Esther Discusses "Estimating the Opponents' Card *Distributions* Based on the Lead and the Play: Knowing *When* and *How* to Execute a '*Holdup Play*'"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen[1]

To return to the "Esther Bridge Lessons," CLICK:
https://esther-bridge.com/index.html
To return to the "Esther Bridge '*Pop*' Quizzes", CLICK:
https://esther-bridge.com/quiz.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 **"Estimating the Opponents' Card *Distributions* Based on the Lead and the Play: Knowing *When* and *How* to Execute a '*Holdup 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, would you begin today by first explaining from where today's concepts and examples originate?

Esther: Well, my *inquisitive interlocutor*, I will certainly try to help you. Today's concepts and examples originate from the 2/5/89 Richard Pavlicek newspaper bridge column, "Duplicate Bridge Is For Everyone":
https://www.rpbridge.net/7c92.htm
This "Real Deal" was a Board played by a bridge student of Pavlicek's wife in a local Florida Club game. The student was

© Copyright, Bruce Thompson, 2026. All rights reserved.

[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**.

sitting SOUTH as Declarer and this was her very 1st duplicate bridge competition!

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… In any case, would you please tell us a little bit about this Richard Pavlicek fellow?

Esther: Well, my *loquacious linkster*, of course!

About **Richard Pavlicek**

Richard Pavlicek (1945-) has won **11** North American Bridge Championships, including a record-setting **3** straight wins in the Reisinger Board-a-Match Teams, 1982-84, and again in 1990. He won the 1973 inaugural Grand National Teams tournament and repeated a win there in 1997. He has written or co-authored several bridge books, including with co-author William S. Root their 1981 book, Modern Bridge Conventions. From 1984 until 1990 Pavlicek was the Bridge Columnist for the Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel.

Bruce: Well, Esther, thank you! Would you now share the "Real Deal" bridge Board?

Esther: Well, Bruce, *my studly squirrel*, of course. I certainly want to help you!

Dealer: ***EAST***
Vul: ***NONE***

	NORTH (***8***) ***S:*** *Q 5 4* ***H:*** *T 6 4* ***D:*** *A Q 8 4* ***C:*** *9 6 3*	
WEST (***7***) ***S:*** *A T 8 3* ***H:*** *J 9 5* ***D:*** *T 9 3 2* ***C:*** *Q 5*		*EAST* (***8***) ***S:*** *J 9 6* ***H:*** *7* ***D:*** *K 7 6 5* ***C:*** *K J T 7 4*
	SOUTH (***17***) ***S:*** *K 7 2* ***H:*** *A K Q 8 3 2* ***D:*** *J* ***C:*** *A 8 2*	

Bidding

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

WEST leads the Diamond 2 as ***4th*** *from the "top" of a "long" Suit not headed by an Ace. Declarer SOUTH "ducked" in the NORTH Dummy and EAST "won" with his Diamond King.*

Bruce: Hmmm, well, Esther… Would you now talk us through what Declarer SOUTH should do once the lead is made and the NORTH Dummy is exposed?

Esther: Well, Bruce, of course. *First*, it appears that WEST is leading **4th** from the "top" of his "longest" Suit in which he does not hold the Diamond Ace. Because neither NORTH nor SOUTH hold the Diamond King Declarer SOUTH now knows that EAST holds the Diamond King.

Second, Declarer SOUTH can now use the "**Rule of 11**"[2] to determine exactly how many cards higher than the Diamond 2 that EAST holds. SOUTH knows that 11 – 2 = **9** and **4** Diamonds sitting in the NORTH Dummy and **1** Diamond that SOUTH himself holds means that EAST holds exactly 9 – 4 – 1 = **4** Diamonds higher than the led Diamond 2.

---

[2] Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" see: "**Some of the 40 or So Bridge Bidding/Play 'Rules'**": https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/rules.pdf

Third, Declarer SOUTH can now begin to estimate the Opponents' card distributions. SOUTH knows that WEST holds exactly **4** Diamonds because if WEST held **5** or more Diamonds WEST would *necessarily* have led a Diamond higher than the Diamond 2. N/S together hold 4 + 1 = **5** Diamonds therefore EAST holds exactly 13 – 4 – 5 = **4** Diamonds.

N/S together hold 3 + 3 = **6** Spades and therefore there is a **62%** probability[3] that the **7** E/W *Spades* "split" 4-3. N/S together also hold 3 + 3 = **6** Clubs. Because the number of "missing" E/W Clubs is "*odd*", 13 – 6 = **7**, again the *most-likely* Club "split" is the 4-3 Club "split". Specifically, the probability of a 4-3 "split" is **62%**, the probability of a 5-2 "split" is **30%**, the probability of a 6-1 "split" is **7%**, and the probability of a 7-0 "split" is **1%**.[3]

Bruce: Hmmm, well, Esther… On Trick **#1** Declarer SOUTH "ducked" in NORTH Dummy to attempt a finesse with his own Diamond Jack singleton. Unfortunately, EAST "won" with his Diamond King. On Trick **#2** EAST led his Club Jack as the "top" of an interior "touching" Honor sequence. Declarer SOUTH "won" with his Club Ace. On Tricks **#3-#5** Declarer SOUTH "drew" the **4** E/W Trump Hearts which were found to "split" 3-1 (**49.7%** probability[3]).

On Trick **#6** Declarer SOUTH led his Spade 2 and WEST "won" with his Spade Ace. On Trick **#7** WEST then led his Club Queen and EAST overtook the Club Queen with his Club King and then on Trick **#8** EAST "cashed" his Club Ten and the N/S 4**H** contract was "set".

Esther, was Declarer SOUTH's "mistake" trying to finesse with his own Diamond Jack singleton on Trick **#1**?

Esther: Well, Bruce, no, **no**, ***NO!*** The Diamond finesse on Trick **#1** was indeed the "correct" play. An "**unmarked finesse**"[4] is *always* a more attractive opportunity where within the **2** Hands that the Declarer "controls" a "winner" will still be "promoted" even if the finesse "fails". Here the NORTH

---

[3] 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

[4] Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" see: "**As Declarer Executing an '*Unmarked Finesse*', a '*Marked Finesse*', or a '*Semi-Marked Finesse*'**":
https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/U_M_S_Fin.pdf

Dummy's Diamond Queen was "promoted" once EAST "won" Trick **#1** with his Diamond King.

Bruce: Oh my goodness, Esther… Well, *where* did Declarer SOUTH go wrong?

Esther: Well, Bruce, of course I will try to help you. Declarer should have done a better job of inferring the Defender's initial card distributions. From the lead SOUTH knew that WEST and EAST both initially held exactly **4** Diamonds. During play WEST was shown to hold **3** Trump Hearts while EAST held only **1** Trump Heart. WEST likely initially held either **4** or **3** Spades and EAST likely initially held either **3** or **4** Spades. This makes it likely that WEST initially held **4** Diamonds, initially held **3** Trump Hearts, and likely initially held either **4** or **3** Spades and therefore initially held either 13 – 4 – 3 – 3 = **3** Clubs or 13 – 4 – 3 – 4 = **2** Clubs.

Bruce: Oh my goodness, Esther… Well, why is how many Clubs WEST initially held so important?

Esther: Well, Bruce, Declarer SOUTH knows that EAST initially held **4** Diamonds, held **1** Trump heart, and initially likely held either **3** or **4** Spades. Therefore, EAST initially likely held **5** Clubs including several of the "missing" Club K,Q,J,T Honors. This means that on this Board EAST is officially the "**Danger Player**" whom Declarer SOUTH wants to keep out of the lead:
https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/avoidance.pdf
Bruce, on this Board Declarer SOUTH's "mistake" was not the Trick **#1** Diamond "**unmarked finesse**". Instead, Declarer SOUTH's mistake was on Trick **#2** "cashing" his Club Ace.

If WEST initially held the Club K,x or Q,x or J,x or T,x doubleton, if Declarer SOUTH *instead* "ducks" on Trick **#2** then later when E/W lead a Club Declarer SOUTH can then "cash" his Club Ace and thereafter the "**communication**" in Clubs between WEST and EAST will be "severed" because WEST will hold no more Clubs to lead to EAST. This is called a "**Holdup Play**".

As Jeff Tang notes on his excellent "Bridge Bum" website in his posting "**Holdup Play**":
https://www.bridgebum.com/holdup_play_declarer.php

> "A *hold-up* play occurs when declarer purposely refrains from winning a trick in a suit led by the defense. This is done in an

effort to disrupt the defense's timing or communication." (italics added)

You may also wish to check out Karen Walker's web posting, "**Declarer Play: The Hold-up Play**": **https://kwbridge.com/holdup.htm**

Bruce: But Esther, on this Board Declarer SOUTH needed to make his "**Holdup Play**" on Trick **#2** before he knew so much about the E/W card distributions!

Esther: Well, Bruce, you are certainly "correct". Here Declarer SOUTH nevertheless should have "**held up**" on Trick **#2** based on the *eventuality* that either WEST or EAST may initially have held a Club doubleton. Declarer SOUTH is going to *inevitably* "lose" a Club Trick anyway.

However, I will also tell you that on *many* other Boards the "**Holdup Play**" decision will occur later in play when you have gathered more information, or you instead may have more information at the *start* of the play of the Hand when one or both Opponents were not "silent" throughout the auction.



"Cardinal Bridge Principle"

"*Whenever* as bridge Declarer (a) **1** of the **2** Hands that you control holds an A,x doubleton in a 'side' Suit and an Opponent leads that Suit and (b) you and the other Hand you control hold a few but only a few cards in the led Suit then 'duck' or '**Holdup**' in the Hand holding the A,x doubleton on the **1st** time the 'side' Suit is led in case an Opponent holds the Q,x or K,x doubleton and you can thereby later 'severe' '**communication**' in that 'side' Suit between the Opponents when you next play the 'side' Suit Ace. The only *exception* is if you as Declarer see a clear, present, *imminent* Danger if you fail to 'cash' the Ace immediately."