



Barry Rigal

WHY is Roman Key-Card Blackwood ‘a good thing?’

If the title of this article is not familiar to you, I suggest you might start with Sellars and Yeatman’s masterpiece *1066 and All That*. My colleague and friend David Gostyn may attempt to persuade you to read a bridge book; this will be more fun.

Why is Key-Card Blackwood a good idea? As Bob Hamman said: ‘The best play lousy, the rest play worse’. Bridge is a game of errors, and even the top players make far too many mistakes, because bridge is a game of imperfect information. When it comes to bidding, you do not see partner’s hand till the auction is over. So you need either excellent judgment to work out what partner has, or the ability to show what you have precisely, or failing that, an excellent system to augment your judgment.

What I hope to persuade you of is that Blackwood is a useful tool to assist you in your judgment. When your combined partnership assets put you in the slam zone, you need to ensure that you are not missing too many aces. But that is not enough; simple possession of three aces will not keep you out of hopeless slams.

Say you hold:

Hand 1

♠ K 10 9 4
♥ A K Q 4 2
♦ A K J
♣ 7

Partner opens 1NT and admits to holding four spades. Blackwood (by whatever your partnership route is) reveals you are missing an ace. But does partner have the spade jack, which might make the slam 50%, the spade queen, which would make

RKCB

is a ‘good thing’

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it excellent, or neither, to make it hopeless?

Another problem.

Partner opens 1♣ and raises 1♠ to 2♠.

Holding Hand 2:

Hand 2

♠ Q J 7 4 3
♥ A K J 4 2
♦ A K
♣ 9

You hit him with Blackwood and find one ace opposite. If partner has the spade king, a slam will be excellent . . . without it no better than 50% and probably a lot worse. Your go!

With both these problems, a discerning critic might point out that a cue-bidding auction would help partner value his cards and avoid the problem, to which like Edward Lear’s *Pobble I respond* ‘Fish-Fiddle-De-Dee!’ Cue-bidding requires judgment, Blackwood requires partner to count his aces. The latter is easy, the former requires a delicate partnership understanding, and I know which I’d trust partner with.

Roman Key-Card Blackwood solves the problem on both these deals by focusing on the trump king as the equivalent of an ace. There are thus five aces included in the initial response. And the trump queen is the next most important card, possession of which should always be identifiable at a level that will keep you out of slam if appropriate.

Specifically, on Hand 1 partner’s response of 5♦ lets us ask with 5♥ for the trump queen. If partner has it, he makes a descriptive bid above the level of 5♠ (cue-bidding the cheapest king he has not yet shown) but the call of 5♠ would deny possession of it.

On Hand 2, the initial response will

indicate how many of the missing five key-cards including the trump king partner has. Problem solved.

What else does Key-Card do for you that regular Blackwood does not? A lot of things – mainly to do with identifying specific kings or queens, as well as voids, but those are all advanced ideas. One example will have to suffice: You pick up:

Hand 3

♠ A J 4 3
♥ 9
♦ K 7 4
♣ A Q J 9 2

You open 1♣ and raise 1♠ to 3♠; partner bids 4♦, you use Key-card Blackwood and get a 5♣ response (0 or 3 key cards). Knowing partner has at least one key-card because of his earlier cue-bid, you ask for the trump queen with 5♦; without it partner bids 5♠, with it he cue-bids his cheapest king, 6♣. You can jump to 7♠ facing:

♠ K Q 7 2
♥ A 4 2
♦ A 8 6 3
♣ K 5

I’m sure there are auctions involving judgment that would get you there too . . . but I’ll settle for having the best system.

To sum up, at a basic level Key-Card Blackwood identifies how to stay out of bad slams that regular Blackwood will leave you guessing on, and helps you identify the specific assets that will make slam good, or bad. If you want to know more, Eddie Kantar has written eloquently on the subject. □

RKCB is NOT always a 'good thing'

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR).
Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.



David M. Gostyn

THE DEBATE

MY friend Barry Rigal argues that players should use Roman Key-Card Blackwood (RKCB) because it is a more efficient slam convention than simple Blackwood, i.e. the convention as originally defined.

Let me start by being quite clear what I am *not* going to argue. I am not going to challenge Barry's claims that RKCB is a superior convention. But I shall argue that most partnerships, even absolutely top class ones if only playing a casual game, would be better off using simple Blackwood. I shall put forward three reasons: (i) frequency; (ii) method balance; (iii) complexity.

Before going into detail on these three reasons, I would also like to point out that there are some deals where simple Blackwood is the superior convention. Consider the following. You hold:

♠ Q J 10 7 5 3 ♥ 4 ♦ A K Q J 4 ♣ A

and your reliable partner ('What's that?' you ask) opens 2♠ (weak). What do you do? Of course, you bid 4NT.

First, let us assume that you are playing simple Blackwood. If partner shows two aces then you bid the grand. You are more than happy to play 7♠ opposite, say:

♠ A 9 8 6 4 2 ♥ A 6 3 ♦ 6 3 ♣ 8 7

Now let us assume that you are playing RKCB, and partner shows you two key cards. He might well have the hand above, but he might as easily have:

♠ K 9 8 6 4 2 ♥ A 6 3 ♦ 6 3 ♣ 8 7

in which case 7♠ is far from playable.

RKCB is less efficient than simple Blackwood on all the hands where there is the world of difference between the king of trumps and a missing ace. A slam needing a finesse against the king of trumps is playable; a slam that is off in aces is not.

The first of my three reasons is fairly self-explanatory. The number of hands where it matters which form of Blackwood you use is very low. You might well go months before you see a single hand where your choice of slam convention affects the final contract you reach.

To understand my second reason, method balance, consider the analogy of a hi-fi system. It would be absurd to connect the best CD player in the world to a pair of tinny loud speakers. Similarly it makes little sense to play a sophisticated slam convention as part of a system where there is little sequence definition or cue-bidding.

For example, if your idea of bidding the following hands:

♠ A K J 7 5		♠ Q 10 6 3
♥ K 5 3		♥ A Q J 7
♦ 6 4		♦ A K Q
♣ J 8 6		♣ 4 2

is for West to open 1♠ and East to respond 4NT, then it really does not much matter which 4NT convention you are using. All variations will show that your side has enough aces (by whatever definition), and none will tell you that 6♠ is off in top tricks.

My third reason, the convention's complexity, is, to my mind, by far the strongest argument. Even simple Blackwood has some complexity. Have you discussed what your calls mean after intervention? You might think that the ambiguity of simple Blackwood's 5♣ response (0 or 4 aces) would never give a competent partnership any difficulties, but you'd be wrong. In the round robin of the 1971 Bermuda Bowl there was a much publicised deal when a pair from the French team (eventually the beaten finalists) bid to a grand slam missing all four aces after a 5♣ response.

RKCB has even more ambiguous bids of this type: 5♣, 5♦, 5NT and 6♣ all show either x or y key cards, and the mechanism for dealing with these ambiguities is not totally obvious. Suppose, for example, that clubs is the key suit and the responder to the 4NT enquiry has three key cards. What is he meant to respond? A 5♣ response might well be passed because the 4NT bidder will fear that he is facing no key cards.

While I was writing this piece, I read an

article discussing a difficult hand from the final – 'final', note – of the 1995 Bermuda Bowl. At one table the USA pair missed a good slam but USA still gained on the board because the Canadians at the other table had what the writer described as a 'key-card accident' and bid a grand off an ace. If the best (OK, second best: the Canadians did lose the final) players in the world can have accidents, think how many accidents the average players can have.

Another source of complexity is that not all players play RKCB exactly the same way. In particular, there are different styles of 'follow-up' sequence. If you and your partner are going to play RKCB, you need to spend time making sure that you are playing the same version. Note, in passing, that follow-up enquiries were needed to reach the top spot in most of Barry's examples.

By a mile, the most complex aspect of RKCB is knowing just which suit is 'key'. As luck would have it, in another part of the magazine that reported the Canadian world championship accident, there was an article in which several experts (including world champions) discussed the auction 1♥ – 1♠ – 2NT – 3♥ – 3♠ – 4♣ – 4♦ – 4NT, where each partner has bid one major and then offered secondary support for the other. The 4NT bid was RKCB (the experts were all agreed on that), and the experts were discussing which major was the key suit; they were split almost exactly 50-50.

OK, if a pair are forming a partnership for a serious attempt at an event such as the Gold Cup, then, sure, they should play the best slam convention. But that pair are going to have a detailed system definition anyway, and will have accepted the need for a lot of memorising. By contrast, a partnership that does not want a memory strain has to choose between playing RKCB badly and playing the much easier simple Blackwood – to my mind, an easy choice. □