

Esther Discusses "As Declarer How to Execute a Bridge 'Discovery 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 talk us through "**As Declarer How to Execute a Bridge 'Discovery 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, because I am such a "warm and caring" person!

Bruce: Errr, well, in any case, Esther, at the start would you please briefly explain to us what you mean by a bridge "**Discovery Play**"?

Esther: Well, my *inquisitive interlocutor*, I will certainly try to help you. The posting, "**Discovery Play**", on the "Bernard Magee Bridge" website² notes that:

"A declarer who tests the distribution of the outstanding cards in the unseen hands before committing himself to one line of play is making a 'discovery play'."

In a bridge "**Discovery Play**" the Declarer "tests" the distributions of the Opponents' cards before committing to a final "Line of Play" typically by "cashing" "winners"

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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**.

² See: <https://bernardmageebridge.com/glossary/discovery-play/>

to learn more about Opponents' card distributions or the likely placement of "missing" Honors. In Suit contracts this typically involves playing "side" Suits.

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

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

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... Hmmm... Well, could you give us an example of a "**Discovery Play**" to make this discussion more concrete?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. Here is an example of a Board presented by Bernard Magee which I have slightly modified:

	NORTH (14)	
	S: 6 4	
	H: A J 4	
	D: A Q 8	
	C: K T 7 4 2	
WEST (1)		EAST (3)
S: J T 7 5 3 2		S: 9 8
H: 9 8 6		H: T 3 2
D: 5 4 2		D: J T 7 3
C: 5		C: Q 9 8 6
	SOUTH (22)	
	S: A K Q	
	H: K Q 7 5	
	D: K 9 6	
	C: A J 3	

On this Board SOUTH is playing a 7**NT** contract. WEST leads his Spade Jack from the "top" of his "long" "touching" Spade card sequence.

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... Would you talk us through the execution of a "**Discovery Play**" on this Board?

Esther: Well, my *loquacious linkster*, of course! Once the NORTH Dummy is exposed Declarer SOUTH can see as "winners" **3** Spades, the Spade A,K,Q, **4** Hearts, the Heart A,K,Q,J, **3** Diamonds, the Diamond A,K,Q, and at least **2** Clubs, the Club, A,K, for a total of $3 + 4 + 3 + 2 = 12$ Tricks. To "make" his contract Declarer SOUTH must try to "place" the "missing" Club Queen in order to make a "**marked finesse**".

After SOUTH first "cashes" "winners" in Spades, Hearts, and Diamonds SOUTH eventually "discovers" that WEST started with a 6-3-3-1 card distribution. After WEST "shows out" of Clubs Declarer SOUTH now knows that EAST holds the "protected" Club Queen. Now SOUTH can safely make a finesse against EAST in Clubs on a 2nd Round of Clubs and "make" his 7NT contract no matter how EAST plays on Clubs.

Bruce: Hmmm, well, Esther... Can you give us a second example of a Declarer executing a "Discovery Play"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, of course. This time I will use a slightly modified example Board presented by Jack Stocken in his YouTube video, "A Discovery Play".³

	NORTH (14)	
	S: A K Q	
	H: A 9 7 2	
	D: J 8 5	
	C: 8 4 3	
WEST (12)		EAST (4)
S: T 9 5 2		S: 6 4 3
H: 8 6		H: K
D: A K Q 6		D: T 9 3 2
C: K 9 5		C: J T 7 6 2
	SOUTH (10)	
	S: J 8 7	
	H: Q J T 5 4 3	
	D: 7 4	
	C: A Q	

Bidding

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1NT*	PASS	PASS	2H
PASS	4H	PASS	PASS
PASS			

*E/W are bidding using the British ACOL system in which 1NT is opened with 12-14 HCPs.

Bruce: Hmmm, well, Esther... Once the NORTH Dummy is exposed what "losers" does Declarer SOUTH see?

³<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=jack+stocken+bridge+discovery+play>

Esther: Well, Bruce, s Larry Cohen emphasized in his excellent article, "Trump Suit Contracts—Step 1" (p. 47), published in the January, 2026 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin:

"The key to making the ['Line of Play'] plan is to calculate ['losers'] only from one side (the long-trump Hand)". (p. 47) [emphases added]

Here Declarer SOUTH can see as "possible" "losers" 0 Spades, 1 Trump Heart, a loss to the Opponents' Heart King, 2 Diamonds, and possibly 1 Club to the Opponents' Club King for a total of $0 + 1 + 2 + 1 = 4$ "losers". To make his contract Declarer must try to correctly "place" 1 of the 2 "missing" E/W Heart and Club Kings.

Bruce: Hmmm, well, Esther... After the Dummy is exposed Declarer SOUTH can see that N/S together hold $4 + 6 = 10$ Hearts. Shouldn't SOUTH simply play the Dummy's Trump Heart Ace in the hope that the E/W Trump Heart King will "drop"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, if E/W together held only 2 Hearts including the Heart King, then the probability of playing the Trump Heart Ace "dropping" the E/W Heart King would be 52%,⁴ or slightly better than the 50% probability of a successful finesse. Of course, in this auction WEST opened by bidding 1D, so WEST likely holds at least 1 "missing" King and likely 2 "missing" Kings. But that doesn't mean that WEST necessarily holds 3 of the "missing" Kings. Here E/W hold 3, not 2, Trump Heart cards, so the probability of "dropping" the "missing" Heart King by playing the Trump Heart Ace is only 26%,⁴ which is less than the 50% probability of a successful finesse. Therefore, a finesse seems necessary. But Declarer SOUTH would like to "discover" where the "missing" Kings lie.

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... Would you now please talk us through the play of the Hand?

Esther: Well, my *studly salamander*, of course. On Tricks #1-#3 WEST leads his Diamond Honors. WEST "wins" the first 2 Diamond Tricks but on Trick #3 Declarer SOUTH ruffs.

⁴ 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

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... on Trick #4 shouldn't Declarer SOUTH simply lead his own Trump Heart Queen, and if WEST "ducks" then play "low" from the NORTH Dummy?

Esther: Well, my *studious salmon*, there may be a better way. Declarer SOUTH should instead execute a "**Discovery Play**". On Trick #4 SOUTH sets up his "**Discovery Play**" to "discover" first where the "missing" E/W Club King lies. On Trick #4 SOUTH leads his own "low" Spade to the NORTH Dummy's Spade Queen. Then on Trick #5 Declarer SOUTH leads a "low" Club from the NORTH Dummy and execute a finesse by playing his own Club Queen. WEST "wins" Trick #5 with his Club King.

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... How does this "Line of Play" help Declarer SOUTH "discover" where this "missing" Trump Heart King lies?

Esther: Well, Bruce, WEST started by playing his Diamond A,K,Q, and on Trick #5 WEST plays his Club King. So far WEST has played cards worth $4 + 3 + 2 + 3 = 12$ HCPs. There are **2** reasons why this should cause SOUTH to "place" the "missing" Trump Heart King in EAST's Hand. *First*, because WEST has played cards involving **12** HCPs, EAST is likely to hold some HCPs, and so likely holds the "missing" Trump Heart. *Second*, and more *definitively*, if WEST initially held $12 + 3 = 15$ HCPs WEST playing Acol would not have opened **1NT**.

On Trick #6 WEST exits with a "low" Spade because this lead cannot do any damage to E/W. Declarer SOUTH "wins" Trick #6 in the NORTH Dummy with the Dummy's Spade King. On Trick #7 Declarer SOUTH "cashes" his own Club Ace.

Declarer SOUTH knows that E/W together hold **3** Trump Hearts, the Heart 6,8,K. The possible "splits" of these **3** E/W cards are 3-0 (**22.0%** probability) and 2-1 (**78.0%** probability):

- | | | | |
|----|-------|----------|--------------------------|
| 1. | 6 8 K | -- | 22.0% probability |
| 2. | 6 K | 8 | 26.0% probability |
| 3. | 8 K | 6 | 26.0% probability |
| 4. | 6 8 | K | 26.0% probability |

Thus, the **4** possible "splits" of the 3 E/W hearts are roughly equal in their probabilities. And in only 1 of these roughly *equally-likely* "splits" will Declarer SOUTH "drop" the "missing" E/W Trump Heart King by leading to and playing the NORTH Dummy's Trump Heart Ace on Trick #8. On Trick #8 Declarer SOUTH **must** play for the E/W Trump Heart

King to be a singleton even though the probability of the Heart King being a singleton has only roughly a **1** in **4** probability because that is the *only* way the Declarer SOUTH can “make” his **4H** contract. Happily, on this Board the “missing” E/W Trump Heart King indeed is a singleton!



Esther says:

On my “**Esther Bridge Lessons**” website I have 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 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 *free* “**BBO Bridge Master**” gives you the opportunity to *see* and *repeatedly practice* for *free* playing a given bridge Board. “**BBO Bridge Master**” Level-3 **Lesson B—26** is about executing a “**Discovery Play**”! Why not proceed immediately to “**BBO Bridge Master**” Level-3 **Lesson B—26** and practice executing this bridge play? And by the way, it’s *free*!