ROBERT MUNGER

KICKBACK

SLAM BIDDING AT BRIDGE

SECOND EDITION

This book is dedicated to Cathi,
my partner in all the important events.

Thanks to Mark C. Friedlander for
his assistance in reviewing the manuscript
and for his many valuable suggestions.

Thanks also to Bill Dalton,
whose probing questions, suggestions,
and constructive criticism
challenged me into completing this second edition.

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Foreword

Kickback has been with us since 1981, but there has been little written about it. I have found brief descriptions of it here and there, and some discussion groups on the Internet, but no complete exposition of all the ramifications. This booklet is my attempt to fill that gap.

Much of the convention is based on "normal" Roman Key Card Blackwood agreements. In other places I have created conventional bids where none exist in the literature, or to simplify what does exist.

Foreword to the Second Edition

Experience and feedback from readers have prompted this revised edition. Highlights include:

- Chapter 4, The Queen Ask, has been expanded and reorganized, including enhanced discussion of "0314" and "1430" responses.

- This edition includes a description of the Grand Slam Non-Force, as Jeff Rubens calls it.

- More examples, especially ones where the trump suit is not spades.

- More discussion and examples of "substitution."

- Summaries at the end of several chapters.

There only a few changes to the Kickback convention itself.

- When clubs are trumps, after 4♦-4♥, 4♠ (Queen Ask), Teller can bid either 4NT or 5♣ to deny holding the trump queen.

- After 4K-5K, showing two key cards and an unspecified void, the next step up (5K+1) asks for the void, and 5K+2 is the Queen Ask.

- Simplified method of showing kings when either player has a void.

1. Starting Out

The Kickback convention is the brainchild of Jeff Rubens. He introduced it in a series of articles called "The Useful Space Principle" (*The Bridge World*, 1980 - 1981). These articles are now available in a booklet called *The Useful Space Principle and Transfer Advances of Overcalls.*

Rubens described the basic tenets of the convention, but left much of the work to the reader. Now, nearly 40 years later, Kickback has become popular in the expert community, but still isn't widely played among the rank and file of tournament players.

The purpose of the current book is to bring Kickback to my fellow rank-and-filers, to present a straightforward method of playing the convention effectively, with as few frills as possible. My hope is that two strangers, who have both read this book, can sit down and agree on "Kickback," and play it without problems. Okay, so I'm a dreamer.

Some partnerships will adopt Kickback exactly as set forth here. Others will put in their own variations and exceptions. For them, this book will provide a solid starting point.

Kickback can be added to any bidding system. It goes especially well with Two-over-One Game Force, because that system keeps the bidding low to search for a suit fit.

Terminology

To present Kickback properly, I'll have to introduce you to a few new terms and abbreviations.

    Asker   the player who asks for key cards

K	the Kickback strain (suit or notrump)
Substitution	using a bid in notrump, either 4NT or 5NT, as a substitute for the Kickback suit
T	the trump suit
T-1	the strain ranking just below T (also other shortcuts such as K+1, K+2, etc.)
Teller	Asker's partner
Zoom	a procedure used to save space in relay/asking auctions. When holding the highest possible response, Teller answers the next question *before it is asked.*

Roman Key Card Blackwood (RKC)

To play Kickback you need a basic understanding of RKC. In Roman Key Card Blackwood, there are five key cards, the four aces and the king of trumps. The queen of trumps also enters into the responses. The idea behind RKC is simple – No matter how many *winners* you have, you won't make slam if you have two trump losers.

Over an RKC 4NT, Teller bids:

- 5♣ 0 or 3 key cards
- 5♦ 1 or 4 key cards
- 5♥ 2 or 5 key cards, no queen of trumps
- 5♠ 2 or 5 key cards, queen of trumps or extra length (our first glimpse of Zoom – Teller answers the Queen Ask before Asker asks it.)
- more void-showing

Note that these are the old-fashioned responses, not the "1430" kind many players use to save space. Kickback saves

plenty of space; in most auctions, we don't need 1430 as well. More on this in Chapter 4, The Queen Ask.

Here's a routine example of Kickback in action:

♠ AJ872	♠ Q643	1♠	3♠
♥ KQ5	♥ 103	4NT	5♦
♦ AQ6	♦ K87	5♠	pass
♣ K3	♣ AJ65		

> Missing two key cards, we avoid the anti-percentage slam. Notice that spades are trumps in this example. This is to illustrate that *when spades are trumps, Kickback works exactly like RKC.*

The Theoretical Reason for Kickback

Kickback is a variation on Roman Key Card Blackwood. It saves bidding space compared to RKC, by using a lower bid as the key-card ask. Instead of always using 4NT to ask for key cards, the Kickback bid is 4T+1, *one step above* four in the trump suit:

> When clubs are trumps, 4♦ is the key-card ask.
> When diamonds are trumps, 4♥ is the ask.
> When hearts are trumps, 4♠ is the ask.
> When spades are trumps, 4NT is the ask.

The responses are the same as in RKC, but they are expressed in steps, rather than being "hard-wired" to particular strains.

one step	0 or 3 key cards
two steps	1 or 4 key cards
three steps	2 or 5 key cards, no queen of trumps

| four steps | 2 or 5 key cards, with either the queen of trumps or extra length (enough to know there's a 10-card fit) |
| more | void-showing (see Chapter 9) |

Since we start lower than in RKC, we leave more room for further slam exploration. There are many asking bids available following the first response to Kickback. We have enough room to make these bids, regardless of the trump suit.

Also, Kickback leaves enough room to stop in 5T any time two key cards are missing.

♠ 7	♠ KQJ102	1♣	1♥
♥ KQ95	♥ A107642	3♠	4♠
♦ KQ6	♦ 5	5♥	pass
♣ AQ653	♣ 9		

3♠	splinter raise of hearts
4♠	Kickback
5♥	"two with"

If Responder has to bid 4NT to ask, he'll get to slam off two aces.

That's the theoretical reason for Kickback, to save space.

The Practical Reason for Kickback

In fact, we always have the same amount of room available, no matter which suit is trumps. This makes Kickback easier to play than RKC – the practical reason for Kickback.

By starting one step above four in the trump suit, we avoid the numerous exceptions necessary to make RKC workable

in every situation.   There are very few exceptions; the convention (almost) always works the same way.

♠ KQ3	♠ A106	1♣	3♥
♥ 943	♥ 6	4♦	4♥
♦ KQ8	♦ A652	4♠	6♣
♣ A874	♣ KQ952	pass	

> East makes a splinter raise, enabling West to appreciate the true value of his 14 points – the Losing Trick Count has dropped from seven to five! 4♦ is Kickback; 4♥ shows (zero or) three key cards. 4♠ asks about the trump queen, and East shows it. This convention really is pretty easy.

The definitive book on RKC is *Roman Keycard Blackwood*, by Edwin B. Kantar. It is a wonderful book, and I highly recommend that you read it. (After you read this one, of course.) To date there are five editions of *Roman Keycard Blackwood*, each one with its own New! Improved! set of rules for using RKC.

In the 2008 edition, subtitled *The Final Word*, the first 76 pages completely describe the convention over major suit openings – when to use 1430, the Queen Ask, various follow-up asks, Six-Ace Blackwood, handling voids and more. The next 108 pages describe the exceptions required when a minor suit is trumps.

This is just too hard for most players. We don't have time to devote endless hours discussing these situations.   The relatively small number of rules needed for Kickback will suffice almost all the time. Speaking for myself, I'll come out ahead having a few simple rules to remember, instead of many difficult rules to forget.

Kantar's books provide three important services to Kickback players: They are great sources of example hands and quizzes, they help us appreciate how much easier Kickback is to play, and they can give you ideas for fancier, more sophisticated variations than you'll find here in *Kickback*.

Quiz

1. ♠ 5   1♥   2NT
    ♥ KQ642   ?
    ♦ AKQ97
    ♣ K9

    2NT is Jacoby, a forcing raise in hearts. What do you bid now?

2. ♠ 5   1♥   2NT
    ♥ KQ642   ?
    ♦ A9743
    ♣ KQ

3. ♠ K865   1♦   2♦
    ♥ AJ   3NT   4♥
    ♦ QJ53   ?
    ♣ AK7

    a. 2♦ is an inverted raise, invitational or better and forcing one round. 3NT shows a balanced 18 - 19 HCP. What does 4♥ mean, and what do you bid?

    b. What if partner bids 4♦ instead of 4♥? Now what do you bid?

Answers

1. Bid 4♠, Kickback for hearts. You're not likely to hold a better hand than this for Blackwood.

2. Bid 3♠, showing a singleton or void in spades. This will help partner to value his club and diamond honors properly, while leaving room for showing controls below 4♥. A bid of 4♦ would show a 5-card suit, but a better one than this.

3. a. 4♥ is Kickback for diamonds. You have two key cards plus the queen of trumps, so you bid four steps, or 5♦.

   Here's a useful tip: When the Kickback bid is 4T+1, as it usually is, Teller's return to the trump suit is always "two with."

   b. Partner's 4♦ is a slam try, leaving room for *you* to use Kickback. Bid 4♥. This hand isn't perfect for Kickback, but given partner's strong bidding, you won't stop short of slam unless there are two key cards missing – highly unlikely.

   In some incarnations of RKC, four of the trump suit is used as the key card ask. Kickback gives you a choice – you can take control with 4♥, or give partner control by bidding 4♦. In this example, partner passed control to you because he had two small clubs.

EXPERT SLAM BIDDING FOR EVERYONE

Until now, the Kickback convention has been the purview of the expert community. This book makes Kickback accessible to all tournament players for the first time. The author starts by explaining why Kickback is easier to use and more efficient than Roman Keycard Blackwood. The book addresses such vital issues as setting the trump suit, which strain to use to ask for key cards, the King Ask, the Queen Ask and Control Bidding.

Also included are advanced topics such as showing a useful void, Six-Ace Kickback and Exclusion Kickback. A final chapter gives a simple version of the Third-Round Control Ask, vital for top-flight grand slam bidding.

With many examples and twelve quizzes — two of them for partners to practice Kickback together — *Kickback* gives the reader the experience and confidence to use the convention effectively at the table.

ROBERT MUNGER (Houston, Texas) is a bridge bibliophile, self-taught bidding theoretician and Silver Life Master. Father of four and grandfather of eleven, he plays bridge as much as his schedule allows. He is also the author of *The Roman Two Diamond Opening and Variations*.

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