

WITH AND WITHOUT ROMAN KEY-CARD

On August 7, 2005, Eddie Kantar gave an instructive and humorous lecture at the Barrington Bridge Club. He concluded with a pair of hands and an auction to show “what you can do” with Roman Key-Card Blackwood “if you can ever get it under control!” (I told you he was humorous, didn’t I?)

Most users of RKCB play the standard version, in which 5♣ shows 0 or 3 keys and 5♦ shows 1 or 4 keys in reply to a Roman Key-Card 4NT. However, many have switched to the “1430” version that Eddie invented in which 5♣ shows 1 or 4 keys and 5♦ shows 0 or 3. “1430” improves slightly upon the standard version, but in March 1997, *The Bridge World* published “Miller Lite” (remember the old beer commercials that suggested “Let’s have both!”?). In *Miller Lite*, a player whose previous bidding has shown a strong hand (at least enough strength for a strong notrump) uses the standard replies to RKCB, but uses “1430” otherwise. *Miller Lite* improves upon “1430” substantially, and Eddie has incorporated a watered-down version (revert to standard replies “when the weak hand asks the strong”) in his books on RKCB since 1998.

I shall present Eddie’s illustrative deal as a problem for responder with Hand (1). Eddie hints at two other hands, (2) and (3), that responder might have, but does not show all 13 of responder’s cards. I shall complete Eddie’s constructions for these two hands. The form of contest, vulnerability and dealer are unspecified, and the opponents shall pass throughout.

	(1) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦1032 ♣6543	
	(2) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦106532 ♣43	
	(3) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦10632 ♣Q54	
PARTNER	YOU	
2♣ (a)	2♦ (b)	(a) strong, artificial and forcing (b) artificial neutral response
2♣	3♣ (c)	(c) positive raise (artificial negative available)
4♣ (d)	4♥ (d)	(d) cue bids

This is how the auction would start using methods that both Eddie and I favor. Now let’s continue using the bids that Eddie suggests.

	(1) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦1032 ♣6543	
	(2) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦106532 ♣43	
	(3) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦10632 ♣Q54	
PARTNER	YOU	
2♣ (a)	2♦ (b)	(a) strong, artificial and forcing (b) artificial neutral response
2♣	3♣ (c)	(c) positive raise (artificial negative available)
4♣ (d)	4♥ (d)	(d) cue bids
4NT (e)	?	(e) RKCB

Did you guess to bid 5♣? Yes, that’s the right reply to show one key in the “1430” and *Miller Lite* versions of RKCB. Only in the standard version of RKCB would 5♦ be correct.

	(1) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦1032 ♣6543	
	(2) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦106532 ♣43	
	(3) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦10632 ♣Q54	
PARTNER	YOU	
2♣ (a)	2♦ (b)	(a) strong, artificial and forcing (b) artificial neutral response
2♣	3♣ (c)	(c) positive raise (artificial negative available)
4♣ (d)	4♥ (d)	(d) cue bids
4NT (e)	5♣ (f)	(e) RKCB (f) “1430” reply showing 1 or 4 keys
5♦ (g)	?	(g) Queen Ask

Did you bid 5♥? In reply to the Queen Ask, any bid other than the cheapest bid in the agreed trump suit shows the queen (or equivalent extra length) in the trump suit, and a bid of any other suit shows the king of that suit as well.

- (1) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦1032 ♣6543
- (2) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦106532 ♣43
- (3) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦10632 ♣Q54

PARTNER	YOU		
2♣ (a)	2♦ (b)	(a) strong, artificial and forcing	(b) artificial neutral response
2♣	3♣ (c)	(c) positive raise (artificial negative available)	
4♣ (d)	4♥ (d)	(d) cue bids	
4NT (e)	5♣ (f)	(e) RKCB	(f) "1430" reply showing 1 or 4 keys
5♦ (g)	5♥ (h)	(g) Queen Ask	(h) ♠Q and ♥K
6♣	?		

What is partner's 6♣? Does it suggest playing in clubs? If partner has (4) ♠AKJ109 ♥54 ♦AJ ♣AKQ2 facing Hand (1), 7♣ is an excellent contract, better than 6♠ or 7♠. So this is a useful meaning for the bid. If that's what 6♣ means, then with Hand (1) you should bid 7♣, with Hand (2) you should bid 6♠, and with Hand (3) you should bid 7♠ as partner can't have Hand (4) but the ♣Q is an undisclosed asset justifying a grand slam

Does it ask for second-round club control? In a similar auction during a recent world team championship, a player bid six of a new suit intending it as asking for second-round control, only to have his partner interpret it as asking for third-round control. Result? Down one in 7♠ when a finesse for the missing king lost.

Does it ask for third-round control? Yes, according to Eddie's books. Have you and your partner mastered them? So, as Eddie says, with Hand (1) you should bid 6♠, but with Hand (2) you should bid 7♠ to show a doubleton club and with Hand (3) you should bid 6NT to show the ♣Q.

If you and your partner are on the same wavelength throughout, you will reach the right contract.

Now let's try again using the methods that I favor ... *without* any key-card asks.

- (1) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦1032 ♣6543
- (2) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦106532 ♣43
- (3) ♠Q72 ♥AKJ ♦10632 ♣Q54

PARTNER	YOU		
2♣ (a)	2♦ (b)	(a) strong, artificial and forcing	(b) artificial neutral response
2♣	3♣ (c)	(c) positive raise (artificial negative available)	
4♣ (d)	4♥ (d)	(d) cue bids	
5♣ (i)	5♥ (j)	(i) cue bid showing the ♣K	(j) cue bid showing the ♥K
5NT (k)	?	(k) "Grand Slam Force" (<i>Grand Slam Invitation</i> , as I call it)	

The "Grand Slam Force" (its traditional name, though some call it "Josephine" after Josephine Culbertson, under whose byline the convention was introduced) is a misnomer. It actually only *invites* a grand slam.

What do you need to accept the invitation?

Undisclosed strong trumps will always suffice, as they will eliminate the loser than partner feared he had. For this reason, most bridge players think, mistakenly, that 5NT asks for "two of the top three" trump honors, viewing it narrowly as a *trump-asking* bid. Many theorists have worked out elaborate schemes for showing weaker trump holdings, schemes that are possible whenever the trump suit is other than clubs, and that vary according to which suit is trumps.

When spades is the agreed suit, for example, it is possible to play *graded replies* (6♣ shows no high honor, 6♦ shows the ♠Q, 6♥ shows the ♠K, 6♠ shows the ♠A), *inverted replies* (6♣ shows no high honor, 6♥ shows the ♠Q, 6♦ shows the ♠K, 6♠ shows the ♠A), or the *hybrid replies* invented by one of my friends (6♣ shows no high honor, 6♠ shows the ♠Q, 6♦ shows the ♠K, 6♥ shows the ♠A).

When hearts is the agreed suit, fewer grades can be shown. In my friend's *hybrid reply* scheme, for example, 6♥ shows no high honor, 6♣ shows the ♥Q, 6♦ shows the ♥K or ♥A ... oops, that's what I thought when we used it for the first time, but I had it wrong, as in his scheme (he's the authority!), 6♣ shows the ♥Q or ♥K and 6♦ shows the ♥A.

Too complicated for you? Maybe not, but all versions of graded replies are too complicated for me ... and *needlessly so*. For once partner is willing to commit to a small slam while inviting a grand, there cannot be more than a *one-high-honor difference* between your weakest trump holding and your strongest, else partner dare not bid beyond five of the trump suit. Therefore, to accept his grand-slam invitation, you need only *extra-good trumps in context*, and there is always a context (your previous bidding).

Hands (1), (2) and (3) contain *ordinary* spade support. None of them justify accepting partner's grand-slam invitation. Does that mean you should retreat to 6♠ with all of them?

No, for you have *room below* six of the trump suit in which to show other *undisclosed* values. Partner's two cue bids showed first- and second-round club control. So now you can show *third-round* control by cue-bidding 6♣ with either Hand (2) or Hand (3). See how far *bridge logic* can take you without fancy RKCB (or "graded replies to the Grand Slam Force") agreements?