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**"3 Cardinal Superordinate Bridge Principles That May be Particularly Helpful for New/Beginner Bridge Players: Esther Centennial Bridge Lesson #100"**

**Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen<sup>1</sup>**

To return to the "Esther Bridge Lessons," CLICK:

<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

New or beginning duplicate bridge players confront a dizzying array of new challenges. They have to master MatchPoint scoring, how to Alert! bids, how to behave when ACBL Laws infractions occur, how to use BridgeMates during "human" (in-person) bridge play, and so forth. The list goes on, and on, and on. And, of course, there are also numerous bridge conventions to learn, try on, and possibly start to play. The learning road is *difficult* and, at least at times, even possibly humiliating, because mistakes are inevitable, but are part of the learning process.

The good news is that new/beginning players also have available an equally dizzying array of learning resources. There are great books to be read,<sup>2</sup> some decades old,<sup>3</sup> but still fully

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<sup>1</sup> 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](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.

<sup>2</sup> For lists of great books, see "Karen's [Karen Walker] Bridge Bookstore":

<https://kwbridge.com/books.htm>

Or see Esther's *personally-curated* list of the most important bridge books of all time, and her list of the Best Bridge Book Winners and Runners-Up in the annual American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) awards competitions:

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/BestBooks.pdf>

As to great bridge books, see, for example, Larry Cohen's 1992 To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks, and Marty Cohen's 1996 Points Schmoints!, both winners of the **ABTA Best Bridge Book of the Year Award**.

<sup>3</sup> See Lois Watson's 1934 Watson on the Play of the Hand at Contract Bridge, like the other books listed all still available in various editions from Amazon and other retailers.

relevant. And there are also *great* on-line bridge teaching videos, such as Maggie Hadley's (UK) "Oasis Bridge Tuition" YouTube channel,<sup>4</sup> or Bridget Rampton's (Australia) YouTube channel.<sup>5</sup>

Although there is indeed much to learn as one initially approaches the duplicate bridge table, it is also very important to not get lost in the minutia. So, here I, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, holder of 20+ million ACBL MasterPoints, and a Quintuple Emerald Gold LifeMaster, would like to share with you personally 3 **Cardinal Bridge Principles** that I believe should be *quintessentially* important for you to bear in mind as you start to play bridge. I have previously shared these notions in various previous lessons and quizzes, but here in this "**Esther Bridge Centennial Lesson**" I share these ideas within a single treatise.

### **Cardinal Bridge Principal #1: "Do Not Become a Bridge 'Results Player'!"**

Sometimes less experienced players look at a Board and try to determine what the best bids or plays were on that Board. "**Results Players**" look at what happened on a given Board, and if they got favorable results, even if they bid or played in *violation* of sound Bridge Principles, assume that they played the Board *well*, and so therefore should continue to play in *violation* of sound Bridge Principles. Similarly, "**Results Players**" will look at a Board on which they scored *poorly*, and assume that therefore even though they played in accord with sound Bridge Principles, they therefore should stop playing in accord with sound Bridge Principles!

"**Results Players**" *overgeneralize* from one Board played in violation of Bridge Principles, but that scored "*well*", and from one Board played according to Bridge Principles, but scored *poorly*, and therefore *favor* future **bad play** in violation of recognized sound Bridge Principles. But *one cannot reasonably generalize from one Board to all Boards*. Every Board is unique. For example, if a Board has a 4-2 trump split against you, and you generalize from that Board to all Boards where you are holding your given cards, you will be trapped in an *eternally shifting* set of bidding principles as Boards holding your cards but other combinations of

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://oasisbridgetuition.co.uk>

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://youtube.com/@bridgetrampton1537>

cards in the other Hands eternally shift, and this will lead to *ongoing unfavorable* results.

*Instead*, think about the cards you have, and at each stage of the bidding what your Partner and your Opponents most likely hold in terms of both distributions and points. Think about the current Board, and not previous Boards, and focus on bidding and playing in accord with sound Bridge Principles, and not in accord with one-off *serendipitous* favorable or unfavorable results when you violate sound Bridge Principles! Do not overgeneralize from single results, and do not ever be a "**Results Player**".

Thomas Rush<sup>6</sup> of the Bridge Club of Houston wisely put being a "Results Player" into proper perspective:

I'm a student of the game. I am not a {R}esults [P]layer: you can make a good bid and get a bad board, and you should be complimented. You can also make a bad bid or play and score well; in that case, you [still] have to look at the board and find the mistake [and not continue to play in violation of sound Bridge Principles, which may not work every single time, but that over time will inevitably lead to your most favorable bridge results over time and across all Boards, and not just an aberrant Board]. It's the job of a good bridge teacher to help you understand and learn the right percentage choices, regardless of whether they worked on this hand or not -- because they put the odds on your side.

I believe in teaching principles, not rules; judgement not conventions; consistency not brilliance.

Principles will help you decide what to do in new situations. Judgement makes you more successful in competitive situations, and getting to games that make (as well as staying out of games that don't make!). Perhaps most of all is consistency: Letting your partner know what is in your hand, and not trying to be brilliant. If brilliance were the right thing to do, it would be in all the books, it would be the 'normal' thing, because it worked! [Underlining added.]

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<sup>6</sup> See the "Teachers" Section of the Bridge Club of Houston website:  
[https://www.bridgewebs.com/cgi-bin/bwoq/bw.cgi?club=bcoh&pid=display\\_page11](https://www.bridgewebs.com/cgi-bin/bwoq/bw.cgi?club=bcoh&pid=display_page11)

"**Results Players**" inculcate 2 different kinds of *incorrect lessons* from their examination of the "results" on a given Board, and then *overgeneralize* these results on a given Board, as against instead learning and following Basic Bridge Principles: (1) When on a given Board they play correctly by following Basic Bridge Principles, and the results are unfavorable, "**Results Players**" formulate the *disastrous* conclusion that playing by Basic Bridge Principles is a bad idea, and (2) When on a given Board they play incorrectly by not following Basic Bridge Principles, and the results are favorable, "**Results Players**" formulate the equally *disastrous* conclusion that not playing by Basic Bridge Principles is a wonderful idea!

For example, on one occasion Partner and I were playing "**Bergen Limit Raises**". Partner opened 1**S**, and I bid 3**C** as an "artificial" bid showing (1) not necessarily ANY Clubs at all, but (2) 4 Spades and (3) 7-10 HCPs. Partner PASSEd my "artificial" bid (not usually a good idea to PASS *any* "artificial" bid), and we got a "Top Board". To a "**Results Player**", this outcome suggests the *fatuous* lesson, "Always leave Partner in any 'artificial' bids that Partner makes!!!"

On another occasion, Partner and I were playing "**Jacoby 2NT!**" responses to Opener's 1-level bid of a Major. As Dealer I opened 1**H**. Partner responded 2**NT!**. Knowing that Partner held (1) 4+ Hearts and (2) 13+ HCPs, I set the final contract at 6**H**. In fact, Partner held only 2 Hearts! And as it turned out, the Opponents held a 5-0 Trump Heart "split", fortunately with my RHO holding the Opponents' 5 Hearts. Against all odds I made my 6**H** contract! We obtained a "Top Board". We did so because no other Pairs sitting in our direction on this Board were *crazy* enough to bid a small slam with these holdings! To a "**Results Player**", this outcome suggests the *fatuous* lesson, "Always lie to Partner so that you and Partner will make a 'Top Board'!"

## **Cardinal Bridge Principal #2: "Play the Room!"**

One of the singly most important admonitions in duplicate bridge is that to be successful you simply must "**Play the room**". When you are playing pairs bridge you are playing against all (and only) the *people* sitting in your direction (N/S or E/W) on a given Board. You are not playing against cards. You are not competing in some theoretical universe in which there are definitely "correct" bids and all your Opponents are exactly equally talented.

This means that you **must** play differently when you are playing in different "rooms"! For example, if you are playing in a "room" full of bridge Sharks, and you and Partner hold Hands that make a slam bid reasonable, when you bid you must think about the fact that many of the Pairs in this "Shark Tank" are going to bid slam, and if slam is really makeable, the Sharks are going to make slam contracts. And if the slam contract is not makeable, many Sharks in your room will bid slam and all go "down". This means that in the Shark Tank, you will be severely penalized if you do not bid a slam contract and the Board makes slam sitting in your direction. And if you bid slam and go down, so will many of the Sharks playing the Board in the same direction as you, and therefore you will not be severely penalized!

On the other Hand, if you are a Novice or Rising player playing in a "room" against other Novices or Rising players, the players sitting in your direction on this Board are *very unlikely* to find or bid the slam contract, so if you do not bid slam, you will not be penalized very much for missing this slam opportunity. Conversely, if you do bid and make the slam contract, you will be disproportionately rewarded in a "room" in which the other players are less adventurous! Your bidding should be informed by your *explicit, thoughtful* consideration of these dynamics! Know your Opponents! Take your knowledge into account while bidding and playing!

### **Cardinal Bridge Principal #3: "Play the Table!"**

Although it is important for you and Partner to vary your play depending on the "room" in which you are playing, you also should **"Play the table!"** Even within a single *given* room there are *wide* variations within your single room across *different tables!* There are **2** different ways in which you and Partner can vary your play and **"Play the table!"**

#### **Vary Your Aggressiveness Across Tables**

You and Partner can vary your aggressiveness in bidding, play as Declarer, or when playing on Defense, taking into account your knowledge of the *specific* Opponents you are facing at *specific* table. If your Opponents are less skilled, you perhaps should bid more aggressively, because you think Opponents are less likely to defend well. In an article on his website, "Fourth Seat: The Rule

of 15 and CRIFS”,<sup>7</sup> Larry Cohen illustrates this “way of thinking” when playing competitive duplicate bridge:

**Any time it [PASSing out a Hand] is borderline (like 10, 11, 12 HCP), *evaluate your opponents! Yes, I am serious.* If you are playing against Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell (or the *best pair* at your local duplicate game), then pass it out. You will likely get a middlish score/result. Who needs to open and have to do battle with an expert pair who will fight hard for the partscore and play or defend well? Conversely, if you look up at your opponents and see Schlemiel and Schlimazel (the *worst pair*), then open the bidding. You can push them around in the auction and will get an extra trick or two in the play/defense.** [Italics added.]

### **Vary Your Convention Card Across Tables**

Although new bridge players will doubtless not want to pursue this second path for “**Playing the Table!**”, even newer players should be aware of this option. You do not have to play the same Convention Card throughout a given duplicate bridge competition. For example, you and Partner could play and show one Convention Card when playing against the better players in the room, and a different convention Card when playing less skilled players in the room. Your obligation is not to stick with a single Convention Card, and instead is to ethically publish to your Opponents on a given Board what bidding and “signals” conventions you and Partner are playing at a given table.

Here is an example from Larry Cohen’s web article, “Opening Leads,”<sup>8</sup> about how he and fellow champion Marty Bergen used the “**Coded 10s/9s=2, Jack=0 Signal for Honors Card Holdings**” convention when playing against Opponents’ **NT** contracts depending

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<sup>7</sup> See:

<https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/rule-of-15-and-crifs>

<sup>8</sup> See Larry Cohen. (2015), “Opening leads”, [Bridge Learning Center](http://larryco.com/bridge-articles/opening-leads):

<http://larryco.com/bridge-articles/opening-leads>

upon how good they believed their specific Opponents at a given table were:

The “**Coded 10s/9s = 2, Jack = 0**” convention “is very good against weak players as you give your [P]artner a useful piece of information. Meanwhile, a poor [D]eclarer won’t appreciate the inferences available. On the contrary, against good players, this is a **horrible method**. It gives way *too much information* to a decent [D]eclarer. I’ll let you in on a Bergen-Cohen secret. We used this **10/9 0 or 2** method against weak players, but standard against good players. We had 2 different convention cards depending on who our match that day was against. Thank goodness, our opponents never knew our criteria!” [emphasis added]