

## **Esther Comments About Playing 1NT as Declarer**

**Bruce Thompson**

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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 the **play of the hand when you are Declarer on a 1NT contract**. Of course, these principles may also apply to other **NT** contracts, and in some cases to suit contracts. Esther, thanks for taking time to be with us today!

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

**Bruce:** Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Here are the 4 hands, and the first few bids:

**Board #11**

Knoxville Consortium 499er 10/13/21

Dealer: SOUTH

Vul: NONE

	NORTH (10)	
	<b>S:</b> A K J	
	<b>H:</b> 4 3 2	
	<b>D:</b> J T 7 5	
	<b>C:</b> J 8 7	
WEST (12)		EAST (5)
<b>S:</b> Q 8 2		<b>S:</b> T 9 6 3
<b>H:</b> 9		<b>H:</b> Q J T 7 6
<b>D:</b> A 9 6 2		<b>D:</b> Q 8 4
<b>C:</b> A Q 9 5 2		<b>C:</b> 6
	SOUTH (13)	
	<b>S:</b> 7 5 4	
	<b>H:</b> A K 8 5	
	<b>D:</b> K 3	
	<b>C:</b> K T 4 3	

**Bidding**

SOUTH: 1**C**      WEST: PASS      NORTH: 1**NT**      EAST: PASS  
SOUTH: PASS      WEST: PASS

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, first, do you agree with SOUTH's opening bid of 1**C**?

**Esther:** Well, SOUTH holds 13 HCPs, and 4 of one Major including the Ace and King of Hearts, and a total of 3 Kings. So, the HCPs are in top honors, and not Queens and Jacks (sometimes called "Quacks"). So, this is a pretty straightforward bid.

**Bruce:** OK, so do you agree with NORTH's 1**NT** response bid?

**Esther:** Well, NORTH holds 10 HCPs. WEST Passed. So WEST either holds points and Clubs that are unbidable in this bidding sequence, and no 5 card suit, and not enough HCPs to overcall by bidding 1**NT**. So NORTH thinks that the partnership holds somewhere between at least (11 + 10) 21 HCPs, and (13 + 10) 23 HCPs. NORTH thinks that the 4 hands are probably pretty equal in

HCPs, and the auction is likely headed toward a N/S 1NT contract at most tables.

**Bruce:** Well, you know they says that "1NT is the hardest of all contracts to make"?

**Esther:** Yes, my malodorous muffinhead. That is true because, in a 1NT contract, (1) the 4 hands are usually relatively **equal in HCPs**, and (2) the auction has been so brief that NORTH learned very little about Partner's hand, and also very little (here virtually nothing) about Opponents' hands, so you might get killed in a surprise long suit held by the Opponents. But there are other things that NORTH must also take into account when planning the "play of the hand."

**Bruce:** Such as?

**Esther:** Well, a lot of this is covered in the 1950's *excellent* book by Louis Watson, Watson's Classic Book on the Play of the Hand at Bridge. On this Board, most tables will likely be playing the *exact same contract*. Indeed, in this competition, 26 pairs sat N/S. For this Board, only 2 E/W pairs got the contract, and 18 of the 26 contracts were 1NT NORTH. This means that Declarer's "play of the hand" may well make all the difference in sorting out how the N/S pairs rank, based on how many MatchPoints the Partnership will earn on the Board. Taking 1 **more** trick than the other N/S pairs, or an average number of tricks, or 1 **less** trick, while making *very little difference* in the Bridge Score (150 for +2, or 120 for +1, or 90 for taking +0 or 7 tricks on a 1NT contract), may nevertheless result in very large difference in the MatchPoints awarded. For example, as always, the lowest Bridge Score on the Board will receive 0.0 MatchPoints, but the top Bridge Score in this competition, if and only if there are no ties in the top Bridge Score, will receive 26-1, or 25.0 Matchpoints. Although the range of the *Bridge Scores* may be very small, the range of the resulting *MatchPoints* (e.g., 0.0, 13.0 for the middle or Average Board, and 25.0 for the Top Board) may be massive.

**Bruce:** Well, OK, but what's the bottom line?

**Esther:** Well, you as Declarer want to develop your line of play to take **ALL** of your winning tricks, and also try to find extra tricks, especially if you can do so without jeopardizing your contract.

**Bruce:** OK, in this case, as expected, EAST leads the top of a sequence in a long suit, the Queen of Hearts. What should NORTH think about, once the Board comes down?

**Esther:** Once the Board comes down, in suit contracts, the Declarer must first identify losers, and try to formulate a plan for dumping the losers, either by trumping them, or by sloughing them. However, in **NT** contracts, the Declarer should instead count winning tricks, and also try to develop a plan for *promoting* additional winners. Here, I think I am going to take 2 or 3 Spades. There is a very good chance I can take 3 Spade tricks if I, at some point, lead a Spade from the Board toward my hand. If WEST holds the Queen, and plays it, I can overtake it from hand, thus promoting my Jack to a winner. If WEST ducks, I will take the trick with the King of Spades. I will then at some point go back to the Board by leading a small Heart. I will then again lead a small Spade from the Dummy. This strategy increases the chances that I can drop the Queen if WEST holds it, in case WEST's Spade holding is a doubleton. If WEST ducks again, I will play the Jack of Spades from my hand, or of course if WEST plays the Queen, I will overtake it, and then next play the Jack. I won't take the third Spade trick until later. Since the Board has 3 Spades, I always have transportation back to my Declarer's hand later. This allows me to first promote winners in other suits, either Clubs or Diamonds.

**Bruce:** OK, so how many other winners do you count?

**Esther:** I have 2 and probably 3 Spade winners. I definitely have 2 Heart winners. I have 3 of the top 6 Diamonds, and I have 3 of the top 6 Clubs. So, I have the potential to add to my likely 5 tricks, and pick up at least 2 more tricks, thus making my contract, or more.

**Bruce:** So what else do you look at in formulating your initial plan?

**Esther:** Well, as Marti Ronemus emphasizes, in her excellent bridge modules and bundles on the "**bridgebee.app**" and "**vubridge.com**" websites, especially in **NT**, **never ignore** a long suit as a potential source for promoting tricks. So, I always look for long suits, in case I can promote winners there. So, I always count the number of cards I have in each suit across the two hands. In this case, I have 6 Spades, 7 Hearts, 6 Diamonds, and 7 Clubs. Of course, I would really prefer 8 (or 9), and 7 ain't pretty, but 7 is better than 6. EAST led the Queen of Hearts, showing at least the Jack, and probably more Hearts, so EAST is the "danger" hand I want to try to keep out of the lead. So I probably will be inclined to promote new winners in Clubs. Of course, it is important to remember the very wise bridge admonition of world champion duplicate bridge player, and world champion boxer, Mike Tyson, who once said about Declarer's initial plan for a bridge line of play, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

**Bruce:** So talk us through play of the first few tricks, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen.

**Esther:** Well, EAST leads the Queen of Hearts. The "Rule of 7" says I as Declarer should count the number of cards I have in the lead suit from 7 and, even if I have stoppers, I should duck for whatever number of rounds equals  $[7 - \text{my number of cards in the suit}]$ . Here,  $7 - 7$  is 0, so I will not duck. I will take Trick #1 with the Ace or the King. Since I can get back to dummy later, I will work the Spades later. On Trick #2 I will lead the 3 of Clubs from the Dummy.

**Bruce:** What next?

**Esther:** Well, because WEST sees the Board, WEST knows that BOTH the Ace and the Queen of Clubs will win this trick. So, WEST will take the Queen winner. Now WEST could here win the Ace of Clubs, but holding the Ace

of Diamonds, expects to get back in later to do so. WEST having held a singleton in Partner's led suit, cannot return Partner's led suit. Once WEST does not lead a Heart back to Partner, WEST now shows out of Hearts, and then NORTH has the good news that WEST can't lead Hearts to EAST, and the bad news that EAST has 4 more Hearts including Jack, Ten. So WEST will lead a low Spade, which NORTH will take with the King; the odds of a successful Jack finesse will be better in a subsequent trick. NORTH leads the Jack of Clubs to further promote Club winners, and will play the 4 of Clubs from Dummy, which WEST will win with the Ace, thus leaving 2 winning promoted Clubs on the Board.

**Bruce:** What next?

**Esther:** Well, WEST will most likely lead a low Club, to allow/force Declarer to take the 2 Club winners on the Board, thus promoting WEST's final Club into a winner, likely accessible once Diamonds are finally led. NORTH will now likely lead the 5 of Spades off the Board, and win 2 more Spade tricks, for a cumulative total of 6 tricks.

**Bruce:** And then?

**Esther:** Well, NORTH can either lead a small Heart to Dummy's Ace, and take the 7 tricks and run. Or, NORTH can lead the Jack of Diamonds, hoping that EAST has and plays the Queen to cover, and then play SOUTH's King from the Board, which either wins, or WEST will take with the Ace, thus promoting the Declarer's Ten of Diamonds into a winner.