

"Exploring Slam by Asking for Aces or 'Key Cards': Gerber, Blackwood, Blackwood Key Card, Roman Key Card (RKC), and 'Minorwood' Key Card"

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When partners suspect that they may have 32+ points, or favorable distributions with fewer HCPs, such that a small slam might be made, one partner in a pair may declare himself/herself to be the "**captain**" of the pair, who will then be in charge of setting the contract, and use a bridge convention to ask partner for a count of Aces in partner's hand. The answer then informs the captain about whether to go on to a slam bid, or to stop before a slam bid.

Bidding makeable slams is very, very important, because slams carry *massive* scoring bonuses. Plus, bidding and making a slam is great fun! Of course, it is equally important to not bid slams that cannot make!

A partner does not "ask for Aces" unless the partner holds several Aces. Partners also may not ask for Aces if the slam contract is potentially in Clubs, because at least in some "asking" conventions the response may take the pair past the stopping point of a 5-level bid. And partners might not ask for Aces if partner is holding a void, because when the other person responds to the Ace count query, one will not know whether an Ace is being counted in a suit where the pair already has coverage via the void. And **one should never "ask for Aces" unless one holds first or protected (e.g., K,x,x) second round control in every suit!**

Gerber

When **1NT** was the original opening bid and **NT** is apparently still the contract under active consideration, or when **NT** was the last bid within the partnership, partners can bid **4C** using the Gerber convention to ask, "Partner, how many Aces do you have?" The Gerber convention was invented by William Konigsberger and Win Nye in Switzerland who published the convention in 1936. John Gerber of Texas introduced the convention in North America in 1938.¹ Partner responds by bidding an artificial bid to show Ace count: **4D** = 0 OR 4, **4H** = 1, **4S** = 2, **4NT** = 3.

A **5C** bid by captain over the response providing the Ace count asks for a count of Kings. Any other bid is the captain's decision to either stop, or to bid a slam.

Blackwood

The Blackwood convention was invented by Easley Blackwood in 1933.² The Blackwood convention is used to ask for Aces when partners have found a suit "fit" and believe that a slam contract may be possible.

Roman Blackwood

A variation on Blackwood is the Roman Blackwood convention popularized by the Italian "Blue Team" who dominated bridge team competitions in the 1960s.² Once a suit "fit" has been established if Partner asks for Aces by bidding **4NT** partner responds: **5C**, 0 or 3 Aces, **5D**, 1 or 4 Aces, or **5H**, 2 Aces.

Roman Keycard (RKC) 1430

Another convention that can be used to "ask for Aces" is very popular when the contract emerges as a suit contract. To use this convention it must be clear to the partners what the **expected suit** (i.e., not **NT**) is for the contract. For example, in the following sequence, which assumes that the opponents Pass

¹ See the Wikipedia article, "**Gerber Convention**":

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerber_convention

² See the Wikipedia article, "**Blackwood Convention**":

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackwood_convention

at each of their bids, it is clear that the "asking" is being done with respect to a Spade contract:

NORTH: 1**S** SOUTH: 2**S** NORTH: 4**NT**

Here is another such bidding sequence, again "asking" about Spades:

NORTH: 1**S** SOUTH: 2**D**
NORTH: 2**S** SOUTH: 3**S**
NORTH: 4**NT**

When multiple suits have been bid, but Responder has "supported" Opener's suit bid, thus establishing "fit" in that suit, any bids in other suits are to show "side features", but trump is assumed to be the suit in which "fit" has been clearly established.

In the RKC **1430** system the captain is actually asking not only about Aces, but also about the **King of the trump** suit. There are a total of **5** "key cards": the 4 Aces, and the King of trump. The responses to the 4**NT** "asking" bid are:

1. 5**C**: "I have either **1 OR 4** key cards." (thus, **1430**);
2. 5**D**: "I have either **3 OR 0** key cards." (thus **1430**);
3. 5**H**: "I have **2** key cards, and I do not have the Queen of trump.
4. 5**S**: "I have **2** key cards, and I do have the Queen of trump."

More Exotic RKC-1430 "Asking" Bids

There are additional components in the RKC system in which the "captain" can then bid to ask whether Partner has 0, 1, 2, or 3 *Kings* in suits other than trump. Note that the response by Partner to the 4**NT** bid already covers 1 King: the King of trump. These additional components are primarily useful in exploring 7-level Giant Slam bids, and at this stage you may, or may not, want to worry about asking for Kings.

Roman Keycard (RKC) 3014

A variation on RKC 1430 is RKC **3014**. Here the responses to the 4**NT** "asking" bid are:

1. 5**C**: "I have either **3 OR 0** key cards." (thus, **3014**);
2. 5**D**: "I have either **1 OR 4** key cards." (thus **3014**);

3. **5H**: "I have **2** key cards, and I do not have the Queen of trump.
4. **5S**: "I have **2** key cards, and I do have the Queen of trump."

'Minorwood' Keycard

One problem bridge players confront when they find a "fit" in a Minor and want to explore slam is that the previous conventions will take the Partnership past the **5C** or **5D** level even though in some cases Partners want to "stop" at the game level. As Vic Quiros noted in his October, 2025 article, "Improving Your Key Card Auctions—Part 3", published in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin:

"When we bid and raise a minor in a game-forcing auction, we want to be able to (a) bid a slam if it's right, (b) stop at five of our minor, or (c) stop at 4NT... To accomplish these objectives, we need maximum bidding space. Some players use 'minorwood' (four of the agreed suit) as the key-card ask, others use 'redwood' (4♥ if diamonds are agreed or 4♦ if clubs are agreed), but both of these eat up bidding space. I therefore recommend that [once you have found a 'fit' in a minor] you [*always*] use 4♣ as your key-card ask, whether the agreed suit is clubs or diamonds." (p. 68)

For more information about the 'Minorwood' Keycard convention see Robert S. Todd's January 24, 2022 "Slam Bidding: Minorwood" web posting.³

Example #1

Partner	YOU
1C	2C
4C	

Your responses:

4D	"1 or 4 Club key cards"
4H	"3 or 0 Club key cards"
4S	"2 key cards, but <u>not</u> the Club Queen"
4NT	"2 key cards, and the Club Queen"

The 'Minorwood' Keycard convention can be particularly useful if Partners are playing the "**Inverted Minors**"⁴ convention because

³ See: <https://www.advinbridge.com/this-week-in-bridge/405>.

⁴ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see "Convention Lesson #21: Bidding 'Inverted Minors'": https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/inv_minor.pdf

Responder's 2C response in this example shows a "strong" hand as well as Club support.

Example #2

Partner	YOU
1D	2C*
2D	4D

Your responses:

4D "1 or 4 Diamond key cards"

4H "3 or 0 Diamond key cards"

4S "2 key cards, but not the Diamond Queen"

4NT "2 key cards, and the Diamond Queen"

*Here Partners are playing the "2 Over 1" bridge convention and YOUR bid as Responder shows (1) 4+ Clubs and (2) ~13 HCPs.