

## Lesson 9 – Blackwood (4NT)

### How to Bid to Slam:

A Small Slam requires taking 12 tricks, losing just one. A Grand Slam requires taking all 13 tricks. When you bid a Slam contract and make it, you get bonus points. That's why you want to bid to slam if you think it is a possibility. The Blackwood Convention helps you to bid to the right level based on how many Aces and Kings the partnership holds.

Compare these scores and you will see the advantage of bidding and making slam, as compared to bidding only to game level — and then making slam (12 tricks):

4♥ bid — 6♥ made = 480 pts (non-vulnerable) or 680 pts (vulnerable)

6♥ bid — 6♥ made = 980 pts (non-vulnerable) or 1430 pts (vulnerable)

The scores are the same if you bid 4♥ and make 5♥ (11 tricks), compared to bidding 5♥ and making 5♥. You benefit only when you bid to the 6 and 7 level and make 12-13 tricks.

This is the simplest method of bidding to slam for beginners. More advanced players may use Blackwood in combination with other methods and strategies to assess the possibility of bidding a slam contract.

How do you determine whether you and your partner have the possibility to make a Small Slam or a Grand Slam? This depends on points and on distribution. One guideline is to consider about 32 HCP, over 30 points for sure.

Here are some good indications that slam is possible:

- 1) Your partner opens 2♣ indicating 22+ points and you have 10+ points.
- 2) Your partner opens the bidding (12 points minimum) and you have 20+ points.
- 3) Your partner opens 2NT and you have opening points (12+).
- 4) Your partner opens 1NT and you have 15+ points.

Before you start investigating for slam, establish your suit first.

Bid as usual to start, but keep in mind which bids your partner can pass. If slam is a possibility, you do not want your partner to pass until you reach game or slam. As soon as either one of you (you or your partner) bids the **suit** of the final contract and you think you have enough points for a slam, the key bid is **4 No Trump**. (Some partnerships agree to reserve **4NT** as a code that always means Blackwood. This is a good idea. For the purposes of this lesson, **4NT** always means Blackwood.)

In order to determine how many tricks you can take, you need to find out how many Aces and Kings the partnership holds. If you are missing only one Ace and have all the Kings, you can usually make 12 tricks. If you are missing one King but have all the Aces, you can usually make 12 tricks. If you are missing two of either

an Ace or a King, or one of each, it may not be possible to make a slam. These are just guidelines. Once you have more experience, you may be able to determine slam possibilities based on other factors. If you have a void, for instance, you can be missing an Ace and a King and still make slam with a good, strong trump suit.

A bid of **4NT** initiates Blackwood and is asking the partner for Aces. Once the process is started, precise answers are essential.

Partner responds according to how many Aces are in his/her hand:

**5♣** = 0 Aces or all 4 Aces

**5♦** = 1 Ace

**5♥** = 2 Aces

**5♠** = 3 Aces

Hint: The bidding goes up the line. One bid higher than 4NT is **5♣**, so that means 0 Aces (or 4 Aces which is not very common, you will easily know which it is); one more higher (**5♦**) means 1 Ace and so on. One method that some find easy to remember is this – a heart has two humps; therefore, a bid of **5♥** means 2 Aces and then move up or down the scale from there. Because the wrong bid can make a big difference and all these bids are codes, both partners need to be accurate.

Once Partner answers, the initiator of Blackwood will continue as follows:

If it is determined that an Ace is missing, usually the initiator will get out of Blackwood and bid the suit at the next lowest level possible. If the initiator has all 4 Kings, s/he should jump to 6 of the suit.

If it is determined that the partnership possesses all 4 Aces, then the initiator will continue by asking for Kings. That is, by bidding **5NT**.

Partner will answer as follows according to how many Kings s/he has:

**6♣** = 0 or all 4 Kings

**6♦** = 1 King

**6♥** = 2 Kings

**6♠** = 3 Kings

From this answer, the initiator will bid the suit again at the appropriate level. This will indicate the final bid.

Usually, with all Aces and all Kings, the contract will be at the 7 level.

Usually, with the partnership missing one Ace or one King, the contract will end at the 6 level.

Usually, with the partnership missing two Aces or two Kings or one of each, the contract should go no higher than the 5 Level.

Distribution (e.g., long trump suits, voids and singletons) is also an important factor. For example, one King could be missing, but if one partner has a singleton Ace in that suit, a trick may not be lost.

Here are a few sample bidding auctions to show how Blackwood is used:

Player	Bid	Explanation
North	2NT	North is showing 20-21 HCPs, balanced hand
South	3♥	South has 15 HCPs and holds a 5-card major in spades, so will use Jacoby transfer to force North to bid spades
North	3♠	(The last suit bid before Blackwood will be the final suit)
South	4NT	Blackwood – asking for Aces (South has 3 Aces)
North	5♦	North has 1 Ace (so all 4 Aces are in the partnership)
South	5 NT	Blackwood – asking for Kings (South has 1 King)
North	6♥	North has 2 Kings (so one King is missing)
South	6♠	This is a cut-off bid in suit agreed to before Blackwood

Player	Bid	Explanation
East	1♥	East has 12+ pts. (The last suit bid before Blackwood will be the final suit.)
West	4NT	West has 3-card support for hearts and 21 points. Blackwood – asking for Aces (West has 1 Ace)
East	5♥	East has 2 Aces (so one Ace is missing)
West	6♥	West has all 4 Kings so immediately jumps to 6♥ without bidding 5NT. (Obviously, there is no point in asking for Kings!) This is a cut-off bid in suit agreed to before Blackwood.

Similar, but slightly different:

Player	Bid	Explanation
East	1♠	East has 12+ pts. (The last suit bid before Blackwood will be the final suit.)
West	4NT	West has support for spades and 21 points. Blackwood – asking for Aces (West has 1 Ace)
East	5♥	East has 2 Aces (so one Ace is missing).
West	5♠ or 6♠	As soon as West asks for Kings, the contract will be at 6♠, even with a King missing. So West must decide whether it is worth the risk. The highest contract they can now reach is 6♠ unless one of them has a void. West can stop and bid 5♠. With that, East could raise the bid to 6♠ with good judgment. West could also just jump to 6♠ and take a chance. With so many points, most players would attempt it.

A different convention called Gerber can be used to investigate the possibility of slam in No Trump contracts. Gerber uses the same type of bidding but different codes and can be confusing for beginners if trying to learn both Blackwood and Gerber at the same time. It is best to master Blackwood and then add Gerber after some practice with Blackwood. You should be very careful that you do not initiate Blackwood in No Trump unless you are confident that you have the total points needed. Sometimes you can bid a No Trump final contract on points alone. Here is one way of bidding to slam in No Trump using Blackwood.

Some players agree that they will use only Blackwood and not Gerber at all.

Player	Bid	Explanation
North	2♣	22+ pts, very strong hand
South	2♦	"Waiting," 10 HCP
North	3NT	Indicating 25-27 HCP and a balanced hand
South	4NT	Remember, it is agreed for now that 4NT always means Blackwood. (Other players may use 4NT to mean something different depending on the bidding.) South has 1 Ace and 2 Kings, 10 HCP.
North	5♠	North has 3 Aces. (No Aces are missing.)
South	5NT	With all 4 Aces, then ask for Kings. (South has 2 Kings.)
North	6♦	North has 1 King. A grand slam may not be attainable.
South	6NT	Cut-off bid and final contract.

Sometimes you can bid to slam when you are missing an Ace. For example, if you hold 3 Aces and are void in the 4<sup>th</sup> suit, you can trump the opponent's Ace. That depends on length of trump suit, total points, etc. It is better to use good judgment rather than blindly following strict rules, but good judgment often takes experience and practice.

Also, if the partnership holds all the Aces and all the Kings, and you are in a suit contract, it may be to your benefit to bid 7NT even though you and your partner have already agreed on a suit. For example, 7♥ or 7♠ nets 1510 pts, whereas 7NT nets 1520 pts. For duplicate players, those 10 pts can mean the difference between an average board and a top board. For a beginner, you should be proud any time you bid and make slam. It is an achievement and does not happen very often.

Keep in mind that contracts can fail because of various factors. If you bid to slam and do not make it, that does not always mean the bidding was incorrect.

Another little piece of advice: It is better to bid to the 6 level and make the contract than to bid to the 7 level and go down. If not sure, stay at the 6 level and be happy to make an overtrick.