

**Esther Discusses "Making and Responding to  
'Weak' 2-Level Preempt Opening Bids: The 'Law of  
Total Tricks', the 'Rule of 17', 'Limiting'  
Bids, and Various Other Bidding  
Aids and Pitfalls"**

**Bruce Thompson**

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

**Esther:** Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will discuss "**Making and Responding to 'Weak' 2-Level Preempt Openings: The 'Law of Total Tricks', the 'Rule of 17', 'Limiting' Bids, and Various Other Bidding Aids and Pitfalls**".

**Bruce:** 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, very sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Why don't we talk a bit about the bidding on the following Board? First, do you agree with WEST's opening bid of 2**H**?

499er 2/18/24

Dealer: WEST

Vul: NONE

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

### Bidding

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
2 <b>H</b>	PASS	3 <b>H</b>	PASS
4 <b>H</b>	PASS	PASS	PASS

**Esther:** Well, my *Malodorous Misanthrope*, sitting WEST as Dealer I hold **10** HCPs. I hold 6 Hearts, so I could count holdings  $10 + 2 = \mathbf{12}$  HCPs for the extra Heart length. I hold a Spade singleton. I hold **1** side-Suit Ace, and a "protected" Diamond Queen. So, an opening bid of 1**H** would not be insane. Of course, I also do not quite meet the requirements of the "Rule of 20"<sup>1</sup>, but some people do instead play the "Rule of 19". However, I think I would bid 2**H**, because this bid tells Partner I hold **6** Hearts, and either (1) **2** of the top 3 Hearts, or (2) **3** of the top 5 Hearts. I actually hold **5** of the top 7 Hearts, and a very lovely 8 through Queen "touching" Heart card sequence, which is very sweet and important.

**Bruce:** OK, Est... Errr..., I mean, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What do you think of EAST's 3**H** response bid?

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<sup>1</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Lesson #25: 40 or so Bridge Bidding/Play 'Rules'", and "Lesson #43: Are the 'Rule of 20' and the 'Law of Total Tricks' Both Broken?"

**Esther:** Well, my *Simpering Simpleton*, I both sorta *understand* this response bid, and I also *hate* this bid. The appropriateness of this response turns on Partnership Agreement. It depends on whether or not Partners have agreed to treat a "weak" 2-level opening bid as "**limiting**" the Opener's Hand.

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what does "limiting" the Opener's Hand mean?

**Esther:** Well, my *Bodacious Bupkus*, a CARDINAL PRINCIPLE of bridge is:

**Once an Opener makes a bid that "limits" his Hand by fully describing both (1) the HCPs held in the Hand and (2) his card distribution, the Opener must never bid again, unless the Responder, who upon a "limited" opening bid becomes "The Captain", requests more information from the Opener.**

For example, if I open 1**NT**, I have told Partner, "Partner, I hold 15-18 HCPs, no void, no singleton, and no more than 1 doubleton, But I *may* hold a 5-card Major." That is very detailed and specific. I **must not** bid again unless Partner asks me a question, such as "Do you hold a 4-card Major?", or makes a demand, such as "Please bid 2**H** or 2**S**."

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, opening with a 2**H** bid provides a very detailed and specific description of the Opener's hand, saying, "I hold fewer than ~13 HCPs, and 6 Hearts, and either (1) 2 of the top 3 Hearts, or 3 of the top 5 Hearts." So, this does clearly "**limit**" the Opener's Hand. And many Partners play such the Opener will never bid again unless Partner asks a question. For example, if Responder bids 2**NT!**, Responder is asking Partner, "Partner, do you hold a side-Suit Ace or side-Suit 'protected' King?" Why would some Partners bid *differently* than this when Partner makes a "limited" opening bid, and *sometimes* expect the Opener to bid again?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, *some* Partners agree that they will play a 3**H** response to a 2**H** opening bid as saying, "Partner, I have

some support for your Hearts, but I am not sure we can make a 4H contract. If your Hand includes any special features of any kind whatsoever, such as a *short* side Suit, which is pretty likely because you have a *long* Suit, please bid 4H, and otherwise PASS."

**Bruce:** OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, do you think that EAST should have used the "Rule of 17" and simply PASSEd WEST's 2H opening bid? EAST held 9 HCPs + 4 Hearts = 13, which means EAST's Hand *definitely* did not meet the "Rule of 17" requirement to jump to a Game contract bid.

**Esther:** Well, my *Dandruff-ridden Dufus*, no. Esther is not a super big fan of the "Rule of 17", except as a very general guide that should not be used thoughtlessly, mechanically, or rigidly<sup>2</sup>. Neither is Larry Cohen, the author of the massively influential 1992 award-winning<sup>3</sup> bridge book, To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks, who says,

...[T]he Rule of 17 fails to take ruffing values into consideration. If you have Kxx in trump support and a singleton on the side, that is obviously much better than Kxx in trump support and 3-3-4 in the other suits. Holding QJx in partner's trump suit is surely more valuable than if it were in a side suit (the Rule of 17 would count either as simply 3 HCP)... The Rule of 17 (like most rules) is a guideline--no more. I don't recommend that experienced players use it. It is more of a learning crutch for newer players.<sup>4</sup>

EAST's Hand on this Board is the **perfect** example of why not to blindly follow the admonitions of the "Rule of 17". EAST

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<sup>2</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see the "*lagniappe*" treatment to Lesson #25, "Beware the 'Rule of 17' When Responding to Partner's 'Weak 2' Preemptive Opening Bids":

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Rule\\_17.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Rule_17.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> This book won a **Bridge Book of the Year Award** from the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA).

<sup>4</sup> On Larry Cohen's bridge website, see:

<https://www.larryco.com/bridge-learning-center/detail/455>

holds (1) **4** of Partner's bid Hearts, (2) including one pretty high Honor, the Heart Ace, and (3) a Club void.

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, on this Board sitting EAST would you have responded **3H** to WEST's opening **2H** bid?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, no! No, no, no! **NO, NO, NO, H\*\*\* NOOOOOO!!!** I would **never** bid **3H** rather than **4H** holding EAST's Hand within this bidding sequence!!! *N\*E\*V\*E\*R!* Now, Bruce, within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" there is a post listing (1) Esther's **4 most important bridge books** of all time, and (2) the **2021-2023 Best and Runner-Up Bridge Books** identified by the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA)<sup>5</sup>. As noted previously, within **\*\*ALL\*\*** these bridge books, perhaps the most important book of all time is Larry Cohen's 1992 ABTA award-winning book, To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks. And Cohen's compatriot Marty Bergen, in Bergen's ABTA 1996 award-winning book, Points Schmoints!, also teaches the all-important philosophy underlying the "**Law of Total Tricks**". The "**Law of Total Tricks**" says:

**When you are bidding a Suit contract, assuming both you and Partner are bidding rationally, you will almost always (about 85% of the time in Esther's estimation) make a Suit contract if your contract is set at, or lower than, the number of Trump cards you hold minus 6!**

On this Board, (1) I hold **4** Trump Hearts, *including the Ace*, and (2) Partner has shown **6** Trump cards, including either (a) **2** of the top 3 Hearts, or (b) **3** of the top 5 Hearts, and (3) I hold a Club void. I know we hold  $6 + 4 = 10$  Trump Hearts, and  $10 - 6 = 4$ , so when Partner opens **2H**, on this Board I am going to *promptly, immediately* boom out a **4H** response bid, even though my opening Hand does not meet the requirements of the "**Rule of 17**". *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

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<sup>5</sup> Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", go to: <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/BestBooks.pdf>

As *lagniappe*<sup>6</sup>, Esther discusses in some detail, “**(1) Does the ‘Law of Total Tricks’ Really Work, and (2) Is the ‘LOTT’ Magic?’**” Within the “**Esther Bridge Lessons**”, go to:

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/LOTT\\_bad.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/LOTT_bad.pdf)

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<sup>6</sup> “*Lagniappe*” means “a little something extra”, a word heard with some frequency in New Orleans restaurants, and even today is the name of a magazine published about cuisine and culture in Southwest Louisiana.