

# Kickback: A Better Control-Asking System

by

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## References

1. **The Useful-Space Principle, III.** Jeff Rubens. *The Bridge World* Vol. 52 No. 4, January 1981.
2. **The Useful-Space Principle, IV.** Jeff Rubens. *The Bridge World* Vol. 52 No. 5, February 1981.
3. **Building a Better Mousetrap: King Ask.** Kit Wolsey. *Bridge Today*. May/June 1991

## Introduction

Kickback is a slam investigation convention. It is similar in intent to Blackwood or Roman Keycard Blackwood in that it enables a partnership to determine the number and nature of controls held by the partnership. But, it is more.

The Kickback convention was introduced by Jeff Rubens in the January and February 1981 issues of the Bridge World journal, as part of a sequence of six Bridge World articles in which Rubens espouses the Useful-Space Principle (USP): *Available bidding space should be assigned by a system to those devices that can best use it.* Kickback is just one of several applications of the USP.

To appreciate the usefulness of Kickback, one need only consider a problem experienced by all bridge players whether using simple Blackwood, or some version of Keycard Blackwood: *when the agreed trump suit is other than Spades, a conventional response to a 4N control ask may be beyond the safety level of 5 of the trump suit.* Recognition of this problem has led to stipulations of pre-conditions under which a 4N control ask may be initiated; typically, that the number of keycards held by the asker should be sufficient to guarantee that the response will not exceed 5 of the trump suit when it is unsafe to do so.

The Kickback method addresses this problem by providing a control-ask and response system that incorporates USP. Happily, the response *structure* will be familiar to Roman Keycard users and will require only minor adjustments for most partnerships. The consistency of the structure should make it easy to employ for players of all levels. The gains in space create safety, and allow for useful embellishments by more advanced partnerships.

## Overview

First, we summarize the broad characteristics of the Kickback convention. The details of a specific implementation are considered in following sections.

- The asking strain is always the next higher strain after the trump suit.
- The Keycard-ask is 4 of the asking strain.
- The King-ask is 5 of the asking strain.

<b>Trump Suit</b>	<b>♠</b>	<b>♥</b>	<b>♦</b>	<b>♣</b>
Keycard Ask	4N	4♠	4♥	4♦
King Ask	5N	5♠	5♥	5♦

- The basic responses to the Keycard-ask are in steps, following the Roman Keycard response structure. Responses to show voids are considered later.

<b>1<sup>st</sup> Step</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Step</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Step</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> Step</b>
0 or 3	1 or 4	2 or 5 without Trump Queen	2 or 5 with the Trump Queen

- Responses to the King-ask show specific Kings.
- The Queen-ask is the next available bid following a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> step response to the Keycard-ask; variable response structures are possible.

### The Keycard-Ask and Response Structure

As specified above, the Keycard-ask is always 4 of the next higher strain after the agreed trump suit; responses are in steps following the traditional Roman Keycard response structure, 0 or 3, 1 or 4, 2 or 5 without, 2 or 5 with:

<b>Trump Suit</b>	♠	♥	♦	♣
<b>Keycard Ask</b>	<b>4N</b>	<b>4♠</b>	<b>4♥</b>	<b>4♦</b>
<u>Responses</u>				
1 <sup>st</sup> Step: 0 or 3	5♣	4N	4♠	4♥
2 <sup>nd</sup> Step: 1 or 4	5♦	5♣	4N	4♠
3 <sup>rd</sup> Step: 2 or 5, no Queen	5♥	5♦	5♣	4N
4 <sup>th</sup> Step: 2 or 5, with Queen	5♠	5♥	5♦	5♣

This Keycard-ask and response structure represents a great improvement over traditional structures. Instead of a fixed suit-independent 4N ask, the Keycard-ask is 4 of the next higher suit after the trump suit. When the trump suit is ♠, 4N asks, and the responses are the familiar Keycard responses. When the trump suit is other than ♠, the adjusted Keycard-ask permits a full range of responses ending at 5 of the trump suit. This observation justifies the claim of increased safety since the contract level is never elevated purely because of system requirements. It is important to note that the *structure* is unchanged even though the actual named response is adjusted in parallel with the Keycard-ask. There is no additional memorization overhead since the response structure, expressed in steps, is identical for all agreed trump suits.

The structure is easily and consistently extended to show a useful void:

<b>Trump Suit</b>	♠	♥	♦	♣
<b>Keycard Ask</b>	<b>4N</b>	<b>4♠</b>	<b>4♥</b>	<b>4♦</b>
<b><u>Standard Responses</u></b>				
1 <sup>st</sup> Step: 0 or 3	5♣	4N	4♠	4♥
2 <sup>nd</sup> Step: 1 or 4	5♦	5♣	4N	4♠
3 <sup>rd</sup> Step: 2 or 5, no Queen	5♥	5♦	5♣	4N
4 <sup>th</sup> Step: 2 or 5, with Queen	5♠	5♥	5♦	5♣
<b><u>Void-Showing Responses</u></b>				
5 <sup>th</sup> Step: even #, any void	5N	5♠	5♥	5♦
6 <sup>th</sup> Step: odd #, cue-bid void	6♣	5N	5♠	5♥
7 <sup>th</sup> Step: odd #, cue-bid void	6♦	6♣	5N	5♠
8 <sup>th</sup> Step: odd #, cue-bid void	6♥	6♦	6♣	5N

- When the trump suit is ♠, the void-showing responses are identical with the most commonly used method of expressing voids.
- A response of 5 of the asking strain always shows an even number of keycards, plus a void in some undisclosed side suit.
- A response higher than 5 of the asking strain always shows an odd number of Keycards plus a void in the bid suit.
- 5N is a *surrogate* cue-bid for a void in the asking suit.

## The King-Ask and Response Structure

Traditionally the King-ask promises partnership possession of all the Keycards and either the trump Queen or sufficient combined trump suit length to make the trump Queen irrelevant. Following Kit Wolsey (see Bridge Today, May/June 1991), we relax this requirement to permit the King-ask in an attempt to reach a better-paying match-point contract of 6N. Thus, our response to show **all of the side Kings** is **6 of the asking strain (rather than 7 of the trump suit)**. Asker can always convert to a grand slam in the agreed suit or in no-trump.

The Kickback King-ask is 5 of the next higher strain after the trump suit, 5N only when the trump suit is ♠. The responses show *specific Kings*:

- A response of 6 of the trump suit denies any outside (non-trump) King.
- When holding at least one outside King, responder shows the cheapest King, that is, the King that can be shown by the lowest available cue-bid.
- A non-cheapest cue-bid denies possession of any cheaper King.
- 5N is a *surrogate* cue-bid for the King of the asking suit.

Secondary ask: When there is space between the response to the King-ask and 6 of the trump suit, the asker may cue-bid 6 of an intervening strain to ask responder if he holds the indicated King in addition to the King already shown:

- A response of 6 of the trump suit denies possession of the asked King.
- A response of 6 of the asking strain shows possession of the asked King.
- Responder may deny possession of the asked King, but show possession of the 3<sup>rd</sup> remaining King by cue-bidding the remaining King.

<b>Trump Suit: ♠</b>	<b>King-ask: 5N</b>	<b>Order of Responses: 6♣, 6♦, 6♥:</b>	
<u>Response</u>	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>	<u>K♥</u>
6♣	Yes	-	-
6♦	No	Yes	-
6♥	No	No	Yes
6♠	No	No	No
6N	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5N - 6♣; 6♦	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>	<u>K♥</u>
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>?</b>	
6♥	Yes	No	Yes
6♠	Yes	No	No
6N	Yes	Yes	-
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5N - 6♣; 6♥	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>	<u>K♥</u>
	<b>Yes</b>		<b>?</b>
6♠	Yes	-	No
6N	Yes	-	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5N - 6♦; 6♥	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>	<u>K♥</u>
	<b>No</b>		<b>?</b>
6♠	No	Yes	No
6N	No	Yes	Yes

When the trump suit is other than ♠, the King-ask will be below 5N. In each such case, a **5N** response is a **surrogate** bid to show the King of the asking suit.

**Trump Suit: ♥ King-ask: 5♠ Order of Responses: 5N(= K♠), 6♣, 6♦:**

<u>Response</u>	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>
5N	Yes	-	-
6♣	No	Yes	-
6♦	No	No	Yes
6♥	No	No	No
6♠	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5♠ - 5N; 6♣	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>?</b>	
6♦	Yes	No	Yes
6♥	Yes	No	No
6♠	Yes	Yes	-
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5♠ - 5N; 6♦	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>
	<b>Yes</b>		<b>?</b>
6♥	Yes	-	No
6♠	Yes	-	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5♠ - 6♣; 6♦	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♣</u>	<u>K♦</u>
	<b>No</b>		<b>?</b>
6♥	No	Yes	No
6♠	No	Yes	Yes

**Trump Suit: ♦ King-ask: 5♥ Order of Responses: 5♠, 5N(= K♥), 6♣:**

<u>Response</u>	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♣</u>
5♠	Yes	-	-
5N	No	Yes	-
6♣	No	No	Yes
6♦	No	No	No
6♥	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5♥ - 5♠; 5N	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♣</u>
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>?</b>	
6♣	Yes	No	Yes
6♦	Yes	No	No
6♥	Yes	Yes	-
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5♥ - 5♠; 6♣	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♣</u>
	<b>Yes</b>		<b>?</b>
6♦	Yes	-	No
6♥	Yes	-	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u> 5♥ - 5♠; 6♦	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♣</u>
	<b>No</b>		<b>?</b>
6♦	No	Yes	No
6♥	No	Yes	Yes

**Trump Suit: ♣ King-ask: 5♦ Order of Responses: 5♥, 5♠, 5N(= K♦):**

<u>Response</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♦</u>
5♥	Yes	-	-
5♠	No	Yes	-
5N	No	No	Yes
6♣	No	No	No
6♦	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♦</u>
5♦ - 5♥; 5♠	<b>Yes</b>	<b>?</b>	
5N	Yes	No	Yes
6♣	Yes	No	No
6♦	Yes	Yes	-
<u>Secondary Ask</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♦</u>
5♦ - 5♥; 5N	<b>Yes</b>		<b>?</b>
6♣	Yes	-	No
6♦	Yes	-	Yes
<u>Secondary Ask</u>	<u>K♥</u>	<u>K♠</u>	<u>K♦</u>
5♦ - 5♠; 5N		<b>Yes</b>	<b>?</b>
6♣	No	Yes	No
6♦	No	Yes	Yes

When receiving a negative or unsuitable response to either the primary or secondary King-ask, the asker is able to sign off at the 6-level since all negative response sequences end at or below 6 of the trump suit.

When the response to the primary King-ask is favorable, or when receiving a positive response to a secondary ask, the response sequences end at 6 of the asking suit. There are now three available final contracts.

- If the target contract is 6N, asker may pass or correct the positive response.
- If the target is the grand slam in the agreed trump suit, asker may correct to that contract.
- Occasionally, 7N will still be possible. There is a full bidding level available below 7 of the trump suit that may be used to enable a choice of grand slams. A partnership must assign meanings to the available *asking* bids (note that an asking bid of 6N becomes a *surrogate* for the asking suit):

<u>Trump Suit</u>	<u>King-Ask Positive</u>	<u>Asking Bids</u>			<u>Sign-Off</u>
♠	6N	7♣	7♦	7♥	7♠
♥	6♠	6N(= ♠)	7♣	7♦	7♥
♦	6♥	6♠	6N(= ♥)	7♣	7♦
♣	6♦	6♥	6♠	6N(= ♦)	7♣

### The Queen-Ask and Response Structure

Following a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> step response to the Keycard-ask, the next available bid becomes the Queen-ask. The recommended response structure is:

- Bid 5 of the trump suit to deny possession of the trump Queen
- Bid 6 of the trump suit to show possession of the trump Queen, but to deny possession of any outside King.
- Make a specific King response to show possession of the trump Queen and possession of 1 or more outside King.

#### Trump Suit: ♠ Queen-ask: 5♦ or 5♥

Response	Q♠	K♥	K♦	K♣
5♠	No	-	-	-
6♣	Yes	-	-	Yes
6♦	Yes	-	Yes	No
6♥	Yes	Yes	No	No
6♠	Yes	No	No	No
6N	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

#### Trump Suit: ♥ Queen-ask: 5♣ or 5♦

Response	Q♥	K♦	K♣	K♠
5♥	No	-	-	-
5N	Yes	-	-	Yes
6♣	Yes	-	Yes	No
6♦	Yes	Yes	No	No
6♥	Yes	No	No	No
6♠	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

#### Trump Suit: ♦ Queen-ask: 4N or 5♣

Response	Q♦	K♣	K♥	K♠
5♦	No	-	-	-
5♠	Yes	-	-	Yes
5N	Yes	-	Yes	No
6♣	Yes	Yes	No	No
6♦	Yes	No	No	No
6♥	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

#### Trump Suit: ♣ Queen-ask: 4♠ or 4N

Response	Q♣	K♦	K♠	K♥
5♣	No	-	-	-
5♥	Yes	-	-	Yes
5♠	Yes	-	Yes	No
5N	Yes	Yes	No	No
6♣	Yes	No	No	No
6♦	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Following a specific King response to the Queen-ask, the asker may continue with a secondary King-ask as described in the preceding section. Obviously, the grand slam asking bids are available also.

It should be noted that in each set of responses to the Queen-ask described above, no meaning is assigned to a response of 5 of the asking strain: 5N when ♠ is the trump suit, 5♠ when ♥ is trump, 5♥ when ♦ is trump, 5♦ when ♣ is trump. An enterprising partnership might find a useful assignment for this bid.

Also, following a 1<sup>st</sup> step response to the King-ask, the 3<sup>rd</sup> step bid is unused in the current structure.

♠ Trump		♥ Trump		♦ Trump		♣ Trump	
4N	5♣	4♠	4N	4♥	4♠	4♦	4♥
5♦	Queen-ask	5♣	Queen-ask	4N	Queen-ask	4♠	Queen-ask
5♥		5♦		5♣		4N	
5♠	Sign off	5♥	Sign off	5♦	Sign off	5♣	Sign off
5N	King ask	5♠	King ask	5♥	King ask	5♦	King ask

A partnership may assign a useful meaning to this bid.

### The Surrogate Principle

It is typical of systems/conventions that adhere to the Useful Space Principle that some bids cannot be assigned their usual meanings. For example, let's assume that ♦ has been agreed as the trump suit. As described above, the Kickback asking bids are 4♥ (for keycards) and 5♥ (for Kings). Because the ♥ suit is employed as the asking suit, it is impossible to give a ♥-response to either ask without bypassing the safety level of 5♦ (Keycard ask) or 6♦ (King ask). In all such situations, *no-trump is employed as a surrogate or substitute for the asking suit*. Thus, in responding to a 5♥ King-ask, a 5N response shows the K♥ (King of the asking suit).