

A Key Question

0314 or 1430: Which set of responses to Roman Key Card Blackwood is better and why?

By Eddie Kantar

Some players use 0314 responses to Roman Key Card Blackwood, others 1430. Is one really better than the other and if it is, why isn't everyone playing that way? These two approaches — the latter commonly dubbed "fourteen-thirty" — refer to the answers given to a 4NT key-card ask. In the 0314 scheme, 5♣ shows zero or three key cards, while 5♦ shows one or four. Playing 1430, however, the meaning of these two responses is reversed.

The third- and fourth-step responses to Roman Key Card Blackwood — two keys without

the queen of the agreed suit and two with the queen — are identical, so we need only concern ourselves with the first- and second-step responses.

First, a few givens:

1. In most key-card auctions the stronger hand asks the weaker hand.
2. A "0" response usually leads to a sign-off.

3. A "4" response, which is rare, usually leads to the moon (a small or a grand slam).

4. A first-step response is preferable to a second-step response because it allows the asker an extra step for a lower-level queen-ask as well as for other lower-level asks.

One of the beauties of using Roman Key Card Blackwood instead of regular Blackwood is that it allows the 4NT bidder to ask partner whether he holds the queen of the agreed suit, as well as for other goodies. To do this economically the asker needs room. The optimal response to 4NT, therefore, is 5♣ (as opposed to 5♦) allowing a follow-up bid of 5♦ to be the queen-ask.

Clearly then, the best method for responding to Roman Key Card Blackwood caters to increasing the likelihood of a first-step response regardless of what bid is used as the key-card ask. Keep in mind that 4NT is seldom used as a key-card ask after a minor-suit agreement.

Let's start by assuming the most likely scenario, the stronger hand asking the weaker hand. Playing 0314, a 5♣ response shows zero or three. "3" is a highly unlikely response when the stronger hand asks the weaker hand, so the 5♣ response figures to show "0".

After a zero response the asker usually signs off. The end result is that a 5♣ response seldom leads

to any further asks.

Playing 1430 the 5♣ response shows one or four. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that it shows "1". Now if the asker wishes to ask for the queen, 5♦ is available. This lower step is especially important when hearts is the agreed suit. Now the queen-ask can be made beneath the five level of the agreed suit.

Playing 0314, the "1" response is 5♦, preempting the asker out of a lower-level queen-ask if hearts is the agreed suit. Clearly 1430 works best when the strong hand asks the weak hand.

Note: All serious 0314 players use 4♠ ("kickback") to ask for key cards when hearts is the agreed suit. They have to in order to avoid the queen-ask problem. Kickback is the name of the agreement some players have to ask for key cards by using the four-level bid directly above the agreed suit. For example, 1♥-3♥ (limit raise); 4♠ is Roman Key Card Blackwood for hearts playing kickback. Kickback is especially useful when a minor suit has been agreed. After, say, 1♦-2♦ (inverted raise, game-forcing); 4♥ is key-card asking.

Playing 4♠ as kickback gets around the queen-ask problem, but it opens up other cans of worms when spades is a previously bid suit. There are times when a player would like to bid or jump to 4♠ naturally, or perhaps cuebid 4♠, or perhaps make a 4♠ splinter jump. Expert partnerships have rules to avoid these confusions, but it can get tricky.

For example, most use 4NT as a replacement 4♠ cuebid or as a replacement 4♠ splinter. When you use 4NT as a substitute cuebid or a substitute splinter, however, it

The Bridge Bulletin

Why is Roman Key Card Blackwood better than regular Blackwood?

RKC Blackwood provides more information. Common responses to 4NT using regular Blackwood:

- 5♣ = 0 or 3 key cards
- 5♦ = 1 or 4 key cards

Responses to 4NT using RKC Blackwood:

- 5♣ = 0 or 3 key cards
- 5♦ = 1 or 4 key cards

Some players switch the meanings of the 5♣ and 5♦ responses. Some will examine why the better of the above schemes is better.

becomes a little awkward for your partner to ask you for key cards.

So, if we agree that 1430 is better when the strong hand asks the weak, what about the other way around, when the weak hand asks the strong? No one knows the exact percentages, but let's say this occurs a generous 30% of the time.

Playing 0314, the 5♣ response shows zero or three, obviously "3". The "3" response is far and away the most common response when the weak hand asks. After all, the weak hand figures to have at least one key card; asking with zero key cards is rare. So playing 0314 the 5♣ response is just what the doctor ordered.

Playing 1430, the "3" response of 5♦ is not good, since it wastes a

step. The 5♣ response showing "4" leaves the asker better placed in theory, but in practice it's a hollow victory. The frequency is low, and even when it comes up, the room factor is usually not critical.

Conclusion: When the strong hand asks the weak, 1430 is superior, but when the weak hand asks the strong, 0314 is much better. If you can't handle playing both ways at once, it makes more sense to play 1430 on frequency. If, however, you insist on 0314 throughout, at least learn a simple version of kickback.

All this may sound reasonable, but you still have to know which is the strong hand and which is the weak hand. In most sequences it is obvious. Sometimes, however, the strength can be rather equally divided, so it doesn't hurt to have a few rules. You and your favorite partner can set up your own, of course, but you might consider these for starters.

The opener is considered the strong hand *unless* she has limited her hand showing a minimum range opening bid by:

1. Rebidding 1NT.
2. Giving partner a single raise — even though the raise may be considered unlimited and forcing.
3. Rebidding her original suit at the cheapest level.
4. Making a non-jump rebid after partner bids the fourth suit.
5. Passing in a competitive auction when a pass would not be considered forcing.
6. When opener has preempted.
7. When opener has opened 2♦ (or 2♥), Flannery.

Responder is considered the strong hand if:

1. She has made an original jump shift.
2. Opener has done any of the five things listed above.

It is possible for the stronger of the two hands to make a key-card ask, but by the *rules* it is still considered the weaker hand. Confused? Try this example. Say you open 1NT (15 to 17 high-card points) and partner eventually makes a key-card ask. By the rules,

you have more than a minimum opening bid and are considered the strong hand. But what if partner's hand is even stronger? No matter, the weak hand is still asking the strong. Live with it and remember you are playing 0314. This doesn't come up very often and if it does, it's hard to imagine anything bad happening. I mean, how bad can it be when a hand that is stronger than a strong notrump makes a key-card ask regardless of which set of responses one uses? Give me a break. Chances are you going to get a "2" response anyway.

It would be nice to hear differing opinions on this subject.

Kantar can be reached by e-mail at ekbridge@earthlink.net His web address is www.kantarbridge.com □

East Hands for February's

"The Bidding Box"

(West hands are on page 53.)

1. North deals.
No one vulnerable.
♠A97642 ♥K10843 ♦— ♣K8
2. East deals.
North-South vulnerable.
♠A1052 ♥7 ♦AK874 ♣982
3. South deals.
East-West vulnerable. (South opens 1♦ and rebids 3♦ if possible.)
♠75 ♥Q1073 ♦Q105 ♣Q1086
4. West deals.
Both vulnerable.
♠A764 ♥QJ103 ♦AK5 ♣K2
5. North deals and opens 1♣.
North-South vulnerable.
♠65 ♥A95 ♦J82 ♣AJ1087
6. East deals.
East-West vulnerable.
♠10942 ♥K10863 ♦6 ♣J73
7. South deals.
Both vulnerable.
♠2 ♥AKQJ87 ♦A62 ♣AK2
8. West deals.
No one vulnerable.
♠AK96 ♥8 ♦AQ9863 ♣A7

This kind of situation illustrates why RKC Blackwood is superior. Consider the following pair of hands:

West	East
♠A9862	♠Q1075
♥KQJ	♥9
♦A93	♦KQJ4
♣86	♣AKQJ

Using regular Blackwood, the auction might proceed

1♠	2NT (1)
4♠ (2)	4NT
5♥ (3)	?

- (1) Game-forcing raise (Jacoby)
- (2) Minimum hand, no shortness
- (3) Two aces.

Admit it. It's awfully tempting to bid slam with the East hand, but barring a friendly trump position West won't have a chance in 6♠.

Using RKC Blackwood, however, the auction would be:

1♠	2NT (1)
4♠ (2)	4NT
5♥ (3)	5♠

Pass

- (1) Game-forcing raise (Jacoby)
- (2) Minimum hand, no shortness
- (3) Two key cards without the ♠Q

Knowing that the partnership is missing two key cards, East avoids the inferior slam.