



Convention of the Week

2nd July, 2008

QUEEN ASK

Here we explore the arcane world of the Queen Ask, an adjunct to Roman Key Card Blackwood. For example, suppose that the auction proceeds **1♠ 2♥, 2♠ 4NT, 5♣**. 4NT agreed Spades (the last bid suit) and Responder has shown his Key Cards but has neither admitted to nor denied possession of the trump Queen. Enter the "Queen Ask", which in this case would be **5♦** (the cheapest non-signoff). All examples in this article assume 1430 responses.

Responses

Using the previous auction, where **5♦** is the Queen Ask, the responses are as follows:

- **5♥**: Shows the **Q♠** and the **K♥**
- **5♠**: Denies **Q♠** (in major suit auctions the denial bid is always the cheapest return to the trump suit)
- **6♣**: Shows the **Q♠** and the **K♣** (denies the **K♥** by the failure to bid **5♥**)
- **6♦**: Shows the **Q♠** and **K♦** (no **K♥**, no **K♣**)
- **6♥**: Shows the **Q♠**, denies possession of a side-suit King.

What would a response of **5NT** mean? One treatment is for it to show the **Q♠** and to say "Despite the lack of a side-suit King, I like my hand". The likely reasons are extra trump(s) or a Queen in Partner's side-suit.

Extra Length

You hold: ♠ 76532
 ♥ KQJ5
 ♦ AQ
 ♣ Q8

Partner opens **1♠**, you respond with a Jacoby **2NT**, a game-forcing Spade raise. Now Partner takes charge with **4NT**, and you respond **5♣**. Next comes **5♦**, Partner is making the Queen Ask. The **Q♠** may be conspicuously absent but this hand does have the next best thing, namely a 5th Spade. Partner's **1♠** promised 5 so the combined trump holding is 10

That being the case, the **Q♠** is largely unnecessary, as a 2-1 trump break will work just as well (78% chance). So, the correct response to that **5♦** Queen Ask is **5♥**, showing the **Q♠** and also the **K♥**.

Let's change that hand slightly: ♠ 76532, ♥ AQJ5, ♦ AQ, ♣ Q8. As before the auction starts **1♠ 2NT, 4NT**, but this time you have two Key Cards. And, as there are 10 trumps between the two hands, the response here is **5♠** (two *with*), using the same logic as before.

Avoiding Mishaps

Here is an auction with some potential for partnership grief:

1♠	2♥
3♥	3♠
4NT	5♦
5♥	...

First of all, what is the trump suit? There's a double fit but it's the last bid suit that counts, so **4NT** is RKCB in *Spades*. Secondly, could **5♥** possibly be an attempt to play in Hearts? No, once you have used Key Card in one suit you simply cannot play short of slam in another suit. So, **5♥** is the Queen Ask (in Spades, of course).

When Hearts are Trumps

Consider these two auctions:

1♠	2♥	1♠	2♥
4NT	5♣	4NT	5♦
??		??	

In the left-hand auction, **5♦** now would be the "cheapest non-signoff", and as such it is available for the Queen Ask, just as in the examples where Spades were the trump suit.

In the right-hand auction, you could use **5♠** as the Queen Ask, in fact most players who have the Queen Ask in their arsenal do precisely that, their (reasonable) rationale being that it's supposed to be obvious whether the response means 0 or whether it means 3. But if within you lurks a mad scientist who likes to live dangerously, then **5♥** can be used as a kind of conditional Queen Ask, telling Partner "If your **5♦** response was 3 Key Cards, then **5♥** is the Queen Ask. But, if **5♦** was 0 Key Cards then pass **5♥**". And if you really want to make the Queen Ask even if Partner's **5♦** showed no Key Cards? It's highly unlikely, but if so then use **5♠** for the Queen Ask in this particular auction.

When Clubs or Diamonds are Trumps

In this case, if you use 4NT to invoke RKCB, the Queen Ask will, of necessity, be above 5 of the trump suit. As such, a Queen Ask would commit the partnership to a small slam so would only be of value in trying for a grand slam. But, if you use Minorwood or Redwood to achieve cheaper minor suit RKCB sequences, then the Queen Ask can also be a tool for getting to six.

1♣	2♣
4♣	4♦/4♥

Suppose that 2♣ was an Inverted Raise and 4♣ was Minorwood (RKCB), then Responder made a 0/3 or a 1/4 response. Now 4♥ (over 4♦) and 4♠ (over 4♥) can be used as the Queen Ask. The responses are not that different to those we have already encountered, but there is one wrinkle. We'll use 1♣ 2♣, 4♠ 4♥, 4♠ as our route to the Queen Ask. Now the responses are:

- 4NT: This is the wrinkle, instead of returning to the trump suit we use 4NT to deny the trump Queen. This allows Partner to pass, if he thinks that 4NT will be a superior contract to 5♣.
- 5♣: Shows the Q♣ and no side-suit King.
- 5♦: Q♣ and the K♦
- 5♥: Q♣ and the K♥ (no K♦)
- 5♠: Q♣ and the K♠ (no K♦, no K♥)
- 5NT: Q♣, no side-suit King but something "extra".

In minor suit slam auctions it is useful to be able to bail out in 4NT if the slam hunt goes badly, as in these auctions:

1♣	2♣	1♦	2♦
4♣	4♥	4♦	4♠
4NT		4NT	

In both these auctions Responder showed "0 or 3" and the suggested treatment is for 4NT to say "Pass if you have no Key Cards, respond to the Queen Ask if you have 3 Key Cards". And, on the rare occasion when Opener wants to make the Queen Ask even opposite zero Key Cards? In that case, Opener must bid 4♠ over 4♥ (in the left-hand auction) or 5♣ over 4♠ (in the right-hand auction).

Being able to use 4NT as a conditional Queen Ask can be quite useful at times, allowing the partnership to stop in 4NT missing 3 Key Cards, a contract which is likely to be more fun than 5 of a minor missing 3 Key Cards.

Examples

♠ Q4	1♥	1♠
♥ AKQT54	3♥	4NT
♦ 743	5♦	5♥
♣ A4	??	

We showed 0 or 3 Key Cards, and 5♥ is a conditional Queen Ask. As we have 3 Key Cards we bid again, and 5NT here would show the Q♥, no side-suit King, but with an extra feature (in this case it is the Queen in Partner's first-bid suit).

♠ A	2♣	2♦
♥ AKJT75	2♥	3♣
♦ AKQ865	3♦	3♥
♣ --	4NT	5♦
	??	

2♦ was waiting, 3♣ was artificial and negative, and 5♦ showed "0 or 3", obviously zero in this case. What next? We obviously want to be in 6♥ or 7♥ and our use of 4NT was merely a prelude to making a Queen Ask. So, we cannot make the conditional Queen Ask of 5♥ (that would be passed), and therefore we must bid 5♠.

P.S. Yes, the Grand Slam Force would also have worked here.

♠ 3	1♦	2♦
♥ K8	4♦	4♠
♦ AK9654	??	
♣ KQJ7		

Here's a strange situation! Partner has shown 0 or 3 Key Cards, and he might hold ♠ A42, ♥ A42, ♦ Q872, ♣ A42, in which case we are cold for 7♦ or even 7NT. Alternatively, he might hold ♠ KQJ, ♥ QJ7, ♦ QT732, ♠ 85, in which case 4NT is the last making contract. No problem! Bid 4NT, the conditional Queen Ask (even though the Q♦ is not an essential card with the 10+ fit), after which you will find yourself declaring 4NT or 7NT but nothing in between!

Suppose that you hold the same hand as above, but that this time your methods are different and you find yourself in a Redwood auction, 1♦ 2♦, 4♥. The 4♥ bid was Key Card, and Partner responds 4NT. Oops! Now you are guessing whether Partner has 0 or 3! One solution is to use Minorwood (it's cheaper and avoids this particular dilemma), another is not to launch into a Key Card auction when you cannot cope with Partner's response.