

## "Larry Cohen's '*3-Step System*' for Planning Declarer's 'Line of Play' for a NT Contract"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen<sup>1</sup>

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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 "**Larry Cohen's '*3-Step System*' for Planning Declarer's 'Line of Play' for a NT Contract**". 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, before you teach us about today's topic would you first tell us a little bid about this **Larry Cohen** fellow?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you.

### Larry Cohen

By the age of 22, Larry had won his first two of **25** National Bridge Championships, the Blue Ribbon Pairs and the prestigious Spingold Teams. Between 1979 and 2008, Cohen won **57** first or second place finishes in national and world competitions. In 2002, the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) named Cohen "Player of the Year". Cohen is also listed on the ACBL's "Top 10 Living Most Influential Bridge Personalities". In 2020,

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<sup>1</sup> 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](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.

in his first year of eligibility, Cohen was elected to the ACBL Hall of Fame. Cohen has had long-term bridge partnership with players such as Marty Bergen and David Berkowitz.

Cohen's bridge writings have been massively influential. Cohen for many years has published a monthly column in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin. Cohen has authored numerous books including 6 books that have won the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) "Bridge Book of the Year Award":

Larry Teaches Modern Bidding Vol. I, II, and III (Self-Published 2020);

On The Other Hand (co-written with David Bird) (2019);

On The Other Hand - Defense (co-written with David Bird) (2020);

Tricks of the Trade (2018);

Larry Teaches Opening Leads (2014); and

To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks (1992).

Esther regards Cohen's 1992 book on the "Law of Total Tricks" as probably being the *most important bridge book of all time!* This book is published in 6 different languages and was the best-selling bridge book of the 1990's.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Est... err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, is there anything else you need to tell us before you delve into the details of your lesson?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, yes indeed. I need to inform you that the ideas presented here are drawn from Cohen's excellent article, "Declarer Play Basics: Stoppers", published in the September, 2025 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin (p. 53). However, I have changed a few of the cards in the examples.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what are the **3 steps** in Cohen's system for developing an initial "Line of Play" for a Declarer playing a **NT** contract?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, of course I will try to help you. The **3 steps** in Cohen's system for developing an initial "Line of Play" for a Declarer playing a **NT** contract are, *in order*:

- 1. Estimate how many "certain" Tricks you can "win" in your Hand or the Dummy.**
- 2. Next, ask yourself "how might we get more?"**
- 3. Finally, ask yourself, "What will happen if I lose the lead?"**

**Bruce:** Errr, well, hmmm... Well, would you talk us through this process using some concrete examples?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, sure. Here is Example #1:

Dealer: **SOUTH**

NORTH (12)

**S:** K Q 2

**H:** 9 7

**D:** 9 8 7

**C:** A Q J T 3

SOUTH (14)

**S:** A 6 4

**H:** A 3

**D:** K Q J T 2

**C:** 9 8 6

**Bidding\***

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 <b>D</b>	PASS	2 <b>C**</b>	PASS
2 <b>NT</b>	PASS	3 <b>NT</b>	PASS
PASS	PASS		

\*This bidding is by Esther.

\*\*N/S are playing the "2 Over 1" bidding convention in which NORTH's bid as Responder shows (1) ~13 HCPs and (2) 4+ Clubs and (3) says *nothing* about Diamonds. See:

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/2 over 1.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/2%20over%201.pdf)

WEST on Trick #1 leads the Heart 4.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Esther, ...err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, would you talk us through the application of "Larry Cohen's '3-Step System' for Planning Declarer's 'Line of Play' for a NT Contract" after the NORTH Dummy has been exposed?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, OK. Here are the "3 steps" applied to the current example:

Step #1. Declarer SOUTH sees 5 "certain" Tricks: 3 Spades, the Spade A,K,Q, 1 Heart, the Heart Ace, and 1 Club, the Club Ace.

Step #2: Declarer SOUTH sees the possibility of making 4 more Tricks in Diamonds after "knocking" out the E/W Diamond Ace and either 3 or 4 more Tricks in Clubs after taking a "losing" or a "winning" Club finesse.

Step #3: Declarer SOUTH sees that N/S together hold only 2 + 2 = 4 Hearts but do hold the Heart Ace for 1<sup>st</sup> Round "control". Therefore, Hearts is the "Danger Suit". And Declarer SOUTH can not afford to "lose" the lead to "promote" Tricks or else E/W will take at least 4 Heart Tricks. This means, according to Bergen, "if we knock out the ♦A, we will be down" (p. 53).

This means the only sensible "Line of Play" for the Declarer is to enter the NORTH Dummy via Spades and then lead the NORTH Dummy's Club Ten for a finesse. SOUTH "ducks". If WEST does not "cover" with the Club King then we know that EAST holds the Club King. If this turns out to be the case we will repeat the finesse. If N/S are lucky N/S will "win" 3 Spade Tricks, 1 Heart Trick, and 5 Club Tricks for a total of 9 Tricks and will "make" his contract without ever losing the lead. This is good because given the E/W Heart holdings losing the lead would be bad. This is the only N/S "Line of Play" that may possibly (1) "make" the 3NT contract and (2) not lose the lead!

**Bruce:** Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, OK. Would you talk us through another example?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, yes indeed.

Dealer: **SOUTH**

NORTH (12)

**S:** J T 9  
**H:** A K 5 3  
**D:** K J 4  
**C:** 9 8 5

SOUTH (12)

**S:** A 4  
**H:** Q 7 2  
**D:** A Q 5 3  
**C:** J T 4 2

**Bidding\***

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1D	PASS	1H	PASS
1NT	PASS	3NT	PASS
PASS	PASS		

\*This bidding is by Esther.

WEST on Trick #1 leads the Diamond Ten.

Step #1. Declarer SOUTH sees 8 "certain" Tricks: 1 Spade, the Spade A, 3 Hearts, the Heart A,K,Q, and 4 Diamonds, the Diamond A,K,Q,J.

Step #2: Declarer SOUTH sees two possibilities for making more Tricks. First, N/S together hold  $4 + 3 = 7$  Hearts. If the E/W  $13 - 7 = 6$  Hearts "split" 3-3 the NORTH Dummy's 4<sup>th</sup> Heart may be "promoted" into a "winner". However, when the Opponents hold 6 cards the probability of a 3-3 "split" is not the most likely "split". When there are an "even" number of cards "missing" the most nearly-equal "split", 4-2, is more likely than the equal 3-3 "split". Specifically, the probability of the 4-2 "split" is 48.4% while the probability of a 3-3 "split" is 35.5%.<sup>2</sup> Of course, although  $48.4\% > 35.5\%$ , but  $35.5\% \neq 0\%$ !

Second, Declarer SOUTH can hope to "promote" 1 of his 4 Clubs into a "winner". It is even possible that on a later Club Trick E/W will drop 2 Club Honors on a single Club Trick.

Step #3: With respect to what dangers lurk if N/S lose the lead, there is a real danger that E/W will switch to leading Spades, a Suit in which N/S hold only 1 "stopper". But Declarer SOUTH has no choice but to take this risk if he hopes to "make" his 3NT contract.

**Bruce:** Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, OK. Would you talk us through a third example?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, sure.

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<sup>2</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see: "8 Different Categories of Important Bridge Probabilities/Statistics, and How These Help Guide Your Bidding and Play": [https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8\\_probs.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8_probs.pdf)

Dealer: **SOUTH**

NORTH (18)

**S:** K Q  
**H:** A J  
**D:** 8 7 5 3  
**C:** A K J 7 3

SOUTH (13)

**S:** A J  
**H:** K Q  
**D:** Q J T 9 4 2  
**C:** T 9 8

**Bidding\***

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 <b>D</b>	PASS	2 <b>C**</b>	PASS
2 <b>NT</b>	PASS	3 <b>NT</b>	PASS
PASS	PASS		

\*This bidding is by Esther.

\*\*N/S are playing the "2 Over 1" bidding convention in which NORTH's bid as Responder shows (1) ~13 HCPs and (2) 4+ Clubs and (3) says *nothing* about Diamonds.

WEST on Trick #1 leads the Heart 4.

Step #1. Declarer SOUTH sees 6 "certain" Tricks: 2 Spades, the Spade A,K, 2 Hearts, the Heart A,K, and 2 Clubs, the Club A,K.

Step #2: Declarer SOUTH must rely on Club finesses to "make" his 3**NT** contract. On Trick #2 Declarer SOUTH can play the Club Ace given that SOUTH holds the "touching" Club King in case he can "drop" the Club Queen. On Trick #3 we can "cross" to the Declarer's Hand to run the Club finesse. If the finesse "wins" SOUTH will take 5 Club Tricks and exactly "make" his 3**NT** contract.

Step #3: Declarer SOUTH can see that N/S do not have "time" to "promote" Diamond "winners". If SOUTH "attacks" Diamonds E/W will "win" the 1<sup>st</sup> Diamond Trick, on the next Trick E/W will "clear" the Hearts. When E/W next obtain the lead they will then "run" their Hearts.

**Bruce:** Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, so would you sum things up for us, please?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, sure. I will sum things up by quoting from my very dear personal friend Larry Cohen's article:

"Observe the thinking process in all three deals:  
how many tricks, how we can gain more, and what  
is the stopper situation (can we afford to lose  
the lead)?" (p. 53)