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Esther Discusses "A Note on Playing NT Contracts as Declarer: Is NT a 'Race', or a 'Slog', or Sometimes One, Sometimes the Other?"

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An often repeated canard in bridge is the cliché:

1NT is the hardest contract to "make" in bridge!

Of course, other **NT** contracts, such as **3NT**, also present their own special challenges for the Declarer!

These **NT** challenges are most acute in *duplicate* bridge, as against *social* bridge. In *social* bridge taking or not taking 1 extra Overtrick, or Trick above the level required to "make" the contract, will have a small and usually *inconsequential* affect on your overall results for the day. However, in *duplicate* bridge, a single Overtrick can have *massive* impacts on your Board Percentage, and even a noteworthy impact on your competition Total Percentage!

Impact of a Single Board Percentage

For example, if you are in a competition involving 30 Pairs sitting N/S, and you are playing a **3NT** contract, and you make **1 Overtrick**, and the other 29 N/S Pairs exactly make their **3NT** contracts, your N/S Pair will earn the "top" Board Matchpoints and "top" Board Percentage.

The "top" Board Matchpoints, assuming no ties in Bridge Scores on the Board, as is the case in our example, will equal $30 - 1 = 29.0$. The Total number of Matchpoints awarded on the Board will be:

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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**.

$$\begin{aligned}
 & [30 (30 - 1)] / 2 = \\
 & [30 (29)] / 2 = \\
 & 870 / 2 = \mathbf{435}
 \end{aligned}$$

Your Board Percentage will equal your Matchpoints divided by the mathematically maximum possible Matchpoint score, or:

$$29.0 / 29 = 1.0 = \mathbf{100.0\%}$$

Your 29 opposing N/S Pairs will each earn an *exactly equal* Matchpoint score, reflecting their *exactly equal* Bridge Scores on the Board:

$$435 - 29.0 = 406 / 29 = \mathbf{14.0}$$

And

$$\begin{aligned}
 & 29.0 + [14.0 (29)] = \\
 & 29.0 + 406 = \mathbf{435}
 \end{aligned}$$

And each of the other 29 N/S Pairs will earn a Board Percentage of $14.0 / 29 = \mathbf{48.3\%}$!

And you as Declarer taking this 1 Overtrick on this single Board has a very noteworthy impact on your Total Bridge Percentage in the day's competition. Let's say the competition involved playing 18 Boards. The net impact of the 1 Overtrick equals the impact of your making this Overtrick versus **not** making this 1 Overtrick. If all 30 N/S Pairs had made exactly **3NT**, every N/S Pair would have earned an equal Board Percentage of 50.0%. So, your Percentage of 100.0% as against 50.0% improved your Total Bridge Percentage by:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & [100.0\% - 50.0\%] / 18 = \\
 & 50.0\% / 18 = \mathbf{2.8},
 \end{aligned}$$

or almost **3%** Total Percentage units!

The impact of that 2.8% on your Overall Competition ranking can be *quite dramatic*, especially if you are in the *middle* of the competition where numerous N/S Pairs will have *nearly-equal* Total Percentage! A relatively small change in your Total Percentage if you are in the *middle* of the competition can move you below or above numerous other N/S Pairs when you are near where many N/S Pairs have *very similar* Total Percentages!

NT **Nightmare**: NT as a "Race" Scenario

Every **NT** Declarer's nightmare scenario is that Opponents hold a "long" Suit which you do not have "stopped", or at least not "stopped" before your Opponents can "run" their long Suit. Let's say that you sit NORTH as Declarer. A potentially "nightmarish" holding in a **3NT** contract might involve you holding:

NORTH (17)

S: A K J 8

H: 9 5 4

D: A Q 9

C: K T 8

SOUTH (8)

S: Q 2

H: T 8 6

D: K 7 5

C: Q J 9 5

These holdings suggest that E/W PASSEd at every turn, because if an Opponent had bid Hearts, you should not have set this **3NT** contract, because both N/S Partners can see that N/S do not have E/W's Hearts "stopped"!

The E/W Opponents hold **8** Hearts, including the "top" **4** Hearts! It is *unlikely* that E/W will fail to discern their opportunity to "run" their long Heart holding, or that whichever Opponent is on lead will fail to lead a Heart. In **NT** contracts Defenders and Declarer will generally both want to focus their *primary* attention on "attacking" *their respective long-Suit holdings*!

However, in the unlikely event that E/W do not make an initial lead of a Heart, Declarer NORTH will then be in the proverbial **NT "race"** to take as many Tricks "off the top" as he possibly can in order to try to make his contract, and in order to force E/W to discard "sure" winners, or at least to try to guess what cards they show "throw off"!

Playing NT with "Balanced" Hands: Usual Scenario

Suit contracts play well when Partners hold long Trumps hopefully combined with "shortness" in one or more "side" Suits (e.g., 6-1-2-4, 5-0-6-2), and possibly complimentary length in another "side" Suit. **NT** contracts, however, generally play well when Hands are "flat" or "balanced" (e.g., 4-3-3-3, 3-4-3-3, 3-3-4-3, or 3-3-3-4), because the focus in **NT** contracts is on "control", or "stoppers", and "balanced" holdings imply "control" across all Suits, and being able to preclude Defenders "running" long Suits!

Here are holdings reflecting common **NT** distributions:

NORTH (17)

S: A K J 8

H: 9 5 4

D: A Q 9

C: K T 8

SOUTH (10)

S: Q 2

H: K Q T 8

D: J 7 5

C: Q 9 7 5

These Hands involve "first-Round" control in Spades and Diamonds, paired with "second-Round" control in Hearts and Clubs. The Declarer knows once Dummy comes down that even if he loses "control", he will inevitably quickly regain "control"!

Playing NT with "Non-Balanced" Hands: "Slog" Scenario

In some situations you may end up playing a **NT** contract when one Hand in your Partnerships holds a "long" Suit, such as:

NORTH (17)

S: A K J 8

H: 9 5 4

D: A Q 9

C: K T 8

SOUTH (10)

S: Q 2

H: K Q 9

D: K

C: 9 7 6 5 4 3 2

These holdings involve a case in which a **NT** contract is **not, not, not** a "race" to take Tricks before you lose "control". Instead, these holdings are an example of when (1) you can afford to lose "control" several times, and (2) indeed you should *intentionally*, and repeatedly, give up "control".

As Marti Ronemus emphasizes, in her excellent bridge modules and bundles on the "bridgebee.app" and "vubridge.com" websites, especially in **NT**, **never, ever, never ignore** a long suit as a potential source for "promoting" even very lowly cards into winners!!!

With these holdings, you as Declarer have first-Round or second-Round "control" in every Suit *except* Clubs. **YOU WANT TO "PROMOTE" CLUB WINNERS IN DUMMY**, even though Dummy holds very

low Clubs, but holds *lots* of them! You as Declarer also must retain repeated entries into Dummy!

You hold 3 "first-Round" entries to Dummy in Spades, Hearts, and Diamonds. You do not want to use these Dummy entries until you have "drawn" all 3 of the E/W Club cards! So every time you gain "control" in the NORTH Declarer's Hand, you are going to lead a Club there until "mission accomplished". Then, gain entry in Dummy SOUTH, and play all your numerous remaining Club winners in Dummy, including your very lowly Club 2, Club 3, or Club 4!

Esther Says



NT is not, *not, not* always about "racing" to take "winning" Tricks as rapidly as you can early in play. Sometimes playing a NT contract is *better* played as a "slog" rather than as a "race"!