

Esther Discusses "As a Declarer Playing a NT Contract, the Importance of Evaluating Your 'Finessing Opportunities' When Formulating Your Initial 'Line of Play'"

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), who will discuss "**As a Declarer Playing a NT Contract, the Importance of Evaluating Your 'Finessing Opportunities' When Formulating Your Initial 'Line of Play'**". 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, very sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Well, obviously once Dummy comes down the Declarer on a **NT** contract must formulate his initial "Line of Play". Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, would you first review the various issues that the **NT** Declarer must consider as play begins?

Esther: Well, my *Boneheaded Bozo*, of course I will try to help you! In order to make the present discussion concrete, let's use one of the Boards from the "**BBO Bridge Master**"

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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**.

Website:

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

that I Esther, holder of 20+ million ACBL MasterPoints and a Gold Emerald Triple Diamond LifeMaster *forcefully* recommend on my "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" website.

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*. The present "Esther Bridge 'Pop' Quiz" Board is drawn from "**BBO Bridge Master**" Level-2 **Lesson A-34**.²

NORTH (7)

S: 5 4 3 2

H: 5 4 3 2

D: A Q

C: J T 3

SOUTH (20)

S: A Q

H: A K

D: J 4 3 2

C: A Q 9 8 7

Bidding

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2 NT	PASS	3 C	PASS
3 D	PASS	3 NT	PASS
PASS	PASS		

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther, ...err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, on Trick #1 WEST leads his Diamond 6, and the NORTH Dummy comes down. Please talk us through the Declarer SOUTH's formulation of his initial "Line of Play".

Esther: Well, my *Beaudacious Bupkus*,

1. Declarer SOUTH must initially count his "sure winners". Here SOUTH can count as "certain winners" the Spade Ace (1), the Heart A,K (2), the Diamond Ace and either the Diamond Queen or the Diamond Jack (2), and the Club Ace and at least 3 more smaller Clubs (4). Thus, because $1 + 2 + 2 + 4 = 9$, SOUTH's 3**NT**

² The "**BBO Bridge Master**" deals, such as Level-2 **Lesson A-34**, are not fixed. Some of the cards in the deal over repetitious play of the Board change from time to time within the website.

contract seems imminently makeable. Of course, SOUTH also may want to pursue additional Tricks. Even only one Overtrick on a Board such as this one may spell the difference between a "Top" and a "Bottom" Board Matchpoint Score and Board Percentage made against Pairs sitting in your direction and playing the same contract.

2. Next, SOUTH must count the number of cards held by N/S together in each Suit. Here Declarer SOUTH sees $4 + 2 = 6$ Spades, $4 + 2 = 6$ Hearts, $2 + 4 = 6$ Diamonds, and $3 + 5 = 8$ Clubs. Thus, Declarer SOUTH's best hope for "promoting" lower cards into "winners" in this **NT** contract is Clubs. A Cardinal Bridge Principal is:

When playing NT contracts, never, never, N*E*V*E*R overlook the opportunity to create "extra" Tricks in a long Suit, *iff* ("if and only if") you can do without unduly endangering your contract.

There are $13 - 8 = 5$ Clubs "out". With an "odd" number of cards (5) "out", the most likely "split" is 3-2 (**67.8%**) versus 4-1 (**28.3%**) and 5-0 (**3.9%**). The 3-2 "split" is $67.8 / 28.3 = 2.4$ *times more likely* than the 4-1 "split".

3. Next, Declarer SOUTH should evaluate all the "**finessing opportunities**" in the 2 Hands that the Declarer both sees and controls. Declarer SOUTH also has **1 "finessing opportunity"** in Diamonds if he wishes to play assuming that WEST led the Diamond 6 away from the Diamond King. This finesse has *more appeal* because even if the Diamond finesse fails then the *SOUTH Declarer's Diamond Jack will still be "promoted" into a "winner"*.

In Spades Declarer SOUTH has **1 "finessing opportunity"**, because Declarer SOUTH can finesse from the NORTH Dummy through EAST and toward the Declarer SOUTH's "hidden" Spade Ace, Queen.

Declarer SOUTH also has **3 "finessing opportunities"** in Clubs, because Declarer SOUTH can play a Club finesse either through WEST or EAST respectively toward NORTH or toward SOUTH. And in Declarer SOUTH's Hand SOUTH can finesse with any of his 9,8,7 Clubs or toward the NORTH Dummy's Jack, Ten. Thus, the preferred "Line of Play" for SOUTH to

finesse will feature finessing in Clubs, potentially repeatedly until the Opponents' Club King is played.

Of course, in this auction EAST and WEST PASSED at every turn within the auction, so the auction provided no information about which Opponent to finesse through. Because N/S hold the Club Ace and the "touching" Club sequence Q,J,T,9,8,7 there is a massive opportunity to "promote" lower cards into "winners".

Because N/S together hold **8** rather than **9** Club cards a finesse is more likely to be successful than playing for the Club King to "drop". The probability to "drop" a missing King by playing the Ace with 5 cards "out" is only **5%**, while the probability of a successful finesse when neither Opponent has bid is **50%**.

4. WEST who played his Diamond 6 apparently led 4th from the "top" of his "longest and strongest" Suit. Invoking the "**Rule of 11**" when a player leads 4th from the "top" of his "longest and strongest" Suit Declarer SOUTH knows that because (1) $11 - 6 = 5$, and (2) the NORTH Dummy holds **2** Diamonds higher than the Diamond 6, and (3) Declarer SOUTH holds **1** card higher than the Diamond 6, therefore Opponent EAST holds $5 - 2 - 1 = 2$ cards higher than the Diamond 6.

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther, ..err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What then should be Declarer's SOUTH's initial "Line of Play"?

	NORTH (7)	
	S: 5 4 3 2	
	H: 5 4 3 2	
	D: A Q	
	C: J T 3	
WEST (8)		EAST (5)
S: K 7 6		S: J T 9 8
H: Q T		H: J 9 8 7 6
D: T 8 7 6 5		D: K 9
C: K 6 5		C: 4 2
	SOUTH (20)	
	S: A Q	
	H: A K	
	D: J 4 3 2	
	C: A Q 9 8 7	

Esther: Well, Bruce, it is perhaps tempting for Declarer SOUTH on the Diamond 6 lead to "duck" in the NORTH Dummy and play the NORTH Dummy Diamond Queen, especially because Declarer SOUTH holds the Diamond Jack, which will be "promoted" if EAST holds and plays the Diamond King. Declarer SOUTH can then retain via the Diamond Ace an extra entry back to the NORTH Dummy once Clubs are "established" by later playing toward the NORTH Dummy Club Jack or Ten.

One potential problem that Declarer SOUTH **must** see is that not only do N/S hold *only* **6** Spades, but N/S in fact hold the Spade A,Q,5,4,3,2. Thus, E/W hold the Spade K,J,T,9,8,7,6. *It ain't pretty!*

In the *other* Suits N/S hold the Heart A,K, and thus both first- and second-Round Heart "control". In Diamonds N/S hold **3** of the "top" **4** Honors. And in Clubs N/S hold not only **8** Club cards, but besides missing the Club King, **7** of the **8** "top" Club Honors. So, Spades is a "Danger Suit". And with E/W holding **7** Spades, an "odd" number, the most likely Spade "split" is the nearly-equal 4-3 "split" (**62%**), while the probability of a 5-2 Spade is **30%** and the probability of a 6-1 Spade "split" is **7%**. Note that the **62%** probability of a 4-3 Spades "split" is more than **2 times** as large as the **30%** probability of a Spades 5-2 Spade "split". Because WEST led a Diamond on Trick **#1**, EAST probably holds **4** Spades while WEST more likely holds **3** Spades, or otherwise WEST is likely to have led Spades. So EAST is the "Danger Player" who can lead a Spade finesse through Declarer SOUTH!

So Declarer SOUTH on Trick **#1** must take his Diamond Ace "winner" on Trick **#1** to guard against the likelihood that EAST holds the Diamond King. Failing to do so will put EAST in the lead and *endanger* the **3NT** contract because E/W will discover their Spade strength.

On Trick **#2** Declarer SOUTH leads the NORTH Dummy Club Jack for one of his numerous Club finesses. Even if the finesse is lost to the E/W Club King on Trick **#2** the remaining N/S Clubs will be "promoted" into "winners". However, WEST is likely to "duck" on Trick **#2** because the Club King WEST holds is amply "protected". If WEST "ducks", Declarer SOUTH on Trick **#3** will play the NORTH Dummy Club Ten and keep relentlessly "attacking" Clubs. WEST is likely to "win" Trick **#3** with his Club King.

On Trick **#4** WEST is likely to switch to Spades and lead his Spade 6 as the "bottom of something". Declarer SOUTH can win Trick **#4** with his Spade Queen. (If instead

WEST switches to a Diamond lead EAST will "win" with his Diamond King, but the Declarer SOUTH Diamond Jack will be "promoted" into a "winner".) At this point Declarer SOUTH has "won" **3** Tricks and Defenders E/W have "won" **1** Trick.

NORTH (7)

S: 5 4 3

H: 5 4 3 2

D: Q

C: 3

WEST (8)

S: K 7

H: Q T

D: T 8 7 5

C: 6

EAST (5)

S: T 9 8

H: J 9 8 7 6

D: K

C:

SOUTH (20)

S: A

H: A K

D: J 4 3

C: A Q 9

N/S Tricks: **3**

E/W Tricks: **1**

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther, ..err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What will happen next?

Esther: Well, my *Simpering Simpleton*, on Trick **#5-#7** Declarer SOUTH will "cash" his 3 remaining Club "winners" by playing first his Club Ace, then the Club Q and 9. On Tricks **#8-#10** Declarer SOUTH will play his **1** Spade **2** Heart "winners", and the **3NT** contracts "makes". E/W will likely "win" the last **3** Tricks.

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what is your "take-home" message?

Esther: Well, my *Dandruff-ridden Dufus*, my "take-home" message is that it is important as Declarer to include consideration of "**finessing opportunities**" when formulating your "Line of Play". "**Finessing opportunities**" are especially important when:

1. You obtained "clues" during the auction about which Opponent holds "missing" Honors, and
2. You hold "touching" Honors in the Suit in which you are finessing that will be "promoted" into "winners" even if you finesses fail!