

So, 9 full tables last week, not bad eh? And something else remarkable, Chuck not only managed to read all the way through my last news-sheet, but he actually agreed with everything I said. I guess we really do get older as we get wiser, or vice-versa?

Blackwood

Now ‘everybody’ plays Blackwood; but having mastered the standard version, many improving pairs move on to a more sophisticated variation. There are numerous variants around, but there really is no doubt that the best is Roman Key Card Blackwood (RKCB). Alex has asked me if I could describe it (presumably he likes my free-flowing style?), and so I have obediently put the basic concepts in this news-sheet. I will bring out something more comprehensive later.

Roman Key Card Blackwood

So what is so special about RKCB? The major difference between RKCB and ordinary Blackwood is that the king and queen of trumps are given extra importance. If you are in a suit contract then the king of trumps is every bit as important as an ace. So it is counted in with the aces, giving us a total of five ‘aces’ or ‘key cards’. Special attention is also given to the trump queen, its possession is either given with the first reply to 4NT or it may be asked for on the following bid. RKCB really is far better than normal Blackwood on most occasions and is used by most advanced pairs. RKCB is at its finest when trumps have been agreed.

When the trump suit is agreed, we use the 4 aces and the king of trumps as the ‘key’ cards. When the trump suit is not agreed, the ‘key’ suit is the last suit bid. The responses to 4NT are as follows:

5♣	= 0 or 3 key cards
5♦	= 1 or 4 key cards
5♥	= 2 or 5 key cards without queen of key suit
5♠	= 2 or 5 key cards + queen of key suit

These responses are unaffected by any earlier cue bid, i.e. show the correct number of key cards even if you have previously cue bid an ace. Very occasionally asker may not be sure if responder is showing 0 or 3 (or 1 or 4). In that case he errs on the side of caution and responder will correct.

Higher responses show a void, and I shall be covering them in a later news-sheet.

Note When indicating the absence or presence of the key queen, we also indicate having the queen if we have extra length in trumps. By extra length, we usually mean more cards than the Blackwood bidder expects, such that it brings the total number of trumps to 10 or more. Again, I will cover this later.

Now the (or 5) key cards is usually left out of the definition. I shall just give one example and then also always leave it out of our explanations.

	West	East	West	East
(1) transfer	♠ A95	♠ KQ2	2NT	3♦ (1)
(2) simple accept	♥ AK8	♥ QJ1032	3♥ (2)	4NT (3)
(3) RKCB for ♥'s	♦ A97	♦ KQJ3	5♥ (4)	7NT
(4) 2 or 5 key cards without ♥Q	♣ AJ42	♣ 6		

Let's have an example (slightly modified) from the club. Now you may have heard Chuck wandering around muttering '1430'. What is that? – Yes, I know that it is the score for a major suit vulnerable small slam. RKCB is a superb piece of machinery, but as with anything that works well, somebody has to tinker with it. With 1430 the meanings of the 5♣/♦ replies are reversed. The advantage of this is minimal and I may cover it later. But really it is simplest to play standard RKCB as Chris and Chuck were on this deal from a Friday session a couple of months back.

	Chris	Chuck	Chris (W)	Chuck (E)
(1) A good rebid, do not overvalue hands that may be a complete mis-fit.	♠ 9	♠ A632	1♥	1♠
(2) RKCB	♥ Q108754	♥ AK63	2♦ (1)	4♥
(3) 3 (or 0) key cards	♦ AKJ9	♦ Q5	4NT (2)	5♣ (3)
	♣ AJ	♣ 432	7♥	pass

A good grand slam on minimum values. Note how easy it is using RKCB. Ordinary Blackwood bidders would find it much more difficult, especially if East had the ♠K or ♣K (or both!) in place of the ♥K. This is a perfect example of why the key king is just as important as an ace and should be considered apart from the other kings. You may be able to avoid losing an outside king but you can rarely avoid losing the trump king if it is guarded offside.

There are a number of interesting points in this auction. West's hand is perhaps close to a jump rebid, but a singleton in partner's suit is not usually an asset. A non-jump response is called for. But 2♦ or 2♥? Both are reasonable, but I prefer 2♦ as this is more flexible and is where the points are.

Note also that Chuck did not bid 4♥ at his first turn. This was not because he really wanted to show his lovely ♠ suit, or that he had desires to play the contract himself. A direct bid of 4♥ would show a much less powerful hand. Bidding another suit and then raising partner's major to the 4 level (a delayed game raise) is a simple way to show a solid raise to 4. Of course, with a singleton/void you can splinter. There are other methods (Jacoby 2NT, Bergen raises etc) but without prior agreement, this delayed game raise is how to show a good (rather than more pre-emptive) raise and denies a singleton/void.

Having used RKCB, 5NT asks for kings (there are now only 3). There are various options for the reply - either show specific king(s) or just the number (0-3). Simplest is to show the number, but I will describe the other options (and how to ask about the trump queen after a 5♣/♦ response) in a subsequent news-sheet, perhaps a booklet.

Raising Partner's Minor

This is a hand from last Monday. Your partner opens 1♦, what do you respond?

A totally flat 10 count without any intermediates. Let's assume that partner's opening promises 4+♦'s, what is your bid? 2♦, 3♦, 1NT or 2NT? First of all let's

- ♠ K85 consider a raise of partner's suit. Now all the books say to support partner
- ♥ Q73 whenever possible, but this does not apply to a minor suit. With this
- ♦ J874 actual hand it makes no difference if you play inverted minors or not,
- ♣ A75 neither 2♦ or 3♦ are correct with no ruffing values. You have to go for No Trumps. But 1NT or 2NT? If you have read my previous news-sheets, you

will know that this hand is only worth 1NT. The 3♦ bid found at the table was not a success.

Don't go out of your way to play in minor suit contracts, NT usually scores more and this is especially important at pairs scoring. This also applies when you have a good long minor suit. I have scored up enough sessions to know that 5♦ making scores less than 3NT +1.