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Beware the Bridge "Rule of 7"!

**Esther Teaches Donkey¹ from the Movie with
Shr*k & Fi*na the Correct Use of the Bridge "Rule of 7"**

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen²

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

<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

Esther: Today we are *pleasantly* surprised that Bruce has temporarily escaped to holidays! We will not speculate where he is, or about what nefarious activities he is pursuing. But we will try to enjoy the *peace* and *tranquility* advanced by his temporary absence!

Today, in the absence of that *rapscallion* Bruce, our *Guest Student* is **Donkey**, the stand-out star from that movie with Skr*k and Fi*ona. **Donkey**, do have anything to say before we begin our lesson about the bridge "**Rule of 7**"?



Donkey: Well, yes, Esther, I would *indeed* like to say a few words of wisdom. *Me! Me, me, me, me, me, me!* Also, *me!* And *me. Me! Me! Me!*

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, thank you *very much* for that! As usual your contributions to our dialogs simply *cannot* be overstated!

Donkey: Errr, well, sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. Well, at the outset, would you *first* review what the "**Rules of Bridge**" are?

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¹ **Donkey** is actually, like Esther, a not real, *fictitious* character!

² 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.

Esther: Well, Bruce, I would indeed be *happy* to provide that brief review! First, I need to emphasize that the “**Rules of Bridge**” are in fact not really rules. The “**Rules of Bridge**” should not be confused with the “**ACBL Laws of Duplicate Bridge**”,³ which set out (1) how players are to conduct themselves during bridge competitions and (2) the “corrective” actions that ACBL competition Directors⁴ (who are like “referees”) will implement when rules infractions occur.

Donkey: Errr, well, Esther... Ummm... Errr... OK. So what are the “**Rules of Bridge**”?

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, the “Rules of Bridge” are *general guidelines* about how bridge players should bid or play. Some of these rules have well-known origins. For example, it is well known that Marty Bergen (1948 -) was the progenitor of the very important “**Rule of 20**”.⁵ There are approximately **40 or so** “Rules” that have been popularized through the course of bridge history.⁶

Donkey: OK, Esther... So exactly what is this “**Rule of 7**”?

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, the “**Rule of 7**” says, “When you are playing as Declarer in a **NT** contract, you should add together the number of cards held in the Opponents’ led Suit in both Dummy and your Hand. You should ‘duck’ or not ‘cover’ the cards led by the Opponents for 7 - the number of cards held in both Hands for that number of Rounds of play.” For example, if your Opponent leads the Diamond 7,

³ See the “**ACBL Laws of Duplicate Bridge**” at:

<https://web2.acbl.org/documentlibrary/play/Laws-of-Duplicate-Bridge.pdf>

⁴ For more information about “**Where ACBL Directors Come From, and Their Duties**”, go to:

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

⁵ Bergen’s “**Rule of 20**” says, “You can and *should* open with a Suit bid if the sum of (1) your HCPs and (2) the number of cards in your longest **2** Suits equals **20** more.” This rule honors the facts that (1) 2-Suited Hands play very well in Suit contracts, and that (2) the odds of finding a “fit” with Partner go up enormously when you hold a 2-Suited Hand.

⁶ With the “**Esther Bridge Lessons**”, see: “**Some of the 40 or So Bridge Bidding/Play ‘Rules’**”:

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

and the Dummy holds **3** Diamonds, and you hold **3** Diamonds, because $3 + 3 = 6$, and $7 - 6 = 1$, you should "duck" for **1** Round of play of Diamonds, even if in fact you had a "stopper" and *could* win Trick **#1**.

Donkey: Well, Esther... What is the purpose of this "**Rule of 7**"?

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, the "**Rule of 7**" is intended to optimize how many Tricks you as Declarer can take when playing **NT**. The Opponents in a **NT** contract are always going to "attack" relentlessly what they believe is your "shortest" Suit, the Suit in which presumably you have the fewest "stoppers". It turns out that in some situations you can take more Tricks *in the long run* if you "duck" initially for a certain number of Rounds of play.

Donkey: OK, Esther... Can you give me an example of this subtle bridge phenomenon?

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, there is a free YouTube channel created by Maggie Hadley that has some *great* instructional bridge videos for whom she calls "beginners and improvers": "**Oasis Bridge Tuiton**". The relevant (*great, clear, crystal*) lesson on that YouTube video channel is "**Rule of 7: Does It Work?**":

<https://oasisbridgetuition.co.uk/bridge-videos/rule-of-7>

Donkey: Well, OK, Esther. So should we always *rigidly* apply this "**Rule of 7**"?

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, the two words, "bridge" and "rigidly", do not generally go well together. Bridge is always a game requiring *thoughtfulness, flexibility, and insightfulness*. We will now turn our attention to "exceptions" to the "Rule" in order to illustrate the import of the thoughtful use of the "**Rule of 7**".

Some of the *best* free bridge lessons on the web are those provided by Larry Cohen (1959 -) and his colleagues. Cohen was the Partner of the previously mentioned Marty Bergen when they together won numerous bridge championships. Cohen with various Partners has won **25** North American Bridge Championships. Cohen was also the author of what is probably the most important bridge book of all time, the 1992 To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total

Tricks, which won the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) "Best Bridge Book of the Year Award".

Donkey: OK. What does Cohen think of the "Rule of 7"?

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, he is generally not a fan! Indeed, arguably the best of all his hundreds (or thousands) of bridge lessons on his website is his lesson, "Rule of 7".⁷ Here is what Cohen says in the first few lines of his "Rule of 7" web posting:

"Rules? Schmules. There are too many 'Rules of #x' out there. I prefer the Rule of Thinking."

Donkey: Yikes!!!

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, we are now going to go through Cohen's 4 example Boards involving **NT** contracts in which the "Rule of 7" provides potentially *improvident* advice.

⁷ Go to: <https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/rule-of-7>

Example #1⁸

Contract: 3NT SOUTH

	NORTH (13)	
	S: K 9 2	
	H: 5	
	D: K Q J T 9 8	
	C: A 7 6	
WEST (2)		EAST (14)
S: T 7 3		S: 8 6 5
H: Q T 7 3		H: K J 9 4
D: 6 4		D: A 5
C: T 5 4 2		C: K Q J 9
	SOUTH (11)	
	S: A Q J 4	
	H: A 8 6 2	
	D: 7 3 2	
	C: 8 3	

WEST leads 4th from the "top" of his "longest" Suit, Hearts, by leading the Heart 3.

Declarer SOUTH counts **1** Heart in the NORTH Dummy plus **4** Hearts in SOUTH Declarer's Hand. The "**Rule of 7**" says $1 + 4 = 5$, and $7 - 5 = 2$, so "duck" for **2** Rounds of Heart play.

Declarer South can see as sure "winners" **4** Spades, **1** Heart, and **1** Club, as well as *possibly* as many as **5** Diamond "winners". Declarer SOUTH also sees a profound danger. If Declarer SOUTH "ducks" on the Heart lead on Trick #1 E/W may discover their potentially *devastating* "fit" in Clubs.

Declarer SOUTH should take early winners while reserving a "stopper" in each Suit, and especially preserve "transportation" to the NORTH Dummy. Then Declarer SOUTH can "attack" Diamonds twice to "promote" all Dummy NORTH's remaining Diamonds!

"**Rule of 7**" says, "Duck **2** times."

Cohen says, "Duck **0** times."

⁸ These 4 Boards have been *slightly* modified by Esther.

Example #2

EAST opens 2**H**

Contract: 3**NT** SOUTH

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

WEST leads his Partner EAST's bid Suit, Hearts, by leading his Heart King.

Declarer SOUTH counts **1** Heart in the NORTH Dummy plus **4** Hearts in SOUTH Declarer's Hand. The "**Rule of 7**" says $1 + 4 = 5$, and $7 - 5 = 2$, so "duck" for **2** Rounds of Heart play.

Declarer South can see as sure "winners" **1** Spade, **1** Heart, **6** Clubs, and possibly **1** Diamond. Declarer SOUTH also sees that N/S are missing both the Spade King and the Heart King.

Here Declarer SOUTH on Trick **#1** ought to "duck" Hearts **1** time, on Trick **#2** win with his Heart Ace, and then on Trick **#3** lead to the NORTH Dummy Club Ace. On Trick **#4** lead a Spade from the NORTH Dummy for a finesse on the "off" chance that EAST with a "weak" Hand holds the Spade King. If the finesse works N/S will make at least **9** Tricks and make their **3NT** contract.

If this *unlikely* Spade finesse fails then N/S are going down big time. But then N/S bid **3NT** knowing that they faced a "big" Heart "stack." That's life at the bridge table! But when you have only one way to "make" your contract, that's the way you should play.

"**Rule of 7**" says, "Duck **2** times."

Cohen says, "Duck **1** time."

Example #3

Contract: 3NT SOUTH

	NORTH (6)	
	S: T 7 4	
	H: 5	
	D: K 9 8	
	C: Q J T 9 8 4	
WEST (7)		EAST (9)
S: Q 9 3		S: J 8 6 2
H: K J 8 6 2		H: Q T 4
D: J 7 3		D: Q T 5 2
C: 7 5		C: A 6
	SOUTH (18)	
	S: A K 5	
	H: A 9 7 3	
	D: A 6 4	
	C: K 3 2	

WEST leads 4th from the "top" of his "longest" Suit, Hearts, by leading the Heart 6.

Declarer SOUTH counts **1** Heart in the NORTH Dummy plus **4** Hearts in SOUTH Declarer's Hand. The "**Rule of 7**" says $1 + 4 = 5$, and $7 - 5 = 2$, so "duck" for **2** Rounds of Heart play.

Declarer South can see as sure "winners" **2** Spades, **1** Heart, **2** Diamonds, as well as *possibly* as many as **5** Club "winners". Declarer SOUTH also sees that N/S are missing **8** Hearts. If the Heart "split" is 4-4 you will lose as many as 3 Heart Tricks. But the most likely Heart "split" is 5-3 (5-3 probability: **47%**; 4-4 probability: **33%**; 6-2 probability: **17%**).

If the Hearts are "split" **4-4** you will lose **3** Heart Tricks, regardless of whether you do or do not "duck". If the Hearts are "split" **6-2** holding up once will be sufficient. But of course, you do not know yet what the Heart "split" is. Holding up **2** times accommodates the most probable Heart "split" of **5-3**.

On Trick **#1** you "duck" and EAST win with his Heart Queen. On Trick **#2** you then "duck" on EAST's Heart Ten. You then win Trick **#3** with your Declarer SOUTH Heart Ace. If the Defender holding **5** Hearts also holds the Club Ace you will be in *big* trouble because that Defender will eventually win the Club Trick and run the remainder of his Hearts.

Happily, on this Board WEST held the 5 Hearts, but EAST held the Club A,x. If you "hold up" twice you will take **10** Tricks.

"**Rule of 7**" says, "Duck **2** times."

Cohen says, "Duck **2** times."

Example #4

Contract: 3NT SOUTH

NORTH (13)

S: K 9 6

H: 5

D: A Q 8 7 3

C: A T 9 5

WEST (6)

S: T 9 7 4

H: K Q J T

D: 9 5

C: 7 3 2

EAST (4)

S: 5 3 2

H: 9 7 6 3

D: K J T 4

C: 6 4

SOUTH (17)

S: A Q J

H: A 8 4 2

D: 6 2

C: K Q J 8

WEST leads his Heart King, the "top" of 3 "touching Honors".

Declarer SOUTH counts **1** Heart in the NORTH Dummy plus **4** Hearts in SOUTH Declarer's Hand. The "**Rule of 7**" says $1 + 4 = 5$, and $7 - 5 = 2$, so "duck" for **2** Rounds of Heart play.

Declarer South can see as sure "winners" **3** Spades, **1** Heart, **1** Diamond, as well as **4** Clubs. You will surely make your **3NT** contract! But can you take an *ever-important* duplicate bridge Overtrick?

The obvious source of an Overtrick is a Diamond finesse. But is the finesse safe or might you endanger your contract that will definitely make otherwise? If you win your Heart early and then take your Diamond finesse, the Defenders may then set you by running Hearts. You do not know if the Defenders are 4-4 (probability: **33%**) or the more likely 5-3 (**47%**) in Hearts! It will be better to hold up to take your Heart winner on Trick **#4** so you can take your Diamond finesse *safely* because you will

then know that the Hearts indeed "split" 4-4 and there is *no further danger* of being damaged in Hearts!

"Rule of 7" says, "Duck 2 times."

Cohen says, "Duck 3 times."

Donkey: Wow, Esther. That exposition was AMAZING! Does this all mean that the astute bridge player should *ignore* the "Rule of 7"?

Esther: Well, **Donkey**, I would not say that. I don't entirely agree with Cohen that the "Rule of 7" is useless. But I do agree with Cohen that this "rule", like many of the bridge "rules" and "maxims", must *never* be applied rigidly. There is of course *no substitute* in duplicate bridge for thinking!

Essentially what Cohen is saying is that you have to try to estimate the *idiosyncratic* dangers on every **individual NT** Board you are playing as Declarer.

Example #1: Opponents Hold 2 "Danger" Suits. On some Boards you may see that Opponents have a "long" Suit (or 2 Suits!) that they can "run" if you give up the lead, and you want to take "winners" early in the hope that the Opponents will make improvident discard decisions. On Example #1 you see that you will take 1 Club and 1 Heart "winner", while Opponents if the Club and Heart "splits" are *both* somewhat less likely 4-4 "splits" may take 3 Clubs and 3 Hearts. You *must* set up the NORTH Dummy Diamonds, and hope against hope that E/W will be distracted by their Heart "fit" and seeing the Club Ace in the NORTH Dummy not discover their Clubs. Your only hope is to "duck" 0 times and hope for a miracle.

Example #2: Your Contract Turns on a "Risky" Finesse. You and Partner have bid 3NT over Opponents' 2H preempt opening, which given your holdings is *risky* to say the least! "Hold up" 1 time and then take your chances on a risky finesse that is your *only* way to possibly make your contract.

Example #3: You Must Gamble on a Certain Opponent's King Placement. On some Boards with Opponents holding a "long" Suit against your NT contract the critical *idiosyncratic* Board feature on which your results

hinge involves where a missing King is held by Opponents. If you must play for a certain King placement in order to make your contract you must do so. Of course, there is some solace in the fact that other N/S Pairs will confront exactly the same situation. So you "duck" **2** times and hope for the best.

Example **#4**: You Must Ascertain Opponents' Suit "Split" to Determine When by "Holding Up" You Have Exhausted a Dangerous Suit Held by Opponents. On some Boards you want to let the Opponents take their *inevitable* Tricks so that they become toothless and the danger is eliminated. So you "duck" **3** times hoping to find a 4-4 rather than a 5-3 "split" and then make your move.