

Esther Discusses "3 Strategies for 'Promoting' 'Winners' When Playing NT Contracts as Declarer"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

To return to the "Esther Bridge Lessons," CLICK:

<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 "**3 Strategies for 'Promoting' 'Winners' When 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 such a *warm and caring* person!

Bruce: Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. Well, in any case, before we discuss some of these tips about playing bridge as Declarer, would you talk about how playing **NT** as against Suit contracts as Declarer differ as to strategy?

Esther: Well, my *gracious giver*, I will certainly try to help you! When you are Declarer playing a Suit contract once Dummy comes down your first task is to *count your "losers"*, and your "Line of Play" should focus on "dumping" "losers" either by ruffing or sluffing them. On the other Hand, when you are playing a **NT** contract once Dummy comes down your first task is to *count your "winners"*, and your "Line of Play" should focus on "promoting" "low" cards into "winners".

© Copyright, Bruce Thompson, 2025. 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.

When you are playing Suit contracts even a lowly *Trump* 2 card can "win" a Trick.² But when you are playing a **NT** contract every "low" card including a 2 can "win" a Trick in *any* Suit.

Other initial tasks you confront when playing a **NT** contract is to (1) count the number of cards your Partnership holds in every Suit, (2) identify your "control" cards in every Suit, and (3) identify "entries" back and forth to your "closed" (hidden) Hand and the Dummy. When you are playing as Declarer in a **NT** contract your Opponents will relentlessly "attack" their "longest" Suit. Reciprocally, when you are playing a **NT** contract you too generally should *relentlessly* "attack" your "longest" Suit, at least if you have the other Suits "stopped".

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: Ummm. Hmmmmmm. Well, Esther, in any case would you now please discuss some strategies for "promoting" "low" cards into "winners" when you are playing **NT** contracts?

Esther: Well, my *handsome hombre*, sure. But first I need to share that the example Boards I am discussing here are from the **BBO Bridge Master** lessons.³ I may have altered some of the cards in the Boards. Also, BBO Bridge Master may somewhat alter Boards over repeated play. The discussion here assumes auctions in which Opponents have remained silent during the bidding.

These *web-based* BBO lessons (1) let you select a skill level at which you want to practice, (2) show you your Hand and the bidding, (3) let you play the final contract Trick-by-Trick, and (4) after the Board is finished walk you through the "correct" "Line of Play" step-by-step showing the cards being played, and the reasoning underlying the "correct" "Line of Play." You can either read the explanations or also have your computer speak the

² Of course, when you are playing a Suit contract, *once* you have *fully* "drawn" Trump, even a lowly 2 card in a "side" Suit can "win" Tricks.

³ See: <https://www.bridgebase.com/v3/anon/bridgemaster>

explanations. As you know, these **BBO Bridge Master** lessons have the "Esther Seal of Approval"!

Bruce: OK, Esther. I am anxious to get started.

Strategy #1: "Promote" Your "Longest" Suit Cards When Your Partnership Holds 8+ Cards in a Suit, Even When These Are All the "Lowest" Cards in the Suit, Unless Giving Up Tricks Endangers Your Contract!

Esther: Well, Bruce, here is a Board from BBO Bridge Master:

Lesson **A17 Level 1**

NORTH (10)

S: 4 3 2
H: A K 4
D: 9 8 7 2
C: K 5 3

WEST (8)

S: J T 9 8 5
H: 6 5
D: K J
C: Q J T 9

EAST (7)

S: 7 6
H: J T 9 8 7
D: A Q T
C: 8 7 6

SOUTH (15)

S: A K Q
H: Q 3 2
D: 6 5 4 3
C: A 4 2

Bidding

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

On Trick **#1** WEST led the Jack of Spades thus "promising" Partner that his Spades are "long" and the Jack is the "top" of "touching" Honors.

Bruce: OK, Esther. What should Declarer SOUTH consider once the NORTH Dummy has come down?

Esther: Well, my *studly salamander*, Declarer SOUTH sees **8** "certain" "winners": the ♠AKQ, ♥AKQ, and the ♣AK. An "extra" Trick **must** be "promoted" somewhere else if SOUTH is going to "make" his **3NT** contract. SOUTH also sees that N/S hold **8** Diamonds, which *ain't* 9 or more, and are the 8

"lowest" Diamonds, the 2 through the 9, but Diamonds nevertheless is his "longest" Suit.

These *lowly* 8 Diamonds are Declarer SOUTH's **only** hope for a **9th**, contract-making Trick. E/W hold an "odd" number of cards, $13 - 8 = 5$. This means that the most likely Diamond "split" is the most "near-equal" "split": 3-2 (67.8% probability).⁴ This means that if Declarer SOUTH obtains the lead, and leads Diamonds 3 times, then all the E/W Diamonds will be eliminated and the **2** remaining N/S "lowly" Diamonds will have been "promoted" into "winners"!

Bruce: WOW, Esther, that is simply amazing! Can you give us an example?

Strategy #2: When Either Your "Closed" Hand or Dummy holds 4 Cards and the Other Hand Holds 3 Cards in a Given Suit, Play 3 Rounds of This Suit Until the 13th Card You Hold in the Suit Is "Promoted" Into a "Winner", Even If That Card is a 2!

Esther: Sure! Here is another slightly-modified Board from BBO Bridge Master:

⁴ See: "Odd/Even Card 'Split' Probabilities": <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/probabil.pdf>

Lesson **A12 Level 1**

NORTH (5)

S: A 4 2
H: 4 3 2
D: 6 5 4 3
C: J T 9

WEST (6)

S: Q J T 5
H: T 9 8
D: Q J T
C: 4 3 2

EAST (9)

S: 9 8 7 6
H: 7 6 5
D: 9 8 7
C: A K Q

SOUTH (20)

S: K 3
H: A K Q J
D: A K 2
C: 8 7 6 5

Bidding

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

On lead WEST plays his Spade Queen, thus "promising" Spade "length" and (in many Partnerships) the Spade Jack.

Bruce: OK, Esther. Once the NORTH Dummy is down Declarer SOUTH counts **8** "sure" Tricks: the ♠AK, ♥AKQJ, and the ♦AK. An "extra" Trick must be "promoted" somewhere else if SOUTH is going to "make" his **3NT** contract. The N/S Partnership holds **5** Spades, **7** Hearts, **7** Diamonds, and **7** Clubs. There is *no* way to "promote" the NORTH Dummy Spade 2 into a "winner". There are *no more* than exactly 4 Tricks that can be "won" in Hearts. N/S hold only 7 Diamonds, so Declarer SOUTH will take 2 Tricks, but no more than 2 Tricks in Diamonds.

Declarer SOUTH can only hope to find an additional Trick in the Minor Suits. N/S hold 4 + 3 = **7** cards in both Clubs and Diamonds. If these Suits break 3-3 in the E/W Hands then Declarer SOUTH can drop 3 cards in both Opponents' Hands and thus "promote" the remaining 13th card into a "winner".

Because **6** is an "even" number the nearest-to-equal "split" (3-3) is not as likely as a 4-2 "split". The probability of a 4-2 "split" is **48.4%** while the probability of a 3-3 "split" is **35.5%**. Nevertheless, Declarer SOUTH must play for a 3-3 "split" if he hopes to possibly "make" his contract. It is a **CARDINAL BRIDGE PRINCIPLE** that:

Whenever you must assume a less likely event in order to “make” your contract, that is *exactly* what you must do!

However, one sign that E/W Minor Suits “split” may be 3-3 is that WEST led his Spade Queen on Trick #1, and not a Club or a Diamond! The Diamonds are the more promising Suit to pursue because Declarer SOUTH holds both the Diamond Ace and King. Declarer should win Trick #1 in his “closed” Hand, retaining the NORTH Dummy Spade Ace as an “entry” for later use, and on Tricks #2 and #3 “cash” the top 2 Diamonds and then lead his lowly Diamond 2 from his own Hand.

EAST will eventually “cash” his 3 Club A,K,Q “winners”. But Declarer SOUTH will eventually take 1 Spade Trick (his Spade Ace), 4 Heart Tricks (his Heart A,K,Q,J), and 2 Diamond Tricks (His A,K). Declarer SOUTH will also “win” the 1 NORTH Dummy Spade (the Dummy’s Spade Ace) and 1 Diamond (the 13th Diamond, the Dummy’s Diamond 6).

Esther: Exactly true, Bruce! You are catching on!

Bruce: Well, OK, Ms. Klink..., errr, I mean, Esther. Can you give us a 3rd example?

Strategy #3: When Dummy Holds “Length” in a Suit in Which Your Partnership is “Long”, Relentlessly Attack the “Long” Suit While Rigorously Maintaining Entry to the Dummy.

Esther: Sure! Here is another slightly-modified Board from BBO Bridge Master:

Lesson **A14 Level 1**

NORTH (6)

S: 7 6 5
H: K 5 4
D: 4 3
C: Q J T 9 8

WEST (7)

S: Q J
H: J T 9 8
D: Q J T 9 8 7
C: 7

EAST (8)

S: K T 9 8
H: Q 7 6
D: 6 5
C: K 6 5 4

SOUTH (19)

S: A 4 3 2
H: A 3 2
D: A K 2
C: A 3 2

Bidding

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

On lead WEST plays his Diamond Queen, thus "promising" Diamond "length" and (in many Partnerships) the Diamond Jack.

Bruce: OK, Esther, now what should Declarer SOUTH do once the NORTH Dummy has been revealed?

Esther: Well, my *handsome hombre*, SOUTH sees **6** "certain" Tricks: the ♠A, ♥AK, ♦AK, and the ♣A. On this Board Declarer SOUTH can "make" his contract by "winning" at least **3** more Tricks. The *only* possible place to secure these needed Tricks is in Clubs because the other 3 Suits are all "Aces and spaces" and are not sufficiently "long" to provide opportunities to "promote" "low" cards. Fortunately, Declarer SOUTH does not need 5 Club Tricks to "make" his **3NT** contract.

The "correct" "Line of Play" is for Declarer SOUTH to win Trick **#1** in his "closed" Hand. On Trick **#2** Declarer SOUTH should "cash" his Club Ace. On Trick **#3** Declarer SOUTH should lead his Club 2. On Trick **#3** WEST "shows out" of Clubs and Declarer then knows EAST holds 2 remaining Clubs.

On later Tricks Declarer SOUTH should continue playing Clubs and either (1) take more Club "winners" if the E/W player holding the Club King continues to "duck" or (2) "drop" the missing Club King. The NORTH Dummy Heart King

can be retained as a later "entry" to the Dummy to "cash" the remaining newly "promoted" Club "winners".

Bruce: My goodness, Esther! Well, how important was it for Declarer SOUTH to "win" Trick #1?

Esther: Well, my *bodacious beau*, vitally important. If SOUTH lets WEST "win" Trick #1 WEST is likely to make the very *dangerous* shift to Spades. E/W may be able to establish enough Spade "winners" to defeat the contract once they gain the lead later with the Club King.

Bruce: Oh my! Well, Esther! Is there a 2nd *dangerous* "Line of Play" the Declarer SOUTH **must** avoid or risk going "down"?

Esther: Well, yes indeed, Bruce! If EAST has any sense EAST will *repeatedly* "duck" Clubs and not take his King Club "winner". If EAST did so it is "*vital*" that Declarer SOUTH did not use the NORTH Dummy Heart King as an "entry" to run finesses in Clubs from the Dummy. The Heart King "entry" **must** be preserved to be *later* used once EAST's Club King is finally played so that Dummy's remaining and "*vital*" contract-making "promoted" Club "winners" can be played!



Esther says, "You may also be interested in Esther 'Pop' Quiz #0120: "'Promoting' 'Winners' and Sorting Out Finesses When Playing NT Contracts as Declarer":

https://esther-bridge.com/quiz/q0120_q.pdf