanted to know about spades. So your bid of 3NT states just that. By failing to raise hearts to 4, you must not have 5, so just bid 3NT to imply that you have 4 spades. Without 4 spades, you never would have bid 3 diamonds. This procedure allows the stronger hand to declare spades if the fit exists.

Summary of Wolff Signoff 3 Diamond Checkback

When you have responded 1 of a major and partner jumps to 2NT showing 18 or 19 balanced, you can bid 3 diamonds artificial to checkback on major suit fits in either major. Over 3 diamonds, partner will first describe hearts. If you have bid hearts, he will bid hearts with just 3 of them. But if you have bid spades, partner will bid hearts only with 4 of them. If partner cannot show you 3 in your suit or 4 in the other suit, he will bid 3NT denying all fits. If, however, partner does describe his hearts and you are not interested, simply bid 3NT to imply that your interest was in spades. The only time you bid spades to ask about spades is if you hold exactly 4 spades and 5 hearts.

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So look at each of these auctions:

partner	you
1♦	1♠
2NT	3♦ <i>Alert!</i>
3♥ <i>Alert!</i>	3NT <i>Alert!</i>

You don't have 4 hearts, so you must have 5 spades. If partner has 3 spades, he can now raise to 4 spades.

partner	you
1♦	1♠
2NT	3♦ <i>Alert!</i>
3♠ <i>Alert!</i>	4♠

Partner does not have 4 hearts, but he does have 3 spades.

partner	you
1♦	1♠
2NT	3♦ <i>Alert!</i>
3NT <i>Alert!</i>	

You could have 4 hearts and 5 spades, or perhaps just 5 spades, partner can't be sure. But he does not have 4 hearts and does not have 3 spades, so it doesn't matter. 3NT is the spot to play.

The Wolff Signoff 3 Club Bid

We view partner's jump to 2NT as game forcing unless we have stretched to answer.

Let's say we hold this hand:

954 QJ1096 3 J984

Partner has opened 1 diamond. We elect to bid 1 heart, intending to pass partner's next suit bid or to bid 2 hearts over 1NT. But then partner jumps to 2NT:

partner	you
1♦	1♥
2NT	3♣ <i>Alert!</i>

Your 3 club bid announces to partner that you have stretched to answer and lack the values to support game. You instruct partner to bid 3 diamonds, whereupon you will state where you think the contract should be played. With the hand above, you will select 3 hearts. This signoff feature explains the name of the convention, but the use of 3 diamonds as a major suit checkback is the more important feature.

Alerts with Wolff Signoff and procedures with Kickback

When playing Wolff Signoff, of course the two artificial bids of 3 clubs and 3 diamonds must be alerted. But so must nearly every continuation answer because of the precision expressed by the responses.

But Kickback is NOT alerted, nor is the bid of 4NT as a cuebid of spades. At first this may seem surprising, but the rulemakers feel that special conventions like Kickback can sometimes be confused by their users, so that the alerts favor the users more than the silent opponents. For that reason, ace-asking bids at the 4-level and higher specifically CANNOT be alerted. This is why you may not alert Minorwood either.

However, if you have used Kickback or Minorwood in an auction, then, before the opening lead is faced, you are REQUIRED to inform the opponents that a special ace-asking sequence has occurred. Then explain which bid was the RKC bid and explain all of the responses until the opponents are satisfied with what you have to say. If perchance you have bid 4NT as a cuebid of spades, then this, too, should be announced before the opening lead is faced.