

Esther Discusses
"Sluffing and Ruffing 'Losers':
***Sluffing is the Declarer's Best-est Friend*"**

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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

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 "**Sluffing and Ruffing 'Losers': *Sluffing is the Declarer's Best-est Friend***". 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, because I am such a "warm and caring" person!

Bruce: Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. Well, in any case, would you please give us a bridge Board that we can consider to make this discussion of ruffing and sluffing "losers" more concrete?

Esther: Well, my *gracious giver*, I will certainly try to help you! I am going to use as an example Board a Board used in the Level 3 Lesson **A-07**. On my "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" website I have previously recommended the "**BBO Bridge Master**" *free lessons*:
<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

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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.

the end of play you can then request a solution in which the optimal "Line of Play" is discussed step by step. Note that across repeated play "BBO Bridge Master" may change some Hands in given lessons. I may have altered some cards in some Hands.

BBO Bridge Master Level 3 Lesson A-07

Dealer: **EAST**

	NORTH (11)	
	S: K 7 6 5	
	H: J 6 4	
	D: 6 5	
	C: A K 4 2	
WEST (7)		EAST (14)
S: J 9		S: T 8
H: K 8 7		H: A T 9
D: Q J T 9 8		D: A K 7
C: 7 6 5		C: Q J T 9 8
	SOUTH (8)	
	S: A Q 4 3 2	
	H: Q 5 3 2	
	D: 4 3 2	
	C: 3	

Bidding

EAST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
1 C	1 S	PASS	3 S
PASS	PASS	PASS	

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... Are you actually being nice to me?

Esther: Well, my *inquisitive interlocutor*, of course I am being "nice" to you! Why wouldn't I be "nice" to you?

Bruce: Errr, well, in any case, Esther, on Trick #1 WEST leads the Club 5 in Partner's bid Suit. Declarer SOUTH "wins" Trick #1 in the NORTH Dummy. Once the Dummy comes "down" what should Declarer SOUTH initially do?

Esther: Well, my *handsome hombre*, I will certainly try to help you. Declarer SOUTH must identify his "losers", formulate an initial "Line of Play" including a plan to "dump" "losers", and identify any specific dangers to making his 3S contract.

Bruce: Ummm. Hmmmm. Well, Esther, what plan and what dangers should Declarer SOUTH see?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. Declarer SOUTH can see that N/S together hold $5 + 4 = 9$ Trump Spade cards. With E/W holding **4** Trump Spade cards, because 4 is an "even" number the probability of an unequal "split" is greater than the probability of an equal 2-2 "split". Specifically, the probability of a 3-1 "split" is **49.7%** while the probability of a 2-2 "split" is **40.7%.²** So perhaps Declarer SOUTH should plan for the possibility of a less favorable 3-1 Trump Spade "split".

Declarer SOUTH can see that he can probably successfully "draw" Trump in either 2 or 3 Rounds of Trump play. A 4-0 "split" is possible but is very unlikely ($100\% - 49.7 - 40.7 = 9.6\%$).

Declarer SOUTH sees that he is going to inevitably "lose" **2** Heart Tricks. Declarer SOUTH if he plays badly could "lose" **2** Diamond Tricks. So SOUTH must be careful!

Bruce: Ummm. Hmmmmm. Well, OK, Esther, remind us how can Declarer SOUTH "dump" his "losers"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, SOUTH can "dump" losers in these ways:

1. SOUTH can *sluff* "losers" on Tricks on which he leads and will win if one Hand is now void in the lead Suit. For example, on this Board after Declarer "wins" Trick **#1** in the NORTH Dummy the Declarer can later lead the NORTH Dummy Club King and from his own "closed" (hidden) Hand sluff either a Heart or a Diamond.
2. SOUTH can *sluff* "losers" either in his Hand or the Dummy on Tricks either the Declarer or an Opponent leads and which the Declarer will inevitably "lose" anyway. Included as option here is leading a "losing" card and then intentionally playing another "loser" from the other Hand that the Declarer controls. This is called a "loser-on-loser play".
3. SOUTH can ruff one of his "losers" in either his own "closed" Hand or in the Dummy. In general, (1) the Dummy will be "shorter" in Trump cards than Declarer's own Hand, so (2) ruffing in the Dummy is preferred because doing so can yield "extra" Tricks. Usually, ruffing in Declarer's

² Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see "**A Comprehensive List of 8 Different Categories of Bridge Probabilities, and How These May Help Guide Your Bidding and Play**":

https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8_probs.pdf

own Hand will not yield "extra" Tricks because usually every Trump card in the Declarer's Hand will usually "win" Tricks.

Bruce: Well, OK, Esther, that all makes sense. Sounds neat. What dangers must Declarer SOUTH consider?

Esther: Well, my *studly salamander*, SOUTH **must** avoid losing **3** Heart Tricks. Losing more than **2** Diamond Tricks is unlikely because the NORTH Dummy holds a Diamond doubleton and quite a few Trump Spade cards. If SOUTH leads a Heart he is likely to "lose" **3** Heart Tricks, so he must not make this lead! If the Trump Spades "split" 2-2 Declarer SOUTH can put E/W in the lead where they must lead Hearts, as SOUTH desires.

Bruce: Well, OK, Esther, that all makes sense. Sounds neat. What should Declarer SOUTH lead from the NORTH Dummy on Trick **#2**?

Esther: Well, my *curious carnivore*, on Trick **#2** SOUTH should lead a "low" Club from the Dummy and ruff "low" in his "closed" Hand. Clubs were only played 1 Round so E/W will not be ruffing a Trick **#2** Club! On Tricks **#3** and **#4** Declarer SOUTH should "cash" 2 Rounds of Trump Spades ending in the NORTH Dummy. On Trick **#5** Declarer SOUTH will "cash" his Club King "winner".

Bruce: Well, Esther, what card should Declarer SOUTH play on Trick **#5** from his own "closed" Hand?

Esther: Well, I will certainly try to help you. On Trick **#5** Declarer SOUTH should sluff 1 of his "loser" Diamonds. On Trick **#6** SOUTH should lead the remaining Club in the NORTH Dummy and ruff from his "closed" Hand. After **6** Tricks N/S have taken **6** Tricks and E/W have taken **0** Tricks. The 4 Hands now each contain **7** cards:

	NORTH (11)	
	S: 7 6	
	H: J 6 4	
	D: 6 5	
	C: --	
WEST (7)		EAST (14)
S: --		S: --
H: K 8 7		H: A T 9
D: Q J T 9		D: A K 7
C: --		C: Q
	SOUTH (8)	
	S: Q	
	H: Q 5 3 2	
	D: 4 3	
	C: --	

Bruce: Well, Esther, what should Declarer SOUTH lead from his "closed" Hand on Trick #7?

Esther: Well, Bruce, SOUTH has now already limited E/W to 2 Diamond Tricks. On Trick #7 Declarer SOUTH should now lead a "low" Diamond from the NORTH Dummy. E/W will "win" Tricks #7 and #8 with their "top" Diamonds. The 4 Hands now each hold 5 cards:

	NORTH (11)	
	S: 7 6	
	H: J 6 4	
	D: --	
	C: --	
WEST (7)		EAST (14)
S: --		S: --
H: K 8 7		H: A T 9
D: Q J		D: A
C: --		C: Q
	SOUTH (8)	
	S: Q	
	H: Q 5 3 2	
	D: --	
	C: --	

E/W can both see that that a Diamond lead will certainly be ruffed in the NORTH Dummy so E/W will feel compelled to "break" Hearts on Trick #9. If EAST leads the Diamond Ace then Declarer SOUTH will then (1) ruff from his "closed" Hand and (2) sluff a Heart "loser" in the NORTH Dummy. If EAST instead leads a Heart on Trick #9 Declarer SOUTH will

"lose" 2 Heart Tricks but still exactly make his 3S contract!

Bruce: Well, Esther, that was pretty tricky how Declarer SOUTH positioned E/W to only be able to provide a Diamond ruff or else have to "break" Hearts. Is there a name for this bridge strategy?

Esther: Well, yes indeed, Bruce. This is called an "**elimination play**"! The "**elimination play**" was one of **3** "endplays" (i.e., eliminations, squeezes, coups) discussed by **George Sturgis Coffin** (1903 - 1994) in the first of numerous editions of his hugely influential 1932 bridge book, Endplays: Eliminations, Squeezes, Coups. Coffin was a co-founder of the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA), which was created in 1957.³

³ Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" see the brief history of duplicate bridge in her web posting "**Happy 100th Birthday, Duplicate Bridge!**":
https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/br_hist.pdf