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Esther Discusses "As Declarer Your Partnership Holds 9 Trump Cards With A,K But Not the Queen: Playing '*8 Ever, 9 Never*' versus Culbertson's '*Law of Symmetry*' versus Larry Cohen's '*Inquisitive, Exploratory Play as Declarer*'"

Bruce Thompson

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 "**As Declarer Your Partnership Hold 9 Trump Cards With A,K But Not the Queen: Playing '*8 Ever, 9 Never*' versus Culbertson's '*Law of Symmetry*' versus Larry Cohen's '*Inquisitive, Exploratory Play 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 a "warm and caring" person!

Bruce: Errr, well, sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast…, err, I mean Esther. Well, at the outset, prior to discussing the *3 alternative philosophies* to approach play as Declarer when your Partnership holds **9** Trump cards, but are *missing* the Trump Queen, would you first talk us through the *statistical aspects* of this situation?

Esther: Well, my *gracious giver*, of course I would be *happy* to provide that brief review! Let's assume that the contract is set 4**H** in the SOUTH, and once the NORTH Dummy comes down you see that N/S hold **9** Trump Hearts and E/W hold the Q,9,6,5. A review of some basic bridge probabilities may be

helpful. With E/W holding the Q,9,6,5 there are **16** possible "splits" for the **4** missing Heart Trump cards:

02 *4-0* "Splits"

#01 (4-0)	E: Q 9 6 5	W: --
#02 (0-4)	E: --	W: Q 9 6 5

08 *3-1* "Splits"

#03 (3-1)	E: Q 9 6	W: 5
#04 (3-1)	E: 5	W: Q 9 6
#05 (3-1)	E: Q 9 5	W: 6
#06 (3-1)	E: 6	W: Q 9 5
#07 (3-1)	E: Q 6 5	W: 9
#08 (3-1)	E: 9	W: Q 6 5
#09 (3-1)	**E: 9 6 5**	**W: Q**
#10 (3-1)	**E: Q**	**W: 9 6 5**

06 *2-2* "Splits"

#11 (2-2)	**E: Q 9**	**W: 6 5**
#12 (2-2)	**E: 6 5**	**W: Q 9**
#13 (2-2)	**E: Q 6**	**W: 9 5**
#14 (2-2)	**E: 9 5**	**W: Q 6**
#15 (2-2)	**E: Q 5**	**W: 9 6**
#16 (2-2)	**E: 9 6**	**W: Q 5**

Notice that in the bolded **8** of the **16** possible "splits" the SOUTH Declarer by playing his Heart A,K will "drop" the Queen!

Unfortunately, the probabilities of the **16** possible "splits" are not exactly equal. The probability of each of the **6** *2-2* "splits" is **6.78%**, the probability of each of the **8** *3-1* "splits" is **6.22%**, and the probability of each of the *2 4-0* "splits" is **4.78%**.[1] The overall probability of a *3-1* "split" is **49.76%**, the overall probability of a *2-2* "split" is **40.68%**, and the overall probability of a *4-0* "split" is **9.56%**. Because these are the only possible "splits" when **4** Trump cards are "out", 49.76% + 40.68% + 9.56% = **100.00%.**

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther… Ummm…. Err… First, I am not sure I believe this, but are you again *actually being nice to me*?

Esther: Well, my *handsome hero*, certainly, I am being nice to you. Occasionally, I like to "change things up!"

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[1] See the Wikipedia entry, "**Contract Bridge Probabilities**": **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contract_bridge_probabilities**

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther… Ummm…. Well, thank you *very much* indeed for that review. Now Esther, my understanding is that there are *3 primary philosophies* about how to deal with you as Declarer having control of **9** Trump cards including the A,K, but not the Queen. Would you now review these **3** approaches, and perhaps give us some historical perspective on the proponents of each of these **3** philosophies?

"*Eight Ever, Nine Never*"

Esther: Well, my *inquisitive interlocutor*, this well-known bridge maxim, "*Eight Ever, Nine Never*" says:

> **Lacking any further information[2] the optimal Line of Play is to finesse for the missing Queen when Declarer's Partnership holds 8 Trump cards including the A,K, or when holding 9 Trump cards including the A,K but not the Queen play the Ace and then the King to try to "drop" the missing Queen.**

As the previous discussion showed, when there are **4** Trump cards out the odds of "dropping" the Queen are roughly **52%**. The "odds" of a successful finesse, assuming no further information are also 50-50, or **50%**, because *either* of the **2** Opponents then are *equally* likely to hold the missing Queen. However, when there are only **3** cards out, and the Declarer's Partnership holds the Trump A,K, the odds of "dropping" the Queen are instead **78%**![3]

Bruce: Well, Esther, do we know anything about who was the *progenitor* of "*Eight Ever, Nine Never!*" from the early days of bridge?

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[2] Information that may help inform a judgment about running a finesse as against playing for a Queen "drop" includes whether only 1 Opponent bid during the auction, thus suggesting that that this Opponent holds HCPs and a finesse should therefore be run through this Opponent. Or during play one Opponent may have "shown" numerous Honors, thus suggesting that the other Opponent likely holds remaining missing Honors.

[3] See "**Relevant Percentages for Bridge Players**" at:
https://bridgewebs.com/taverham/Probabilities.pdf

Esther: Well, my *fortuitous friend*, some people believe, probably without reason, that this pervasive bridge maxim was originated in the very early 1900s by the first horse, **Clever Hans**,[4] to become an ACBL LifeMaster! **Clever Hans** performed numerous mathematical skills expositions in Europe during that time. Interest in animal intelligence had soared following the publications of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. On September 4, 1904, the New York Times published an article about this German horse that made the American public aware of this horse's exceptional talents. Although there are no known extant pictures of **Clever Hans** at the bridge table, we do possess pictures of the talented bridge-playing horse publicly performing various mathematical challenges:

Sadly, during World War I **Clever Hans** was drafted into the German army. Laasya Samhita and Hans Gross in a 2013 article in the journal, **Communication & Integrative Biology**, reported that **Clever Hans** was "killed in action in 1916 or was consumed by hungry soldiers."

Bruce: Well, ummm…, Esther, thank you *so much* for that detailed history! Well, I take it that you are not a big fan of the "*Eight Ever, Nine Never!*" approach! Would you now talk us through the other alternatives?

Culbertson's "*Law of Symmetry*"

Esther: Well, Bruce, of course! A *second* philosophy for handling Declarer's Partnership holding **9** Trump cards including the A,K, but not the Trump Queen, was propounded by Ely

[4] See the Wikipedia entry on **Clever Hans**:
https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Clever_Hans

Culbertson. Ely Culbertson (1891 – 1955) was a bridge entrepreneur and personality who dominated bridge during the 1930s. According to a Wikipedia entry about Culbertson, he amassed and also lost several fortunes during his lifetime. He founded and initially edited The Bridge World Magazine, which is still published today. He owned the first bridge playing card company to produce plastic playing cards. Prior to World War II he abandoned competitive bridge in 1938 to focus on advocating for world peace.

Bruce: Well, Esther, will you now give us a summary of Culbertson's "*Law of Symmetry*"[5] approach?

Esther: Well, Bruce, sure. I think the best way to explain Culbertson's approach is to quote from S.J. Simon's 1967 book, Why You Lose at Bridge. Simon's book was chosen by a wide margin in a 1994 ACBL survey as the "#1 Bridge Book of All-time" at least as of 1994.

> "…[T]his is the rule I have made for myself for playing a combined holding [by Declarer's Partnership] of nine trumps missing the Queen.
>
> First play the Ace or King to see what happens—if nothing happens, proceed as follows:
>
> With *no* singletons or voids in your hand or dummy, play for the drop.
>
> *With* a singleton or void in either hand, take the finesse.
>
> I believe myself that this gives me a slight advantage; for it is based on the Culbertson Theory of Similarity of Distributions [or 'Law of Symmetry'], which argues that **when there is a singleton in one hand there will be a compensating singleton elsewhere**.
>
> But even if I show no profit, I certainly show no loss [for following my routine]—and I haven't got a headache each time I come up against the situation." (p. 38) [emphasis added]

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[5] To read a chapter on the "**Law of Symmetry**" from Culbertson's 1954 book, Contract Bridge Complete, go to Jeff Tang's "BridgeBum" website posting: **https://bridgebum.com/law_of_symmetry.php**

Bruce: Well, Esther, is Culbertson's approach well regarded in today's bridge world?

Esther: Well, yes, my *beaudacious bupkus*, I would say no, because there is not a strong *mathematical/statistic basis* for Culbertson's "Law". However, I do place some stock in his philosophy. Alan Truscott for many decades wrote a HUGELY respected bridge column for the New York Times. Here is what Truscott had to say about Culbertson's "*Law of Symmetry*" in a June 25, 1964 NYT article, "Culbertson Book on Play Valuable After 30 Years" (p. 30):

> "VERY few bridge books published before World War II have any value today except for the bridge historian.
>
> One exception is Ely Culbertson's 30-year-old 'Red Book on Play.' This was the **first** comprehensive coverage of card play ever written, and represented a **greater** advance in this aspect of the game than Culbertson's books on bidding did in that field.
>
> A large part of the book was devoted to a hypothesis that **remains unproven**. Culbertson called it, rather grandiloquently, the Law of Symmetry.
>
> The theory was that unbalanced distributions in the visible hands tended to indicate unbalanced distributions in the unseen hands, so that the presence of a void suit in declarer's hand or the dummy increased the probability that one of the defenders would hold a void.
>
> There is **no mathematical justification** for this view..." [emphasis added]

Bruce: Well, Esther, you seem to have mixed views about Culbertson's "*Law of Symmetry*". Is there a third philosophy of play that *most strikes your fancy*?

Cohen's '*Inquisitive, Exploratory Play as Declarer*'

Esther: Well, Bruce, yes there is. Now I use *both* the "Eight Ever; Nine Never" and the Culbertson's "*Law of Symmetry*" approaches. But I put particular stock in Larry Cohen's argument that in place of *rigid* rules or laws or maxims we

should play as Declarer to "explore" the bridge territory before we become committed to a particular "Line of Play."

Cohen presented his views in his web article, "9-Ever, But Not Always":
https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/9-ever-but-not-always
The Board that Cohen used to illustrate his argument was played in the 1997 Bermuda Bowl World Championship:

DLR: **WEST**
VUL: **NONE**

NORTH (**10**)
S: 6 2
H: K 8 4 2
D: 4
C: A K 8 7 6 4

WEST (**9**)
S: A Q 8 4 3
H: 6
D: 9 6
C: Q J 9 5 3

EAST (**6**)
S: T 9 7
H: Q 9 5
D: A T 8 7 5 3
C: T

SOUTH (**15**)
S: K J 5
H: A J T 7 3
D: K Q J 2
C: 2

Bidding

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
PASS	1**C**	PASS	1**H**
1**S**	2**H**	3**D**	**DBL**
PASS	3**H**	PASS	4**H**
PASS	PASS	PASS	

Note. The astute reader will notice that this "real deal" Board conforms quite well with Culbertson's "*Law of Symmetry*".

Bruce: OK, Esther. Would you talk us through SOUTH's play of this board as Declarer?

Esther: Sure. WEST leads his Diamond 9 toward EAST's bid Diamonds, and EAST wins Trick **#1** with his Diamond Ace. On Trick **#2** EAST shifts and leads the Spade 7 towards WEST's bid Spades. Declarer "covers" with his Spade Jack, and WEST wins with his Spade Queen. On Trick **#3** WEST cashes his Spade Ace. On Trick **#4** WEST leads a Club which Declarer wins in Dummy.

Bruce: OK, Esther. What is Declarer SOUTH's plan? Isn't this a situation where Declarer SOUTH should "draw" Trump?

Esther: Well, Bruce, this is what Cohen said in his article:

> "This is certainly a '*draw-trump*' *situation*. *Or is it?*
>
> You have *only* high cards left, and if you can pick up the ♥ Q you have the rest of the tricks.
>
> Will it be *8-ever, 9-never*? That would mean you play for the drop. '*Never*' finesse with 9.
>
> That's what several of our experts tried, and this was the Real Deal:
>
> Down one. So, *how should they have known*?
>
> After winning the ♣ A at trick 4, it couldn't hurt to do *some exploration*.
>
> From the bidding and early play, LHO was marked with 5 spades and not too many diamonds. He *couldn't* also be short in clubs.
>
> Before broaching the trump suit, it couldn't hurt to play more clubs from dummy (West won't ruff). On the second round of clubs, East shows out! This marks West with 5-5 in the black suits, and heart shortness. If West has 2 hearts, it means only 1 diamond. That would give East 7 diamonds, and he would likely have bid the first time. With West's shape pretty much marked (5=1=2=5), declarer should play the ♥ K and then finesse against East's ♥ Q for +420."

Bruce: OK, Esther. What is the "bottom line"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, try <u>not</u> to put *absolute* faith in bridge maxims, or rely upon bridge maxims too *rigidly*. But of course, bridge maxims can be useful as *general* guidelines. And, after all, <u>not</u> everyone is ready to play at Larry Cohen's level!