10. – 4NT - teacher

For the moment I am introducing this convention in its simplest 4-ace version

Disclaimer

It is with great reluctance that I include this topic at this point.

So, just to clarify, you don't have to use Blackwood – there are frequently better ways of searching for a slam -
and
4NT is better used in other ways in certain situations – particularly when searching for a slam on two balanced hands.

But, having said that, partners at local level are almost certain to assume that you are familiar with the convention in at least this simplest of forms, and so I include it at this stage simply to meet that situation.

When does it apply?

Either following suit agreement, or when a jump is made following a suit bid, the bid will usually be used as some version of Blackwood.
For the moment I am limiting its use to asking for how many of the 4 aces partner holds.
In response partner will bid:-
5♣ with 0 or 4
5♦ with 1
5♥ with 2
5♠ with 3

Losers – not winners

Note that the purpose of the convention is to ensure that you do not arrive in a slam contract with 2 immediate losers.
Its purpose is not to determine if you have enough winners – you should be certain that you have sufficient prospective winners before checking to see if you have any immediate losers.

Note

You should not take the risk that partner's response might take you past your makeable contract.
With this in mind, it is frequently wrong to ask for aces with less than 2 in your own hand;
and it is usually wrong to use this convention when Clubs are trump suit either by agreement or implication.

5NT

Following the 4NT enquiry and partner's response 5NT is usually played as a king-ask in the same style.
But, it is almost always the wrong bid!

A bid of 5NT commits you to the 6-level. Only use this extension if you are considering a grand slam - with anything less just bid the slam at the 6-level.

Gerber

Many club players like to use 4♣ rather than 4NT as the asking bid, as it keeps the bidding lower. The responses are in similar steps from 4♦ upwards.

If ace-asking is the only means of looking for a high-level contract then this argument holds up.

However, it leaves very little room in which to determine if there are likely to be sufficient tricks in the first place – it fails miserably when it is important to know which Ace partner hols (e.g. facing a void) and not just how many – and there are far more constructive uses for the bid (e.g. splinter bids, control-showing – setting up a slam-try before a cue-bidding sequence – or even a natural bid).

I would recommend strongly against it when searching for a slam on an unbalanced hand, except when playing with an occasional partner who insists.

Balanced hands

Note that following a natural sequence showing a balanced hand with a bid in no-trumps 4NT is best used in a different way (quantitative).

We shall come to this sooner rather than later, but for the moment bear in mind that partner may well play it as ace-asking – although it would be good to know.

Limitations

Note that at this point in our teaching, and in the absence of Stayman and transfers, there are no invitational sequences showing a 5-card or longer major in response to 1NT,
and there are no weak or invitational responses (other than pass) in response to 2NT.