

Roman Key Card

Imagine a time in the olden days of bridge, even before there was any bid known as Blackwood. Imagine being unable to ask for aces because there is no convention that allows you to do so. You have figured out that you can usually make slam when you and partner have 33 points, but sometimes you bid slam and go down because you're missing two aces. What a problem! And then, along comes Easley Blackwood, who says, "Hey, let's use 4NT to ask for aces," and then John Gerber says, "Yeah, and let's use 4 clubs for notrump contracts." And now you can ask for aces, not just one way, but in two ways. Now, whenever you figure you have the 33 points, you just check up on those aces, and as long as you have three of them, you haul off and bid slam.

Did anyone ever stop to think about the king of trump? Let's say you're missing one ace AND the king of trump. That's going to be a tough play. At least you'll make your slam half of the time on a finesse, as long as you also have the queen of trump, not to mention the jack, and you aren't missing any other kings, and hopefully no other queens, and all the suits break in a friendly fashion. Come to think of it, when you're missing an ace and the king of trump, you probably won't make those slams even half of the time.

Not making your slams half of the time is a problem. Every time you don't make your slam, you go negative. You don't get any of the points you would have got for stopping in game, not even one. No. You get zero. No, worse, you get -50 or -100. Successful slam bidding requires that we make MORE than 1/2 of our slams. How are we going to do that when we can't even check up on the king of trump?

Well, just leave it to those Romans. They had the splendid idea of treating the king of trump just as if it were an ace! When it comes to bidding your slams, don't think of just four aces; include the king of trump and think of five. But we can't call them aces anymore, not strictly speaking. Let's think up some new name. Let's call them "key cards." So now we will be able to bid slams only when we have four of the five keycards. Will that mean all the slams we bid will have at least a 50% chance?

Maybe, but maybe not quite. Let's think a minute. Let's say we're missing one key card. And

let's presume that we will lose a trick to that key card. And now, let's suppose, just for the heck of it, that we're also missing the queen of trump. Okay, so we'll finesse it and win half of the time. And now we'll make the slam half of the time as long as we don't have to take any more finesses, and as long as none of the suits break badly.

That doesn't sound ideal either, does it? If we were to know that we were missing one entire key card, and if we also knew for a fact that we were missing the queen of trump, it doesn't sound as if we should bid that slam either. If we bid that slam, we know we'll have to deal with both a missing key card, and a missing trump queen – PLUS whatever other little twist that the vagaries of chance may put in our road. That's not a 50% slam. Our chances will go back up to an acceptable range if we have 10 trump; that way we can probably drop the queen of trump under the ace-king. But if we don't have 10 trump, and we don't have all the key cards, and we don't have the queen of trump, then we don't have a 50% chance to make our slam. Not only is the king of trump important, but so is the queen of trump.

Well, just leave it to those Romans. They thought about the king of trump, and they even thought about the queen of trump. To bid slams that make at least half of the time we need either:

- all 5 key cards, the queen no matter
- 4 key cards AND the queen of trump
- 4 key cards and 10 or more trump
- 4 key cards and extra values

If we can bid only those slams that meet these requirements, then we'll be bidding slams that are making half the time or more, and we'll be avoiding slams that make less than half of the time. This will put us on the positive side of the scoring ledger day after day, round after round. We still won't make all of our slams, but we'll have the percentages working for us.

So how do they do it? How do those Romans manage to bring all of the necessary information to light? If only we follow the methods of Roman Key Card, we will no longer have to wander in the dim obscurity of the black wood.

The response to 4NT

We still use 4NT as the asking bid. Only the responses are different from Blackwood. Remember, the term “key cards” means the four aces and the king of trump, for a total of 5 key cards:

- 5 ♣ 0 or 3 key cards
- 5 ♦ 1 or 4 key cards
- 5 ♥ 2 key cards, no trump queen
- 5 ♠ 2 key cards with trump queen

Look at the following hands. Presume that spades are trump. If partner has bid 4NT, what would your response be with each sample hand?

1. K975 AQ108 J4 A98
2. KQ86 KQ32 A4 Q87
3. A542 A95 AJ987 A
4. QJ109 KQ KJ5 9743
5. AK984 KJ64 42 Q2
6. KJ652 104 QJ109 K4

1. 5 clubs. 2. 5 spades. 3. 5 diamonds.
4. 5 clubs. 5. 5 hearts. 6. 5 diamonds.

If partner has used Gerber instead of 4NT, you also can give the RKC responses. So 4 diamonds would be zero or three key cards, 4 hearts would be one or four, and so forth.

When partner “goes into convention,” which means that he bids 4 clubs or 4NT, you will usually know which suit is meant. For instance:

S	W	N	E
1NT	P	2♦	P
2♥	P	4♣	

Here we know that hearts are trump, so the king of hearts will be the 5th key card, and we may be able to show the queen of hearts. But sometimes we don't know which suit partner has. For instance:

S	W	N	E
1♠	P	2♥	P
3♣	P	4NT	

This time, we don't really know what partner is thinking. Partner could have three spades, and now that we haven't raised his hearts, he wants to play in our spade suit. Or, he could have a great self-sufficient heart suit, and he wants to play in hearts. Or perhaps our club bid hit a club suit in his hand. Or maybe his destination is notrump. We just don't know. So how do we decide which king is the key card? To keep matters as straight forward as possible, we follow this rule:

When you don't know which suit will be the final destination, use the last bid suit as the key card suit, even if it was an artificial bid.

In the auction we just gave, the club bid was not artificial, but it was the last bid suit. Therefore the king of clubs would be the 5th key card.

Here's one final situation to consider:

S	W	N	E
2NT	P	4♣	

Now what? There isn't any suit at all! Therefore, there are not 5 key cards in this circumstance, only four – the four aces. So, in this case, 4 diamonds would say zero or three ACES, 4 hearts would say one or four ACES, 4 spades would say two ACES and a minimal 2NT opening, while 4 NT would say two ACES and a maximum 2NT opening. Here's one final confusion to avoid. Don't think that clubs was the last bid suit. It isn't. “The last bid suit” means the last suit bid BEFORE partner goes into convention. It doesn't mean clubs when Gerber is used.

Before you bid 5NT

You are right to think that 5NT will ask for kings. But the bid of 5NT also promises that your

side has all five key cards plus the queen of trump. Let's discuss this.

Do you remember our earlier discussion? With only 3 key cards, we are not going to bid slam at all. With only 4 key cards, we must either have the queen of trump, or 10 trump, or extra values, beyond the minimum of 33. If we can't meet these requirements, we don't bid slam at all. If we meet them but don't exceed them, then we are bidding a small slam only. Therefore, the only reason to bid 5NT is to check for a possible grand slam. If we are going to try for a grand slam, then having all five key cards is an absolute requisite. And do you really relish the idea of playing a grand slam when you're missing the queen of trump? I don't think so. For these reasons, we can bid 5NT only if we have all five key cards and the queen of trump.

Whenever you do know that you have the trump queen and the five key cards, you definitely need to bid 5NT. Not only are you checking kings, but you are also telling partner about those five key cards and trump queen. He may be able to jump to 7 based on that information. Let's say that spades are established as trump and partner holds this hand:

10987 A4 KQJ864 9

When partner hears you bid 4NT, he can do nothing better than show his single key card by bidding 5 diamonds. But if you now bid 5NT showing all 5 key cards plus the queen of spades, partner can jump to 7 spades with confidence, or he could jump to 7NT with only the remote fear that one opponent may have 5 diamonds.

Responding to 5NT

Five notrump asks about kings, but unlike Blackwood, it does not ask how many you have. Instead, it asks for information about which specific king or kings you may have. In response to 5NT:

bid the cheapest suit in which you have a king.

So if you have the king of clubs, bid 6 clubs. Or, if

you skip 6 clubs to bid 6 diamonds, you tell partner that you do have the king of diamonds, but you don't have the king of clubs. Or, if you skip over both clubs and diamonds to bid 6 hearts, then you show the king of hearts and deny the two lower ranking kings. Making a grand slam may not be a matter of quantity of kings. Partner may have a good suit that will deliver the needed tricks if you can provide just that one king.

Let's say, then, that partner has bid 5NT in hopes that your side can perhaps reach 7 spades. Your response to 5NT has been 6 clubs. If partner now bids 6 spades, you're all done. But if, instead, partner now bids 6 of some other suit, he is asking you if you hold that specific king. For instance, if he bids 6 hearts over your 6 club bid, he is asking you if you have the king of hearts. If you hold the king that partner asks you about, he wants you to bid 7 spades. If you don't have that king, he wants you to bid just 6 spades.

Over 5NT, respond your cheapest king.

If partner bids yet another 6-level suit (not the trump suit), he is asking you to bid 7 if you have the king of that suit.

Because these agreements allow you to find specific cards in the responding hand, you can be much more accurate in deciding to bid 7 or to stop in 6. Seldom do you have any doubts remaining.

The queen ask

We now know our 5NT bid promises not just all 5 key cards, but also the queen of trump. But how do we know if our side possesses the trump queen? Of course, if the queen is in your own hand, you know. Or, if it isn't in your hand, partner may respond 5 hearts or 5 spades, stating whether or not he has the queen. But what if partner's response to 4 NT has been 5 clubs or 5 diamonds? Does he have the trump queen or not? You don't know. But RKC will let you find out. You just have to bid "the queen ask."

Let's say spades are trump. If partner has bid 5 clubs over 4NT, then 5 diamonds is the queen ask. If he has bid 5 diamonds over 4NT, then 5 hearts is the queen ask. After the RKC response to 4NT, the next cheapest bid by the asker is the queen ask.

But now let's say that hearts are trump. You bid 4NT, and partner responds 5 diamonds. You want to ask for the queen, but if you bid 5 hearts, partner will have to pass – you have signed off. So if you want to ask for the queen of hearts, you will have to bid 5 spades. The queen ask is the cheapest bid the asker can make, but it cannot be the trump suit, which would be a sign-off bid.

a.)	S	W	N	E
	1♠	P	3♠	P
	4NT	P	5♣	P
	5♦			

In this auction, 5 diamonds is a queen ask for the queen of spades.

b.)	S	W	N	E
	1♥	P	3♥	P
	4NT	P	5♦	P
	5♥			

In this auction, 5 hearts is a sign-off. It tells partner that you don't have enough key cards to be in slam.

c.)	S	W	N	E
	1♥	P	3♥	P
	4NT	P	5♦	P
	5♠			

This 5 spade bid is a queen ask for the heart queen.

Responding to queen asks

When partner asks you for the trump queen with a queen ask, the easiest answer to give is "no." If you don't have the queen, then just bid your agreed upon trump suit at the lowest possible level. In example a.) above, bid 5 spades to deny the queen of spades. In example c.), bid 6 hearts. Both of these bids are the lowest possible rebid of your trump suit.

When the answer is "yes, I do have the queen,"

then you get to bid something more interesting. You get to bid the cheapest suit in which you hold a king. We call this bid a "piggyback." When you bid the cheapest king to say "yes," you are piggybacking the king on the positive queen response. Partner gets double information. You gave him good news when you acknowledge the queen, and you advance his search further with the information about your king.

Look again at example a.) in the other column. Partner's 5 diamond bid asks you for the queen of spades. If you now bid 5 hearts, you are showing the queen of spades AND the king of hearts. But let's say you don't bid 5 hearts. This time let's say you bid 6 clubs. Now you acknowledge that you do have the queen of trump, you deny holding the king of hearts, and you acknowledge holding the king of clubs. With just 1 bid you have given partner information about 3 specific cards.

Now look at example c.). Partner's 5 spade bid asks if you hold the queen of hearts. If you bid 6 clubs, you piggyback the club king and the heart queen at once. If instead of 6 clubs you were to bid 6 diamonds, you would show the queen of hearts, deny the king of clubs, and show the king of diamonds, all at once.

But now let's say that you don't have the king of clubs or the king of diamonds, but you do hold both the queen of hearts and the king of spades. This time you bid 5NT. Partner's bid of 5 spades took away your chance to bid 5 spades. So you bid 5NT to show the king in the suit that partner asked with.

The 5 NT response to a queen ask always means the same thing. It means "yes, I have the queen, and I also have the king of the suit you asked me with." Look at example a.) again. When partner bids 5 diamonds, if you respond 5NT, you acknowledge holding the queen of spades and the king of diamonds, and deny holding the king of hearts.

So are you ready to hear about the jack asks? Well, we don't allow any jack asks in our bridge club.

Summary

The five key cards are the four aces and the king of trump.

Over 4NT

- 5♣ zero or three key cards
- 5♦ one or four key cards
- 5♥ two key cards, no trump queen
- 5♠ two key cards with trump queen

Over 4 Clubs Gerber

- 4♦ zero or three key cards
- 4♥ one or four key cards
- 4♠ two key cards, no trump queen
- 4NT two key cards with trump queen

If no suit has been bid, then 4 spades expresses two aces and a minimum and 4NT shows two aces and a maximum.

Over 5NT

This king ask cannot be used unless the bidder knows that the partnership possesses all five key cards plus the trump queen

- 6♣ shows the king of clubs
- 6♦ denies the king of clubs and shows the king of diamonds
- 6♥ denies all lower ranking kings and shows the king of hearts
- 6♠ denies all side suit kings

Showing the trump queen

After the response to 4NT, the cheapest bid available asks if responder holds the trump queen

- deny the queen by bidding the trump suit as cheaply as possible
- acknowledge the queen by bidding the cheapest suit in which you hold a king (bid 5NT if your cheapest king is the suit of the queen ask)

Samples

Opener

♠ 7
♥ A 5
♦ K Q J 9 4
♣ A Q J 6 3

Responder

♠ A 8 3
♥ J 6
♦ A 10 8 5 2
♣ K 9 4

Opener

1♦
4NT
6♣

Responder

3♦
5♥
7♦

After responder's limit raise, opener sees a lot of potential in his hand, so he investigates key cards. Responder's heart bid shows two, so opener sees all 5 key cards. This would entitle opener to bid 5NT, but responses of 6 hearts or spades would overshoot the contract of 6 diamonds, so opener can't use it. But if responder were to hold the king of clubs, opener could almost certainly take all 13 tricks. So opener bypasses 5NT and bids 6 clubs. This bid asks responder if he holds the king of clubs. Since the answer is yes, responder bids 7 diamonds.

Opener

♠ A 10 9 2
♥ A 5
♦ A Q 9 3
♣ K 9 6

Responder

♠ K 8 5 2
♥ J 10 7 3
♦ K 3
♣ A Q 5

Opener

1NT
2♠
4♦
4♠

Responder

2♣
4♣
4♥
P

Responder's try at slam with 4 clubs is quite ambitious. 4 hearts asks for the queen of spades, and 4 spades denies it. Even with 5 key cards, responder gives up. Point count is only about 30. This and a possible trump loser dissuade his aggressive effort.