

## **"Esther's 'Checklist Guide' for Playing NT Contracts as Declarer"**

**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 **"Esther's 'Checklist Guide' for Playing NT Contracts as Declarer"**. 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 so "warm and caring"!

**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, is there anything you wish to emphasize before you begin to delve into today's bridge lesson?

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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**.

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. Yes, I would indeed like to say a couple of things at the outset. First, I am going to talk you through my personally curated "Esther's 'Checklist Guide' for Playing **NT** Contracts as Declarer" by building that Guide one checklist item at a time.

Second, to make the discussion concrete I am going to use a *specific* bridge Board drawn from the Bridge Base Online (BBO) Bridge Master website. Esther on her "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" website has previously 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 bidding and 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. The present "Esther Bridge Lesson" example is drawn from "**BBO Bridge Master**" Level-2 **Lesson B-16**. Note that across repeated play "**BBO Bridge Master**" may change some Hands in given lessons. Esther may have altered some cards in some Hands in this example.

**BBO Bridge Master Level 2 Lesson B-16**

Dealer: **SOUTH**

	NORTH (12)	
	S: 5 4 3	
	H: 4 2	
	D: A J T 4	
	C: A K 3 2	
WEST (9)		EAST (4)
S: 7 6 2		S: A 9 8
H: K Q J T 9		H: 8 7 6 5
D: K 6		D: 9 8 7 5
C: 8 7 4		C: T 9
	SOUTH (15)	
	S: K Q J T	
	H: A 3	
	D: Q 3 2	
	C: Q J 6 5	

**Bidding**

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1NT	PASS	3NT	PASS
PASS	PASS		

WEST leads the Heart King thus "promising" the Heart Queen and "long" Hearts.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther, well, what is the Declarer SOUTH's 1<sup>st</sup> task once the NORTH Dummy is exposed?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, first, Declarer SOUTH should count his "winners". Here SOUTH can see **1** certain Heart "winner", the Heart Ace, **1** certain Diamond "winner", the Diamond Ace, and **4** certain Club "winners", the Club A,K,Q,J, for a total of **6** Tricks. Obviously, Declarer SOUTH sees that he *must* find a way to "create" additional "winners".

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1. Once the Dummy comes “down”, count your certain “winners” to determine whether you will “make” your NT contract or whether instead you need to try to “create” additional “winners” or whether you can safely “win” Overtricks.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther, wha' 's next?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, of course I will try to help you. The next thing you should do is determine whether there is an obvious “Danger Suit” or “Danger Player”? In the present example, here you know that (1) WEST holds a “long” Heart Suit including some “top” Honors and (2) E/W hold 9 Hearts which (3) your Partnership holds only  $2 + 2 = 4$  Hearts with only a *single* stopper. This means that Hearts in this case clearly is a “**Danger Suit**”. This further means that you want to try to avoid E/W gaining the lead because both WEST and EAST *know* that they can *badly* hurt you in Hearts.

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2. Identify any obvious “**Danger Suit**” or “**Danger Opponent**” to help determine how quickly you should “cash” your “winners”.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, hmmmm... Well, then what should the Declarer SOUTH do next?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, the next thing you should do is to identify Suits in which it may be possible to “promote” low cards into “winners”. There are **2** vehicles for possibly “promoting” “winners”.

First, if your Partnership holds a "long" Suit, such as a Suit with 9 or 10 cards, you can repeatedly lead that Suit until eventually even your "low" cards become "winners". You especially hope that your Opponents' holdings in this Suit "split" "evenly" or nearly "evenly" so that "promotion" occurs more rapidly and yields a larger number of "promoted" "winners".

Second, if your Partnership holds in one Hand 4 cards in a Suit and the other Hand holds 3 cards in the same Suit, if the Opponents' holdings of 6 cards in the Suit "split" 3-3 the 4<sup>th</sup> card in player's Hand holding the 4<sup>th</sup> card in the Suit can be "promoted" into a "winner" by you leading 3 Rounds of the Suit. Of course, when there is an "even" number of cards "out", the "equal" "split" is not the most likely "split"! Here the probability of a 3-3 "split" is **35.5%**, the probability of a 4-2 "split" is **48.4%**, the probability of a 5-1 "split" is **14.5%**, and the probability of a 6-0 "split" is **1.5%**.<sup>2</sup> Of course, 48.4% is greater than 35.5%, but 35.5% is not massively different than 48.4%.

### **“Esther’s ‘Checklist Guide’ for Playing NT Contracts as Declarer”**

3. Count the number of cards your Partnership holds in each Suit and identify "split" patterns that may also be used to "promote" "winners".

**Bruce:** Errr, well, hmmm... Well, then what should the Declarer SOUTH do next?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, the next thing you should do is "interpret the Opponent's lead." On this Board WEST holds (1) multiple Heart honors and (2) likely either **5** or **4** Hearts. A "long" Heart Suit *implies* likely "short" Suits elsewhere. If WEST holds **5** Hearts, WEST holds  $13 - 5 = 8$  cards in other Suits, and  $8 / 3 = 2.7$  cards in each of the non-Heart Suits, or **2** or **3** cards in each of the other Suits.

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<sup>2</sup> 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](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8_probs.pdf)

## “Esther’s ‘Checklist Guide’ for Playing NT Contracts as Declarer”

4. Milk all the possible information you can out of Opponent’s lead. This is especially important when the Opponents were silent throughout the auction and so the auction does not give you much information.

**Bruce:** Well, the “**Rule of 7**”<sup>3</sup> counsels the Declarer to count the number of cards the Declarer sees in his “closed” Hand and the Dummy in the led Suit, subtract that from 7, and then “duck” for that number of Rounds of play of the Suit assuming that number is greater than 0. Because Declarer SOUTH sees that his Partnership holds  $2 + 2 = 4$  Hearts, and  $7 - 4 = 3$ , should Declarer SOUTH here “duck” for at least **1** Round of Hearts?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, that would be an extremely bad idea!<sup>4</sup> SOUTH needs to *get about the business* of “promoting” desperately needed “winners”.

**Bruce:** Hmmmm... Well, on Trick **#2** Declarer SOUTH has 3 choices:

1. Declarer SOUTH can lead a Spade to (1) drive out the E/W Spade Ace and (2) “promote” his remaining **3** Spades all into “winners”.
2. Declarer SOUTH can immediately “cash” **4** Club “winners”.
3. Declarer SOUTH can lead the Diamond Queen to either (1) “drop” the Diamond King if WEST holds the Diamond King and “covers” (*he won’t!*) or (2) “win” a finesse. If Declarer SOUTH “wins” the Trick **#2** Diamond finesse, Declarer SOUTH now *knows* that WEST holds the Diamond King and did not “cover” because WEST saw the Diamond Ace in the exposed NORTH Dummy.

Esther, which 1 of these 3 strategies should Declarer SOUTH execute?

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<sup>3</sup> Within the “Esther Bridge Lessons” see: “Some of the 40 or So Bridge Bidding/Play ‘Rules’”:  
<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/rules.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Within the “Esther Bridge Lessons” see: “Beware the Bridge ‘Rule of 7’”:  
[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/rule\\_of\\_7.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/rule_of_7.pdf)

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you! Let's talk through each of these 3 choices 1 at a time:

1. Declarer SOUTH Leading a Spade on Trick #2. What will happen if Declarer SOUTH leads a Spade on Trick #2 is both *crystal clear* and *certain!* E/W will (1) certainly "win" Trick #2 and (2) then will "cash" either 3 or 4 (or maybe more) Heart Tricks!
2. Declarer SOUTH on Trick #2 "Cashes" 4 Club "Winners". These Tricks are not going anywhere, and there is no advantage to "cashing" these Tricks early when there is *vital* Diamond "promotion" work yet to be done!
3. Declarer SOUTH on Trick #2 Leads a Diamond. SOUTH must "win" a total of 4 Diamond Tricks to "make" his 3NT contract. There is *no alternate path* for Declarer SOUTH to succeed. For this "Line of Play" to succeed WEST **must** hold the Diamond King. So that is the "Line of Play" that Declarer SOUTH **must** follow.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, hmmm... Well, I suppose that Declarer SOUTH should lead his Diamond Queen in order to execute a finesse. Is that correct, Esther?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, *no, no, NO!!!* Even if the finesse works on Trick #2 Declarer SOUTH will still "make" his 3NT contract only if the E/W Diamond "split" is 3-3! If the E/W Diamond "split" instead is 4-2 Declarer SOUTH will be in trouble given the Declarer SOUTH must win 4 Diamond Tricks. After 3 Rounds of playing Diamonds the E/W Opponent initially holding 4 Diamonds will then hold a Diamond "winner" in the form of something like the Diamond 9! Furthermore, given that WEST holds (1) 4 or 5 Hearts and (2) 2 or 3 cards in each of the other non-Heart Suits, it is likely that EAST holds the "long" Diamonds.

Instead, Declarer SOUTH on Trick #2 should play a "low" Diamond toward the NORTH Dummy and finesse if WEST "ducks" by playing the NORTH Dummy Diamond Jack or Ten. Remember, Declarer SOUTH **must** assume that WEST holds the Diamond K,x or K,x,x in order for the contract to "make", Then on Trick #3 Declarer SOUTH should lead a "low" Club from the NORTH Dummy to "cross" to his own Hand. Then on Trick #4 Declarer SOUTH should lead another "low" Diamond. If WEST initially held the Diamonds K,x the Diamond King will then "drop" and Declarer SOUTH has now "made" his 3NT contract.

## Summary

### **“Esther’s ‘Checklist Guide’ for Playing NT Contracts as Declarer”**

1. Once the Dummy comes “down”, count your certain “winners” to determine whether you will “make” your NT contract or whether instead you need to try to “create” additional “winners” or whether you can safely “win” Overtricks.
2. Identify any obvious “**Danger Suit**” or “**Danger Opponent**” to help determine how quickly you should “cash” your “winners”.
3. Count the number of cards your Partnership holds in each Suit and identify “split” patterns that may also be used to “promote” “winners”.
4. Milk all the possible information you can out of Opponent’s lead. This is especially important when the Opponents were silent throughout the auction and so the auction does not give you much information.
5. “Promote” “winners” where you can especially if you can do so with reasonable safety, or if you **must** do so in order to “make” your NT contract. This usually means repeatedly leading “low” cards when your Partnership holds a lot of cards in the Suit, especially if you also hold “stoppers” across all the other Suits. Or “promote” a Suit in which your Partnership holds 4 + 3 cards and the Opponents’ “split” in the Suit may be 3-3.

And *never ever* discard on Opponents’ “winning” Tricks even “low” cards in your Partnership’s “longest” Suit because those “low” cards are likely to later be “promoted” into “winners”.