

Slam Bidding – From A to Z

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Article 2: Slam Bidding Tools.

Asking for Keycards

Note: *This is the 2nd in a series of articles on slam bidding.*

I. Asking for Aces/Keycards.

When we first start off we learn about the Blackwood Convention. This is a bid of 4NT by either partner. In response, the other partner will show how many aces. Over the years this Convention has evolved and there are many variations. Rather spending a lot of time on different responses, I recommend a 1430 Keycard structure, with the five Keycards being the four aces and king of trumps.

1st step – 1 or 4 Keycards.

2nd step – 0 or 3 Keycards.

3rd step – 2 Keycards without the trump queen.

4th step – 2 Keycards with the trump queen.

Now most players are familiar with 4NT being the Keycard ask. But there are other bids that are used instead, in specific situations. The most important, is when the agreed suit is a minor.

Other Keycard bids besides 4NT

The question you might ask is why can't 4NT be keycard for the minors?

The main reason is a space issue. You may get your response to a 4NT ask, but find you are off two Keycards, but are too high to sign off in the minor:

Example 1:

1♠ 2♦

3♦ 4NT

5♥

If you are off two aces you are _____, in the words of Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory:

‘What if you were joined to another object, by an incline plane, wrapped helically around an axis?’ (For non-scientists that definition is screwed.) You are past the safe sign off of 5♦.

Keycard when the trump suit is a minor

So there are two common conventional options in this situation:

1. Minorwood.
2. Redwood.

Minorwood is a bid of four of the agreed minor, in a game forcing auction, is Keycard. Four of the agreed minor is also keycard when you bid it, skipping at least one level. So if partner opened 1♦, 4♦ by you would be Minorwood.

Redwood is the bid directly above four of the agreed minor is Keycard. Again, this agreement is triggered only when it is a game forcing auction, or a jump to this bid.

So to be clear, in example 2 below 4♦ is Redwood for clubs.

Example 2:

1♥ 2♣

3♣ 4♦

Which is better?

I prefer Redwood, but they are both better than 4NT. There are, however, a couple of issues with both, of which you need to be aware:

1. Four of the agreed minor is a worthwhile bid to have as natural. There are some auctions that you want partner to ask for Keycards. This is the way you do it. It is a **green light** bid, asking partner to either cuebid or ask for Keycards. Minorwood takes this natural bid away.
2. Redwood doesn't have that problem, but it takes away a cuebid of 4♦ if clubs is agreed, and 4♥ if diamonds. The other big knock against Redwood is that when hearts and diamonds are the agreed suits, a partnership needs clear understandings at the four level. Take this auction:

Example 3:

1♥ 2♦

3♦ 4♥

Is 4♥ Keycard for diamonds, or a **yellow light** saying, I have a minimum, a heart fit, but I don't have extra values?

3. What is a bid of 4NT in one of the Keycard auctions? I like to play that playing **matchpoints, 4NT is to play**. But at IMPs, I prefer you cannot sign off in 4NT, only in five of the minor. The reason is it gives you more space to explore, before having to make a slam decision.

Example 4:

Playing Minorwood:

1♥ 2♦¹

3♦² 4♦³

4♠⁴ 4NT⁵

1. Game forcing

2. Natural raise.

3. Minorwood.

4. 0 or 3 Keycards.

5. Playing matchpoints, this is a **red light**, saying we are off two Keycards. However playing IMPs, it is asking for kings.

Kickback

Minorwood and Redwood are sometimes called Kickback. This convention is also a common treatment in the majors. Essentially in a game forcing auction, when a major is agreed, four of the other major is Keycard. I do not think this treatment is worth playing, so I recommend 4NT Keycard for both majors.

Queen of trumps ask

Before we ask for kings, there is a possible step in between, and that is when the Keycard response does not clarify if responder holds the queen of the agreed trump suit. In that case, the cheapest non-signoff bid asks. The responses are:

- Without the queen of trump, bid five of the trump suit.
- With the queen of trump, but no outside kings, jump to six of the trump suit.
- With the queen of trump and at least one outside king, bid the cheapest available king on the auction.

So here is an example to illustrate how this works:

Example 5:

1♠ 2♥

3♥ 4NT

5♣¹ 5♦²

?

1. 1 or 4 keycards.
2. Do you have the queen of hearts?

So in this auction the following are possible bids over 5♦, and their meanings:

- 5♥ = I do not have the ♥Q.
- 5♠ = I have the ♥Q, and ♠K, and might still have other kings.
- 5NT = I have the ♥Q, and the ♦K, (hardest to show king). However, I do not have the ♠K, as I would have bid 5♠, but may still may have the ♣K.
- 6♣– have the ♥Q, and the ♣K, but deny the spade and diamond kings.

What if you, as the keycard asker, hold the queen of trumps, so you know partner doesn't have it? You ask for kings by bidding one step higher than otherwise. Let's look at this in conjunction with the king ask.

I. Asking for Kings.

There are two primary ways to ask for kings:

1. 5NT.
2. Cheapest non-signoff bid after the keycard response (of course, as mentioned above, the cheapest non-signoff bid is asking for the queen of trumps, if the keycard response has not clarified it.

5NT is ok, but it takes away valuable bidding room in a grand slam investigation. Cheapest non-signoff option is better, but requires a bit more memory. Here are two examples of

cheapest non-signoff bid king asking auctions, one with a major suit agreed, and one when the minor suit is trump.

Let's first look at a major suit auction:

Example 6:

1♥ 2NT¹

3♥² 4NT³

5♣⁴ ?

1. Jacoby.
2. Minimum no shortness.
3. Keycard.
4. 1 or 4 keycards.

Here 5♦ would be the queen of trumps ask. And 5♠ (next cheapest non-signoff bid is the king ask. Here is a minor suit slam try auction:

Example 7, IMPs:

1♣ 2♣¹

4♦² 4♥³

?

1. Game forcing raise.
2. Redwood
3. 1 or 4 keycards.

In this auction, 4♠ would be the queen of trump ask, and 4NT would be the king ask. However, if playing matchpoints, 4NT is a signoff, so 5♦ would be the king ask.

On June 1st, I will post Article 3, which will continue the review of slam bidding tools.