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"Declarer's 5th, 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and Penultimate Duties When Playing a Suit Contract"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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Bruce: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints). Today, Esther will discuss **"Declarer's 5th, 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and Penultimate Duties When Playing a Suit Contract"**. Well, Esther, thank you for talking to us today!

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

Bruce: Errr, well, Est... err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, am I correct that you have previously taught us about the bridge Declarer's various duties?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. You are, indeed, correct, Bruce. I previously addressed these vitally important issues in my "Esther Bridge Dialogue Lesson #177: **"Larry Cohen's '3-Step System' for Planning Declarer's 'Line of Play' for a Suit Contract"**":
<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/3Step Tr.pdf>

Bruce: Errr, well, Est... err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what is it that you wish to emphasize in today's treatment of this very important topic?

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¹ As noted in an article in the Winter/Spring, 2024 article in The American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) Journal, https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/ABTA_1_24.pdf, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! So this article was really, really written by Bruce Thompson.

Esther: Well, Bruce, I want to again emphasize how important it is to usually *delay* "drawing" the Opponents' Trump cards before you *first* discard or "dump" your "losers". Only when you feel you are in *imminent* danger of the Opponents' ruffing should you prioritize "drawing" Trump over "dumping" "losers".

Bruce: Errr, well, Est... err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, will you please give us a bridge Board example to help make your discussion more concrete?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. I have previously strongly recommended the "BBO Bridge Master" website:

<https://www.bridgebase.com/v3/anon/bridgemaster>

The "BBO Bridge Master" website allows you to declare your skill level, then shows a series of Hands and announces the final contract, each of which you then play as Declarer. At the end of play you can then request a solution in which the optimal "Line of Play" is discussed step by step. Here we use the *free* "BBO Bridge Master" Level-1 **Lesson B-20** which gives you the opportunity to see and *repeatedly practice* playing a given bridge Board. Esther may have altered some of the cards in the Hands.

BBO Bridge Master Level 1 Lesson B-20

Dealer: **SOUTH**

	NORTH (8)	
	S: 4 3 2	
	H: 6 5 4 2	
	D: K 4 2	
	C: K Q 3	
WEST (4)		EAST (13)
S: J T 9 8		S: K 7 5
H: K		H: A 3
D: 7 6 5 3		D: J T 9 8
C: 8 7 6 5		C: A J T 9
	SOUTH (15)	
	S: A Q 6	
	H: Q J T 9 8 7	
	D: A Q	
	C: 4 2	

Bidding

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1H	PASS	2H	PASS
3H	PASS	4H	PASS
PASS	PASS		

On Trick #1 WEST leads the Spade Jack as the "top" of a "touching" Spade sequence. EAST plays "low" and Declarer SOUTH "wins" Trick #1 with his Spade Queen.

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, it sounds like you are saying that Declarer SOUTH should not begin "drawing" Trump on Trick #2. Is that correct?

Esther: Well, Bruce, yes, BINGO! Once the NORTH Dummy is exposed in a **NT** contract your initial task is to identify all your "winners". But in a *Suit* contract your initial task is to identify your "losers".

Bruce: Errr, well, Est... err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what losers do you see on this Board?

Esther: Well, Bruce, here N/S must "lose" to the Opponents' Heart A,K and Club Ace. This means that N/S must not "lose" any additional Tricks.

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what then are Declarer SOUTH's most important duties?

Esther: Well, Bruce, of course I will try to help you. The **5 most important duties** for Declarer SOUTH when playing a *Suit* contract are to:

1. Formulate a plan to discard your "losers". As Larry Cohen emphasized in his excellent article, "Trump Suit Contracts—Step 1" (p. 47), published in the January, 2026 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin:
"The key to making the ['Line of Play'] plan is to calculate ['losers'] only from one side (the long-trump Hand)". (p. 47) [emphases added]
2. Formulate a plan to discard your "losers". You can "discard" your "losers" in various ways (e.g., you can sluff a "loser" on a "winner" from the other Hand that you control, you can ruff your own "loser", or you can discard your "loser" on a "winner" that the Opponents will inevitably "win" anyway).
3. Formulate a plan to discard your "losers".
4. Formulate a plan to discard your "losers".
5. Formulate a plan to discard your "losers".

	NORTH (8)	
	S: 4 3 2	
	H: 6 5 4 2	
	D: K 4 2	
	C: K Q 3	
WEST (4)		EAST (13)
S: J T 9 8		S: K 7 5
H: K		H: A 3
D: 7 6 5 3		D: J T 9 8
C: 8 7 6 5		C: A J T 9
	SOUTH (15)	
	S: A Q 6	
	H: Q J T 9 8 7	
	D: A Q	
	C: 4 2	

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther, ...err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what questions should Declarer SOUTH now consider when formulating his "Line of Play"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, Declarer SOUTH must ask himself **3** questions in formulating his "Line of Play":

1. What "losers" can Declarer SOUTH see in his own Hand, the Hand in his Partnership that holds "long" Trump cards (i.e., **6** Trump Hearts versus the **4** Trump Hearts in the NORTH Dummy)?
2. Where in the NORTH Dummy can Declarer discard his "loser(s)"?
3. How can Declarer SOUTH "enter" the NORTH Dummy in order to discuss "losers" on Dummy "winner(s)"?

Bruce: Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, OK. Would you talk us through answering these **3** questions?

Esther: Well, Bruce, sure.

1. Declarer SOUTH holds **1** "loser" in his own "closed" (hidden) Hand: the Spade 6.
2. Declarer SOUTH can discard his Spade 6 on a NORTH Dummy Club "winner" once the E/W Club Ace is "knocked out".
3. The NORTH Dummy holds (1) many "low" cards and (2) few opportunities to ruff. SOUTH's *only* "entry" into the NORTH Dummy is to "knock out" the E/W Club Ace and then lead **1** of his own Clubs to the Dummy's then "promoted" Club "winner".

Bruce: Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, OK. What then should Declarer SOUTH do on Trick #2?

Esther: Well, Bruce, SOUTH should not begin "drawing" Trump Hearts on Trick #2 because if he does, his contract will *certainly* get "set". The Defense will "win" and then continue Spades. The E/W Spade Honors will eventually become problematic.

So, on Trick #2 SOUTH should begin by leading the Diamond Ace to begin "unblocking" the NORTH Dummy's initial Diamond K,4,2 holding. On Trick #3 Declarer SOUTH should "cash" his Diamond Queen "winner".

Then on Trick #4 Declarer SOUTH will lead a "low" Club from his own "closed" Hand. E/W will "win" with the Club Ace. On Trick #5 E/W will continue Spades but SOUTH will "win" with his Spade Ace. N/S have now "won" 4 Tricks and E/W have "won" 1 Trick. The 8 cards now held in the 4 Hands are:

	NORTH (8)	
	S: 4	
	H: 6 5 4 2	
	D: K	
	C: K 3	
WEST (4)		EAST (13)
S: J T		S: K
H: K		H: A 3
D: 7 6		D: J T
C: 8 7 6		C: J T 9
	SOUTH (15)	
	S: 6	
	H: Q J T 9 8 7	
	D:	
	C: 4	

On Trick #6 Declarer SOUTH can lead his Club 4 to enter the NORTH Dummy by playing the NORTH Dummy's "promoted" Club King. On Trick #7 SOUTH plays the NORTH Dummy Diamond King and discards his own Spade 6 "loser".

SOUTH will eventually "lose" 2 Trump Heart Tricks and will exactly "make" his 4H contract. SOUTH "made" his 4H contract by (1) not "drawing" Trump early and (2) identifying his "loser" and executing a plan to "dump" that "loser".

According to Cohen in his excellent article, "Declarer Play Basics: Step 3-Play Trumps", published in the March, 2026 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin (pp. 49-50), "If there is no reason not to draw [T]rump, then draw them" (p.

49). Cohen also then lists some of the *various* reasons to not immediately “draw” Trump in a Suit contract:

- 1) “Need to first set up a discard(s) [of ‘losers’]
- 2) Need to trump losers in the short-trump [H]and
- 3) Need trumps for entries” (p. 49)

Cohen’s *first* reason for not immediately “drawing” Trump was what governed Declarer SOUTH’s insightful play on this bridge Board!



Esther says:

“Why not proceed *immediately* to ‘**Bridge Base Online Bridge Master**’ Level-1 Lesson #**B-20** to practice ‘**Declarer’s Penultimate Duty When Playing Suit Contracts as Declarer**’? Search ‘BBO’, then Click ‘Bridge Master’, then Click ‘Play’, then Click ‘Level 1’, then Click ‘B-20’. You can play this Board *repeatedly* in Bridge Master for *free*!”