

**Esther Discusses "The 'Principle of Restricted Choice': Another Exception to the '8 Ever, 9 Never Bridge Rule for Declarer Play'"**

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

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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), who will talk us through "The 'Principle of Restricted Choice': Another Exception to the '8 Ever, 9 Never Bridge Rule for Declarer Play'". Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, thanks for taking the time to be with us today!

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

**Bruce:** Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther.

**Esther:** Well, Bruce. Please try to exercise at least a modicum of empathy, assuming you have at least the limited capacity to do so. Can you imagine how relentlessly all the other girls in grades K through 4 of my elementary school years relentlessly, endlessly tormented me about my last name, Klinktoast-Houstonhousen?

**Bruce:** Well, yes, sorry again, Esther! I do understand that young girls can indeed be quite vicious to each other. Well, in any case, Esther, would you *first* discuss what the

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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**.

"**'8 Ever, 9 Never Bridge Rule for Declarer Play**'" says?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. The "**'8 Ever, 9 Never Bridge Rule for Declarer Play**'" says:

*"When you are playing as Declarer and your Partnership holds A,K but is missing the Queen, your decision about playing for the Queen 'drop' by leading first the Ace and then the King versus finessing for the missing Queen should be determined by whether your Partnership holds 8 versus 9 cards in the Suit. If you hold 9 cards, it is usually advisable to play for the 'drop', while if you hold 8 cards your results will generally be more favorable if you instead play a finesse."*

The finesse always has a **50-50** probability of success, while when holding **9** cards the probability of a drop, **53%**, is slightly higher.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther, is there anything **important** that we need to know about this famous bridge maxim?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, there certainly is something important to know about the "**'8 Ever, 9 Never Bridge Rule for Declarer Play**'". Bridge is a game of **General Cardinal Principles**. If you play by these **General Cardinal Principles** you will be successful. But these **General Cardinal Principles** also have exceptions. And, of course, there are also exceptions to the exceptions!

For example, when you are playing as Declarer, and an Opponent overcalled during the auction, and the other Opponent was silent, and your Partnership holds A,K in a Suit but is missing the Queen, you should play by "placing" the "missing" Queen in the silent Opponent's Hand. This was explained by Esther in her "Esther Bridge Dialogue Lesson **#110: 1 of David Bird's 52 Great Bridge Tips on Declarer Play: 'Eight Ever, Nine Never', Maybe Not Always**":  
[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8\\_ever.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8_ever.pdf)

**Bruce:** Oh, my, Goodness, Esther. Bridge is so complicated!

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, bridge can be somewhat complicated. But that is also why bridge is challenging and fun!

**Bruce:** Errr, Esther. OK. If you say so...

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I am afraid that in this lesson I am going to further complicate things by teaching you about another exception to the "**8 Ever, 9 Never Bridge Rule for Declarer Play**" **General Cardinal Bridge Principle**. This second exception occurs when certain evidence about the Opponents' holdings emerges during play of the Hand.

The "**Principle of Restricted Choice**" was first propounded by British World Champion Terence Reese (1913-1996) in his 1958 book, The Expert Game. Let's say that as Declarer your Partnership is missing 2 "touching Honors" in a Suit (e.g., both the Queen and the Jack). If you are leading high and the next Opponent to play follows Suit and plays the Queen or the Jack, you should assume that this Opponent had a "restricted choice" and was *forced* to play the Queen on your higher card when sitting 2<sup>nd</sup>, because holding Q,J that Opponent would have instead played the Jack. Or, if your LHO Opponent plays the Queen or the Jack of the led Suit on one of your Partnership's higher cards (or a Trick when you are leading a "low" card toward an "exposed" Honor in the Dummy) that Opponent also may have initially held an Honor singleton in the Suit and this Opponent likely had a "restricted choice" and would have only played an Honor because he was "forced" to do so.

Therefore, you should then assume that the *other* Opponent holds the "missing" Honor and later finesse through the other Opponent. One of the *best* articles on the "**Principle of Restricted Choice**" is Larry Cohen's article, "Restricted Choice", on his bridge website, "Bridge with Larry Cohen":

<https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/restricted-choice>

So, the "**Principle of Restricted Choice**" can help you decide (1) *where* a "missing" Honor lies and (2) *whom* to finesse as holding that "missing" Honor. Of course, the same "**Principle of Restricted Choice**" applies if you are missing different "touching Honors" such as the King, Queen. And the "**Principle of Restricted Choice**" also applies when you are "missing" more than 2 Honors such as the Q,J,T.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. Could you give us a Board as an example, and discuss how the "**Principle of Restricted Choice**" would guide your play?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I am going to use a slightly modified Board from an excellent bridge instructional video by Bridget

Rampton<sup>2</sup> titled "When '8 Ever, 9 Never' Goes Wrong". I am also going to modify the bidding in the auction because Rampton plays the British **Acol** Convention<sup>3</sup> which opens 1NT with **12-14** HCPs. Here is the Board:

	NORTH (12)	
	S: K 8 7 6	
	H: A 4 3 2	
	D: 3 2	
	C: K Q 7	
WEST (12)		EAST (3)
S: Q		S: J 9 2
H: J T 9 8		H: 7 6
D: A K J T		D: Q 9 8 7 6
C: J T 5 4		C: 9 8 6
	SOUTH (13)	
	S: A T 5 4 3	
	H: K Q 5	
	D: 5 4	
	C: A 3 2	

**Bidding**

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1S	PASS	3S*	PASS
4S	PASS	PASS	PASS

\*In some Partnerships playing the "**Jacoby 2NT! Convention**" NORTH probably would bid an "artificial" 2NT! to show SOUTH (1) **4+** Spades and (2) **~13** HCPs.<sup>4</sup> In either case N/S are likely to set a 4S final contract.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Esther. Now please talk us through the play of this Board.

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, WEST led the Diamond Ace thus "promising" the "touching" Diamond King. The NORTH Dummy comes down and Declarer SOUTH sees that he is "missing" Q,J,9,2. With **4**

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<sup>2</sup> Rampton's YouTube channel is available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/@bridgetrampton1537>

<sup>3</sup> "**Acol**" was developed in the 1930s by Terence Reese and others at the Acol Bridge Club, located on Acol Road in North London. The Acol bidding system also focuses on 4-card rather than 5-card Majors.

<sup>4</sup> "!" means "**Alert!**". "~" means "roughly". Within the "**Esther Bridge Convention Lessons**" see "Convention Lesson #2: '**Jacoby 2NT**' Response Bid":

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/jacoby2NT.pdf>

cards "out" the 3-1 "split" is slightly more likely (49.7% probability) than the 2-2 "split" (40.7%) or the 4-0 "split" (9.5%).<sup>5</sup>

WEST wins Trick #1 and Trick #2. On Trick #3 WEST switches to Hearts by leading the Heart 8. Declarer SOUTH "ducks" in the NORTH Dummy, EAST plays the Heart 7, and Declarer SOUTH "wins" with the Heart King in his "closed" (hidden) Hand.

On Trick #4, Declarer SOUTH "draws" 1 Round of Trump by playing his Spade 3 "low to high" toward the NORTH Dummy Spade King. WEST "drops" his Spade Queen "2<sup>nd</sup> Hand high" rather than "2<sup>nd</sup> Hand low" and even though WEST can see the Trump Spade King in the NORTH Dummy and that the NORTH Dummy "spot" cards are the measly 8,7,6. After Trick #4 E/W now together hold only the Trump Spade J,9.

Now the "**Principle of Restricted Choice**" comes into play. Although it is possible that WEST initially held Q,J of Trump Spades and played the Queen, the greater probability is that WEST initially held a Trump Spade singleton Queen.

So, on Trick #5 Declarer SOUTH leads the NORTH Dummy Spade 6. Declarer SOUTH assumes that EAST holds both the Trump Spade Jack and 9 and is "surrounded" by the Declarer's Trump Spade Ace, Ten. Declarer SOUTH therefore runs a "finesse". If on Trick #5 EAST plays his Trump Spade 9 Declarer SOUTH will play his Trump Spade Ten. If EAST "covers" by playing his Trump Spade Jack Declarer SOUTH will play his Trump Spade Ace.

Declarer SOUTH will "lose" only 2 Diamond Tricks. If Declarer SOUTH had not "placed" the "missing" Spade Jack in EAST's Hand, and not run this "finesse", Declarer SOUTH would have "lost" a 3<sup>rd</sup> Trick.

**Bruce:** Errr, Esther. In either case Declarer SOUTH will still make his 4S contract. How much difference can taking 1 more Trick really make?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, that 1 "extra" Trick can make a *huge* difference. Let's say that 50 Pairs are playing in the competition. Sitting N/S you and Partner are competing in a Mitchell movement<sup>6</sup> playing against 24 other N/S Pairs. If

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<sup>5</sup> Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" see the probabilities writings at:

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

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/movement.pdf>

all 25 N/S Pairs played this Board in a **4S** contract and the 24 other N/S Pairs exactly made **4** but you made **5** Tricks, you would have earned a "top" Board. Your MatchPoint Score on the Board would equal  $25 - 1 = \mathbf{24.0}$ .

The MatchPoints awarded to all the 25 N/S Pairs would add up to:

$$\begin{aligned} [25 \times (25 - 1)] / 2 &= \\ [25 \times 24] / 2 &= \\ 600 / 2 &= \mathbf{300.0} \end{aligned}$$

The other 24 N/S Pairs will divide up the remaining  $300.0 - 24.0 = 276.0$  MatchPoints on the Board. Each of the other 24 N/S Pairs will earn the same MatchPoint Score on the Board:

$$276.0 / 24 = \mathbf{11.5}$$

Your N/S Pair will earn a Board Percentage Score of  $24.0 / 24 = \mathbf{100.0\%}$ . The other 24 N/S Pairs will each earn a Board Percentage Score of  $11.5 / 24 = \mathbf{47.9\%}$ . This means that your Total Percentage in the competition will go up by quite a bit. If the competition involved you playing 18 Boards, your Total Percentage will improve by  $100.0\% - 50.0\%$  you would have earned if all 25 Pairs had exactly made the **4S** contract, or by

$$\begin{aligned} [(100.0\% - 50.0\%) / 18] &= \\ 50.0\% / 18 &= \mathbf{2.7\%} \end{aligned}$$

This improvement 2.7% in your Total Percentage may move you higher than quite a few of the other 24 N/S Pairs in the competition, especially if your competition placement is near the "middle of the pack" where a lot of N/S Pairs are "lumped together" and have very similar Total Percentages!