

**Esther Discusses "Playing NT Contracts as Declarer: The *Supercritical* Importance of Maximizing Your 'Trick Count' By 'Promoting' Low Cards into Winners in 1 of 2 Ways"**

**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 "**Playing NT Contracts as Declarer: The *Supercritical* Importance of Maximizing Your 'Trick Count' By 'Promoting' Low Cards into Winners in 1 of 2 Ways**". 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!

**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?

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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**.

**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, would you *first* discuss why it is so critical to *maximize your Trick count* when you are playing competitive duplicate bridge?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. In duplicate bridge your **Board Percentage Score** is computed by dividing your **Board MatchPoint Score** by the **Maximum Possible Board MatchPoint Score**. For example, if there are 5 Pairs sitting NORTH/SOUTH and competing against you sitting N/S, the **Maximum Possible Board MatchPoint Score** would equal  $5 - 1 = 4.0$ . This would be your **Board MatchPoint Score** iff (if and only if) you and Partner (1) achieved the highest **Board Bridge Score** among the 5 Pairs sitting N/S, and (2) no other N/S Pair tied with your Board Bridge Score.

Your **Board Percentage Score** would equal your **Board MatchPoint Score** divided by the **Maximum Possible Board MatchPoint Score**. For example, if your **Board MatchPoint Score** was 3.5, your **Board Percentage Score** would equal:  
 $3.5 / 4.0 = 87.5\%$ .

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. What does all this mean as a practical matter?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, what this means is that:

**When you are playing competitive duplicate bridge, making every single “extra” Trick that you can is quite important!**

For example, if all 5 N/S Pairs are playing 3NT contracts, and 4 Pairs take exactly 9 Tricks, but you take 10 Tricks, your **Board MatchPoint Score** will be 4.0, and your **Board Percentage Score** will be  $4.0 / 4.0 = 100.0\%$ . The sum of the 5 N/S **Board MatchPoint Scores** will equal:

$$\begin{aligned} [5 \times (5 - 1)] / 2 &= \\ [5 \times 4] / 2 &= \\ 20 / 2 &= 10.0. \end{aligned}$$

The 5 N/S Pairs' **Board MatchPoint Scores** will be:

<b>YOU</b>	4.0
N/S Pair #2	1.5
N/S Pair #3	1.5
N/S Pair #4	1.5
N/S Pair #5	1.5
<b>SUM</b>	<b>10.0</b>

The 5 N/S Pairs' **Board Percentage Scores** will be:

<b>YOU</b>	4.0 / 4.0 = 100.0%
N/S Pair <b>#2</b>	1.5 / 4.0 = 37.5%
N/S Pair <b>#3</b>	1.5 / 4.0 = 37.5%
N/S Pair <b>#4</b>	1.5 / 4.0 = 37.5%
N/S Pair <b>#5</b>	1.5 / 4.0 = 37.5%

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. Thanks!  
Now I understand that there are **2 strategies** for optimizing your Trick Count when as Declarer you are playing **NT** contracts. Would you now talk us through both of these strategies?

**Optimization Strategy #1:  
Playing for a 3-3 "Split" to  
"Promote" a 13<sup>th</sup> Card in a Suit**

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, once Dummy comes down, and you as Declarer count (1) both your certain and "possible" "winners", and (2) the number of cards you and Dummy hold in each Suit, you must pay *special attention* to any Suit in which you and Dummy hold **4 and 3** or **3 and 4** cards. This means that your Opponents between them hold  $13 - 7 = 6$  cards.

**Bruce:** Errr, Esther. OK. What does that mean??? **WHY** is that important?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, when your Opponents hold **6** cards in a Suit, there are **4** possible "splits". Because **6** is an "even" and **not** an "odd" number, the "equal" "split" is not the most likely "split"! The "split" probabilities are: (1) 3-3, 35.5%, (2) 4-2, **48.4%**, (3) 5-1, 14.5%, and (4) 6-0, 1.5%. Nevertheless, a 3-3 "split" is *fairly likely* (**35.5%**) albeit not most likely (**48.4%**).

**Bruce:** OK, Esther. But what does this mean with respect to your "promoting" low cards into "winners" and "extra" Tricks?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, when Opponents hold **6** cards in a Suit when you are playing a **NT** contract,

**If you play 3 Rounds of the Suit in a NT contract,  
and no player sluffs during these 3 Rounds of play,  
the 13<sup>th</sup> card will then be "promoted" into a  
"winner". That 13<sup>th</sup> card will win after 12 of the 13**

**cards in Suit have been played, even if that 13<sup>th</sup> card is “low”, such as a 4 or a 3, or even if that 13<sup>th</sup> card is a 2!**

**Bruce:** OK, Esther. Could you give us an example Board to make this discussion more concrete?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, of course! Consider the following Board:

NORTH (17)			
S: A Q J 4 3			
H: A K			
D: K 9 8			
C: T 9 7			
WEST (6)		EAST (6)	
S: 7 6 5		S: 9 8	
H: T 6 3 2		H: J 7 5 4	
D: Q 7 6		D: J 5 4 2	
C: A 6 3		C: K J 2	
SOUTH (11)			
S: K T 2			
H: Q 9 8			
D: A T 3			
C: Q 8 5 4			

**Bidding**

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

**Bruce:** Well, Esther, EAST will lead either 4<sup>th</sup> from the “top” of his Heart or Diamond holdings, and usually from the “higher” ranking Suit when holding 2 unbid Suits of equal length. So, EAST will lead his Heart 4 since neither Pair made a Suit bid during the auction. This will allow Partner WEST (and the Declarer) to invoke the “**Rule of 11**” to determine how many cards higher than the Heart 4 the Opponents hold. Because  $11 - 4 = 7$ , and the SOUTH Dummy holds 3 Heart cards higher than the Heart 4, and WEST holds 2 Heart cards higher than EAST’s led Heart 4, therefore WEST knows that Declarer NORTH holds  $7 - 3 - 2 = 2$  Hearts higher than the led Heart 4. But where can Declarer NORTH make an “extra” Trick in order to try to get a “top” Board?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, Declarer NORTH can see that he can stop E/W from “running” any long Suit. This gives Declarer NORTH the

opportunity at every turn "on lead" to lead a Club to try to "promote" a "low" SOUTH Dummy Club into a winner! Of course, if Declarer NORTH saw that the 3NT contract (1) would "make", but that (2) E/W could "run" a "long" Suit, Declarer NORTH would not pursue this effort to "promote" a Club "winner"! When Opponents can "run" a long Suit, and you see that you can "make" your contract, do so "off the top". But that is not the case on this Board!

**Bruce:** WOW, Esther, that is AMAZING! YOU, are AMAZING!

**Optimization Strategy #2:  
Relentlessly Attacking a "Long" Suit to  
"Promote" Low Cards in a "Long" Suit Into "Winners"**

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, let's now consider a second Board which instead involves either Declarer or the Dummy holding a "long" Suit when playing a NT contract:

NORTH (14)			
S:	A Q J T		
H:	A K T 9 7		
D:	T 8		
C:	T 8		
WEST (6)		EAST (4)	
S:	K 9 4 2	S:	8 7 6 5
H:	8 3 2	H:	J 6 5
D:	Q J 9 7	D:	6 5 3 2
C:	9 2	C:	K 3
SOUTH (16)			
S: 3			
H: Q 4			
D: A K 4			
C: A Q J 7 6 5 4			

**Bidding**

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
2D <sup>2</sup>	PASS	3NT	PASS
PASS	PASS		

<sup>2</sup>This is an "artificial" bid that **must** be Alerted!, not showing 6 Diamonds, and *instead* showing (1) 5+ Hearts and exactly 4 Spades, (2) 11-14 HCPs with (3) the HCPs concentrated in the 2 Majors. Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention Lesson #6: The Flannery 2D! Opening":

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/flannery.pdf>

**Bruce:** OK, Esther. EAST leads his Spade 8 as "top of nothing" and the "top" of 3+ "touching" cards. I notice that on this Board, as was the case with the first Board, Declarer NORTH does not have to "make" his **NT** contract "off the top", because N/S hold ample "stoppers" or "control" cards across all the Suits. How should the NORTH Declarer play this Board?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, given that both Opponents were silent during the auction, once on lead Declarer NORTH should play or lead to the Dummy Club Ace, because "9 ever, 8 never" and try to "drop" the Opponents' Club King rather than finesse toward the SOUTH Dummy Club Ace. Of course, N/S together hold 4 of the "top" 5 Clubs, including the "touching" Q,J,T Club sequence, and if a Club finesse toward Declarer's Hand is tried and fails some of the cards in this "touching" sequence will nevertheless be "promoted."

**Bruce:** OK, Esther. If Declarer NORTH is on lead, and leads a low Club from his Hand, EAST will probably play "2<sup>nd</sup> Hand low", and not play his Club King. So, E/W will eventually win 1 Club if Declarer NORTH does not finesse. Is that correct?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, that's bridge! But Declarer NORTH is nevertheless going to take a ton of Clubs on this Board and must *relentlessly* attack Clubs throughout his play of the Hand.