

**"As Declarer a Type of 'Coup Endplay' Called the
'Smother Play' Can Work Miracles
When Certain Rare Conditions Occur"**

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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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 discuss **"As Declarer a Type of 'Coup Play' Called the 'Smother Play' Can Work Miracles When Certain Rare Conditions Occur"**. Well, Esther, thank you for talking to us today!

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

Bruce: Errr, well, Est... err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, sorry about that. Well, at the start would you remind us first of what an **"Coup Play"** is?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. A "coup" is one of a variety of bridge **"endplays."** As noted in "Esther Bridge Dialogue Lesson #68: **"A Brief Review of 8 Bridge 'Coup' Plays: From 'Bath' to 'Vienna'":²**

"Merriam-Webster's defines a 'coup' as 'a sudden decisive exercise of force' often involving a 'violent overthrow or alteration'. In duplicate bridge, **'Coup'** refers to a *diverse* set of

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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.

² Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see: <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/coup.pdf>

different play strategies for *different* situations, each given specific descriptive names (e.g., 'Scissors Coup', 'Merrimac Coup', 'Vienna Coup'), that can be used to structure the Opponents' 'Lines of Play' in ways that are favorable to the player executing the '**Coup**'. '**Coups**' have as a feature Opponents being generally unable to escape the '**Coup**' effects once the '**Coup**' is implemented."

One variation of a "**Coup**" or "**Endplay**" is the "**Smother Play**". Here is an explanation presented on the "Bernard Magee Bridge" website posting, "Smother Play":³

"[A '**Smother Play**' is] A rare endplay in which you can cause a seemingly certain losing trump trick⁴ to vanish. For this to work [1] the defending hand with trump length must have *only* trumps left while [2] his partner [the other Defender] must [a] have the lead and [b] be able *only* to play suits in which *both* declarer and dummy are void. When his partner's lead is ruffed, the defender with the trump length faces the choice of underruffing or overruffing and being overruffed again. For example:

	S A	
	H -	
	D 9	
	C -	
S K 7		S -
H -		H J T
D -		D -
C -		C -
	S Q J	
	H -	
	D -	
	C -	

³ See: <https://bernardmageebridge.com/glossary/smother-play/>

⁴ While the "**Smother Play**" can be employed in the Trump Suit in Suit contracts the "**Smother Play**" can also be used in **NT** contracts to deal with "missing" Honors.

With spades as trumps, East, on lead, plays a heart. You, South [as Declarer], ruff and subject West to a 'smother play' or coup. You will play dummy's ace of trumps on this trick only if West overruffs with the king."
[emphasis and enumeration added]

Bruce: Errr, well... Err, I mean... Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, are there any other good bridge articles about the "**Smother Play**" that you can recommend?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will try to help you. I recommend Brian Senior's article, "The Smother Play", published September 10, 2017 on the "World Bridge Federation" website:
<http://youth.worldbridge.org/the-smother-play-by-brian-senior/>
and Robert S. Todd's article, "Smother Plays" on the "Adventures in Bridge" website:
<https://www.advinbridge.com/this-week-in-bridge/495>

Bruce: Oh, my, goodness, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! You are blowin' me away! Well, in any case, can you give us an illustrative bridge Board so that this discussion is more concrete?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. I on my "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" website have previously recommended the "**BBO Bridge Master**" website:
<https://www.bridgebase.com/v3/anon/bridgemaster>
The "**BBO Bridge Master**" website allows you to declare your skill level, then shows a series of Hands and announces the final contract, each of which you then play as Declarer. At the end of play you can then request a solution in which the optimal "Line of Play" is discussed step by step. Here in the current posting I will use the *free* "**BBO Bridge Master**" Level-4 **Lesson C-26** which gives you the opportunity to see and *repeatedly practice* playing our example bridge Board. Note that across repeated play "**BBO Bridge Master**" may change some Hands in given lessons. I may have altered some cards in some Hands on this bridge Board.

BBO Bridge Master Level 4 Lesson C-26

Dealer: **EAST**

	NORTH (11)	
	S: 5 3 2	
	H: A 6 4	
	D: 6 4	
	C: A K 7 6 4	
WEST (7)		EAST (6)
S: J T 8		S: K Q 9 7 6 4
H: K 5 3 2		H: --
D: T 9 8 7		D: J 5 3 2
C: Q J		C: T 9 8
	SOUTH (16)	
	S: A	
	H: Q J T 9 8 7	
	D: A K Q	
	C: 5 3 2	

Bidding

EAST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
2S	3H	PASS	5H
PASS	6H	PASS	PASS
PASS			

WEST leads the Spade Jack, the "highest" card in Partner EAST's 2S bid Spades.

Bruce: Oh, my, goodness, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! Once the NORTH Dummy is exposed Declarer SOUTH sees what looks like 2 "losers" when playing his 6H contract: 1 Club and possibly 1 Heart, the Heart King.

Esther: Well, Bruce, there are 3 ways that Declarer SOUTH could deal with the "missing" Heart King. *First*, SOUTH could play to "drop" the Heart King by playing the NORTH Dummy's Heart Ace. However, N/S together hold only 6 + 3 = 9 Hearts so therefore a King "drop" is unlikely. Given EAST's "weak" Hand initially holding 6 Spades WEST likely has long Hearts, the Heart King, and the Heart King is "protected". *Second*, Declarer SOUTH could run repeated finesses. But if WEST holds the Heart K,x,x,x that's going to be a boatload of finesses!

Third, SOUTH could try to take care of the "missing" Heart King with a "**Smother Play**". Let's talk through the play of this Board Trick-by-Trick and see how Declarer SOUTH may be able to use a "**Smother Play**" to "*smother*" the

Heart King and possibly effectively make the Heart King "vanish".

On Trick #1 Declarer SOUTH "wins" with his own Spade Ace. On Trick #2 SOUTH leads the Trump Heart Queen for a finesse and indeed EAST shows "out" of Hearts and discards a Spade. This seems to suggest a *certain* "loser" for N/S in Hearts. And remember that SOUTH also seems to have a certain Club "loser"!

Bruce: Errr, well... Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Oh my goodness. Yikes! What can Declarer SOUTH do? Is the 6H contract doomed???

Esther: Well, Bruce, E/W together hold 13 - 5 - 3 = 5 Clubs. When there is an "odd" number of "missing" cards the most likely Suit "split" is the *nearly-equal* 3-2 "split".⁵ EAST "showed" 6 Spades with his opening 2S bid. Because EAST also initially held 0 Hearts, it is entirely possible that EAST initially held 3 Clubs and WEST initially held 2 Clubs.

Bruce: Errr, well, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what should Declarer SOUTH lead from his "closed" Hand on Trick #3?

Esther: Well, Bruce, on Trick #3 Declarer SOUTH should finesse again in Hearts. EAST again discards a Spade. On Trick #4 Declarer SOUTH should lead a "low" Club to the NORTH Dummy's Club King. WEST plays the Club Jack which suggests that WEST may have initially held the Club Q, J.

On Trick #5 SOUTH leads a NORTH Dummy "low" Spade toward his own "closed" Hand for a ruff. On Trick #6 Declarer SOUTH leads a "low" Club from his "closed" Hand. EAST plays the Club Queen and SOUTH "covers" with the NORTH Dummy Club Ace. On Trick #7 the NORTH Dummy's last Spade is led for another ruff by Declarer SOUTH. On Tricks #8-#10 Declarer SOUTH "cashes" his Diamond A, K, Q.

⁵ As noted in the "Esther Bridge Lesson", "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

the probability of a 3-2 "split" is 67.8%, the probability of a 4-1 "split" is 28.3%, and the probability of a 5-0 "split" is 3.9%. So a 3-2 "split" is 2.4 times more likely than a 4-1 "split".

After **10** Tricks N/S have "won" **10** Tricks and E/W have "won" **0** Tricks. The **3** cards held in each of the **4** Hands are:

		NORTH (11)		
		S:		
		H: A		
		D:		
		C: 7 6		
WEST (7)			EAST (6)	
S:			S: K	
H: K 5			H: --	
D: T			D: J	
C:			C: T	
		SOUTH (16)		
		S:		
		H: T 9		
		D:		
		C: 5		

On Trick **#11** Declarer SOUTH exits with his last Club. WEST plays his Diamond 10, Declarer SOUTH discards a "low" Club from the NORTH Dummy, and EAST "wins" with his Club Ten. On Trick **#12** EAST **must** return either a Spade or a Diamond. Declarer SOUTH ruffs with either the Trump Heart Ten or 9 (he has no choice). If on Trick **#12** WEST plays his Trump Heart 5 Declarer SOUTH will sluff the NORTH Dummy's last Club and on Trick **#13** will "smother" WEST's Trump Heart King with his Trump Heart Ace. If on Trick **#12** WEST instead plays his Trump Heart King Declarer SOUTH will "smother" with the NORTH Dummy's Trump Heart Ace and on Trick **#13** will lead the NORTH Dummy's last Club for a ruff in his "closed" Hand and WEST will play his Trump Heart 5. The **6H** contract is made via a "Smother Play"!



Esther says...

I, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master and holder of 20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints, *strongly* recommend that you *immediately* proceed to the “**BBO Bridge Master**” website. Once there click on **SKILL LEVEL 4**. Next, click on **SELECT DEAL** and then click **C-26**. Then play that Board as Declarer. Play the Board at least 1 time and preferably 4 or 10 times to practice executing the “**Smother Endplay**” play!