



The Blackwood Convention

If the partnership is missing two aces, it can stop at the five level in the agreed trump suit. If only one ace is missing, a small slam can be bid in the agreed trump suit. **If the partnership holds all the aces and there is the possibility of a grand slam, a subsequent bid of 5NT asks about kings.** The responses are:

| | |
|-----|-------------|
| 6NT | Four kings |
| 6♠ | Three kings |
| 6♥ | Two kings |
| 6♦ | One king |
| 6♣ | Zero kings |

When the partnership has decided **WHERE** it belongs, the next decision is **HOW HIGH**. If there is enough combined strength to think about a slam, the partnership must consider controls.

CONTROL REQUIREMENTS

| | |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Small slam | First-round control in 3 suits; at least second-round control in the 4th |
| Grand slam | First-round control in every suit. |

In a suit contract, aces and voids are first-round controls; kings and singletons are second-round controls. The Blackwood convention is the most popular way to find out about aces and kings held by the partnership, but it is often overused.

The Blackwood Convention

Once a trump suit has been agreed, a bid of 4NT asks how many aces partner holds. In standard Blackwood, partner responds:

| | |
|----|-----------------------|
| 5♠ | Three aces |
| 5♥ | Two aces |
| 5♦ | One ace |
| 5♣ | Zero or all four aces |

When to Use Blackwood

The player using Blackwood assumes captaincy of the partnership. Based on partner's responses, the captain will decide whether to bid a slam. To use Blackwood, the captain should be fairly certain:

- A trump suit has been agreed.
- There is likely to be enough combined strength for a slam.
- All that needs to be known is the number of aces and/or kings held by the partnership.

| | |
|-------------|------------------|
| OPENER | RESPONDER |
| ♠ A Q J 7 6 | ♠ K 4 |
| ♥ J 9 5 2 | ♥ K Q 10 8 7 4 3 |
| ♦ K Q J | ♦ 5 |
| ♣ 2 | ♣ A K Q |

| | |
|--------|-----------|
| OPENER | RESPONDER |
| 1♠ | 2♥ ★ |
| 3♥ | 4NT |
| 5♦ | 5♥ |
| Pass | |

Once opener raises hearts, the decision on **WHERE** is resolved, and it is only a matter of **HOW HIGH**. With 17 high-card points plus 3 length points for the seven-card heart suit, responder knows the partnership has enough combined strength to be in the slam zone. The only consideration is whether the partnership has enough controls. Responder uses Blackwood to ask about aces. When opener shows only one ace, responder knows the partnership is missing two aces and signs off in 5♥.

Opener has a hand worth 17 points—14 high-card points plus 3 dummy points for the singleton club. However, even with extra values, opener shouldn't override responder's decision to stop in 5♥. By using Blackwood, responder has assumed the captaincy of the partnership. Responder knows how many aces the partnership holds; opener does not. **So 5♥ is a signoff, not an invitation.**

Let's change opener's hand a little:

| | |
|-------------|------------------|
| OPENER | RESPONDER |
| ♠ A Q J 7 6 | ♠ K 4 |
| ♥ J 9 5 2 | ♥ K Q 10 8 7 4 3 |
| ♦ A 7 3 | ♦ 5 |
| ♣ 2 | ♣ A K Q |

| | |
|--------|-----------|
| OPENER | RESPONDER |
| 1♠ | 2♥ ★ |
| 3♥ | 4NT |
| 5♥ | 6♥ |

Now opener has 2 fewer high-card points, but they are the 'right' points. When opener shows two aces, responder can confidently bid the small slam.

Let's change opener's hand again:

| | |
|--------------|------------------|
| OPENER | RESPONDER |
| ♠ A 10 8 7 6 | ♠ K 4 |
| ♥ A 9 5 2 | ♥ K Q 10 8 7 4 3 |
| ♦ A 7 3 | ♦ 5 |
| ♣ 2 | ♣ A K Q |

| | |
|--------|-----------|
| OPENER | RESPONDER |
| 1♠ | 2♥ ★ |
| 3♥ | 4NT |
| 5♠ | 7♥! |

The same total high-card points in opener's hand, but responder can bid a grand slam when opener shows three aces. There are thirteen top tricks: two spades, seven hearts, one diamond, and three clubs. Responder could actually bid 7NT rather than 7♥!

When to Avoid Blackwood

Blackwood doesn't handle all situations involving controls. **We should avoid automatically using Blackwood with:**

- Two or more cards in an unbid suit with no ace or king.
- A void.
- A slam-invitational hand.

| OPENER | RESPONDER |
|--------------|-----------------|
| ♠ K 10 8 7 5 | ♠ A Q |
| ♥ A 9 5 | ♥ K Q J 8 7 6 3 |
| ♦ 10 5 | ♦ Q 7 |
| ♣ A Q 3 | ♣ K 4 |

| OPENER | RESPONDER |
|--------|-----------|
| 1♠ | 2♥ ♠ |
| 3♥ | ? |

After opener agrees on hearts, responder has enough strength to consider slam, but if responder bids 4NT and opener shows two aces, what does responder do now?

The partnership is missing only one ace, but if responder bids 6♥, the defenders will likely take the first two diamonds. However, if one of opener's aces were the ♦A and the other the ♥A or ♣A, 6♥ would be an excellent contract.

The problem is with responder's diamond holding. With no control in the unbid diamond suit, responder has to be cautious. In general, to take over the captaincy and use Blackwood we should be reasonably sure the partnership has at least second-round control in every suit.

That's not easy to do, although we'll look at how we might address this issue in the next article. However, we can usually make the assumption that partner holds either first- or second-round control in a suit partner has bid. Not always perfect, but a reasonable approach. It's an unbid suit in which we hold no control that we are most concerned about.

| OPENER | RESPONDER |
|------------------|-------------|
| ♠ A K 10 8 7 5 2 | ♠ Q J 3 |
| ♥ K 4 | ♥ Q J 8 7 6 |
| ♦ K Q J 4 | ♦ 9 7 |
| ♣ — | ♣ A K J |

| OPENER | RESPONDER |
|--------|-----------|
| 1♠ | 2♥ ♠ |
| 2♠ | 3♠ |
| ? | |

Opener has enough that slam is likely once a trump suit is determined, but using Blackwood is not the best approach. Responder's reply to Blackwood would show one ace, and opener would still not know what to do. If responder has the ♦A or ♥A, the partnership belongs in 6♠. If responder has the ♣A, as on the actual deal, the defenders can take the first two tricks with the ♦A and ♥A.

The problem is that opener holds a void in clubs. Opener doesn't need to know about the ♣A. Opener wants to know about *specific* aces, the ♦A and ♥A. We'll address a way to handle this next time, but another approach might be for opener to simply jump to slam and hope for the best. Given no information to help, the defenders may not take the ♥A quickly enough, and declarer may be able to discard both hearts on the ♣A-K. The point is that **jumping to slam holding a void is likely to be at least as effective as bidding Blackwood!**

| OPENER | RESPONDER |
|-------------|---------------|
| ♠ Q 7 6 5 2 | ♠ A 4 |
| ♥ A 4 2 | ♥ K J 8 7 6 3 |
| ♦ 9 3 | ♦ A 6 |
| ♣ A Q J | ♣ K 8 5 |

| OPENER | RESPONDER |
|--------|-----------|
| 1♠ | 2♥ ♠ |
| 3♥ | ? |

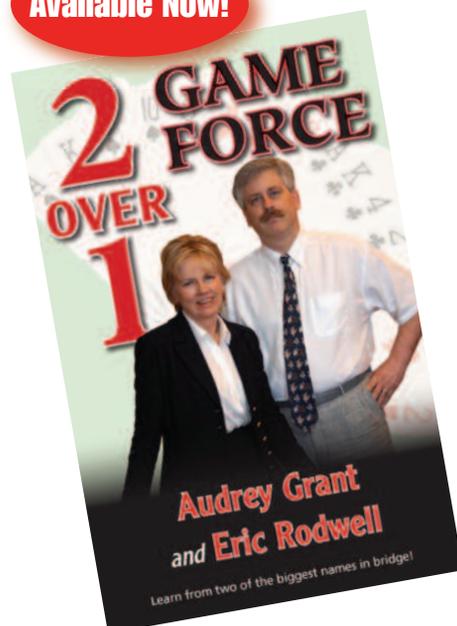
Here responder has 17 points—15 high-card points plus 2 length points for the six-card heart suit. That's too much to settle for game since the partnership has at least 30 combined points—opener has 13 or more. Responder also has first- or second-round control in all the suits. It's tempting to launch into Blackwood.

If responder bids 4NT, opener will show two aces. The partnership holds all the aces, but that doesn't make 6♥ a good slam. Declarer will likely have to lose a spade trick and a diamond trick, and might also lose a trick to the ♥Q.

The problem is that **responder isn't strong enough to assume captaincy and commit the partnership to slam based on the response to Blackwood.** Instead, responder wants to show interest in slam and get opener involved in the decision.

So how does the partnership deal with those situations in which Blackwood should be avoided? That's for the next issue! ♠

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