

A Case to CRO about?

Sitting West you hold:



and your partner opens 1NT (15-17). You transfer your partner into hearts then bid 2S. Partner now bids 3H showing 3 x hearts and lower point range. You have at least a 6-3 heart fit with a relatively strong hand opposite and you feel that a slam is possible. What do you do bid next? If you use simple Gerber or Blackwood to ask for Aces and Kings, partner tells you that she has two of each. If you use Key Card to ask for controls (the controls are the 4 Aces and the K of trumps), partner tells you that she has two Aces without the QH and two Kings. Do you bid the heart slam?

Thoughts:

Standard Ace asking bids like Gerber and Blackwood are not that helpful when you have a void since they will not tell you which Aces and Kings partner holds. If, on this board, partner holds the AC and KC opposite your void the slam is unlikely to make.

Advanced players can get around this problem by control cue bidding prior to Ace asking. There are augmented versions of Blackwood and Key Card asking which will identify voids but they don't apply to the situation where the Ace asker has a void herself as in the situation here.

If you are missing two Aces which is quite common in Ace asking enquiries, there is a bidding system that can help. It is called CRO and is most effectively used as a 4C asking bid in order to keep the bidding level lower for signoff if slam looks unlikely. The special feature about CRO Ace asking is that it will tell you exactly what two Aces partner holds and this can often be used to advantage when assessing your suit quality and especially when you hold a void.

Over 4C Ace asking, responses are as follows:

4D	1 or 4 or 0 or 3 Aces by agreement
4H	0 or 3 or 1 or 4 Aces by agreement
4S	2 Aces of the same colour
4NT	2 Aces of the same rank
5C	2 odd Aces

The King asking bid is 5C (unless responder has already bid 5C whereupon it becomes the next suit up that isn't the trump suit). The responses are:

5D*	1 or 4 or 0 or 3 by agreement
5H	0 or 3 or 1 or 4 by agreement
5S	2 of the same colour
5NT	2 of the same rank

6C	2 odd (KS and KD or KH and KC)
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*unless diamonds are the agreed trump suit.

Please note that, with this King asking system, the partnership will very likely be forced to the six level by the response if partner has two Kings, so don't ask for Kings unless a response of two will be sufficient for slam to be bid.

The full hand was:

26	♠ T54	Dir: E
	♥ Q3	Vul: Both
	♦ Q7653	
	♣ AT3	
♠ QJ986	♠ AK7	
♥ AK9874	♥ JT5	
♦ J2	♦ AK4	
♣	♣ 8762	
	♠ 32	
	♥ 62	
	♦ T98	
	♣ KQJ954	
		♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ NT
		N 1 - - - -
		S 1 - - - -
		E - 1 7 7 1
		W - 2 7 7 1

and the bidding could continue

East	South	West	North
3H	Pass	4C (CRO) Ace ask	Pass
5C (2 x odd Aces = AS and AD)	Pass	5D (CRO) King ask	Pass
6D (2 x odd = KS and KD).	Pass	6H	

Since partner has both AS and KS and AD and KD, 6H seems a near certainty. 7H might be on, but it is more of a gamble. Because CRO identifies the exact Aces and Kings with two Ace or two King responses, it is the only option available except for prior control cue bidding to reach this degree of certainty about the likelihood of a small slam or even a grand slam. Only 2 of the 5 pairs bid the small slam on the night (Board 26, Wednesday evening Aug 21).

Does this mean CRO is the optimum Ace asking system? No, but it has its place in offering more useful information than simple versions of Gerber and Blackwood. It is uniquely useful when missing two Aces but does not necessarily identify whether partner holds the King of trumps as Key Card asking does. Control cue bidding prior to using, for example, Key Card asking would cover more situations and keep the level lower but carries with it more complexity.