

## **Esther Discusses "Third-Hand Play on Defense iff ('if and only if') Partner Leads Low"<sup>1</sup>**

**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 "**Third-Hand Play on Defense iff ('if and only if')<sup>2</sup> Partner Leads Low**". 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 play in the 3<sup>rd</sup> seat while on defense, would you briefly review some of the *Cardinal Bridge Principles* that should guide decisions about what to lead when sitting in the 1<sup>st</sup> seat to play once the contract is set, and assuming that the contract is not for slam?

**Esther:** Well, my *gracious giver*, of course I would be *happy* to provide that brief review! Here are a few guidelines:

1. If Partner bid a Suit, lead your highest card in that Suit, otherwise lead low in Partner's Suit.
2. If Partner did not bid, and you hold a doubleton in a Suit not bid by Opponents, against a Suit contract lead your highest card in your doubleton.

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas in this "Esther Bridge Lesson" are largely drawn from Larry Cohen's *excellent* article, "Third-hand Play" (pp. 53-54) in the July, 2024 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin.

<sup>2</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/if\\_and\\_only\\_if](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/if_and_only_if)

3. If you hold a singleton, against a Suit contract lead your singleton so that Partner knows to "return your lead".
4. If you hold 2+ "touching Honors" against a Suit contract, lead your "top" "touching Honor" thus promising Partner that you hold the next-highest Honor in the Suit. Against a **NT** contract, if you hold 3 "touching Honors" or an Honor tenace (K,Q,T), lead the "middle" of your Honors unless you have a Partnership Agreement to do otherwise.
5. If you are defending against a Suit contract, and both Opponents showed some Trump cards, and you hold a large number of Trump cards, and thus Partner is likely to hold few or no Trump cards, lead Trump, iff you hold no voids or singletons, even if all your Trump cards are quite low.
6. If none of the previous considerations apply, lead "top of nothing, bottom of something" in an unbid Suit.

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Esther... 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!"

### **General (Non-universal) Bridge Principle Sitting Third**

**Bruce:** Well, OK, Ms. Klink..., errr, I mean, Esther. For the purposes of the present discussion, let's assume then that Partner leads "low" against a Suit contract, and leads a Suit unbid by either you or Partner. This suggests that Partner is leading low in a Suit where he is either "short" holding nothing high to lead or has "something".

Let's further assume that once Dummy comes down the *Dummy holds only "low" cards in the led Suit*. This reinforces your initial premise sitting 3<sup>rd</sup> that Partner is leading "bottom of something". What then should guide your play sitting 3<sup>rd</sup>?

**Esther:** Well, my *inquisitive interlocutor*, a **General (Non-universal) Bridge Principle Sitting Third** says:

**Sitting 3<sup>rd</sup>, play “high”, but iff (‘if and only if’) your “high” card “covers” the card Declarer plays from the Dummy!**

As an example of *why* this is important, let’s assume that Partner leads a 2 against a Suit contract. Dummy comes down, and Dummy holds 9,7,6. Let’s say you hold K,T,3. According to our general (non-universal) Bridge Principle, you should play your King, and not your Ten! Let’s say the Hands hold:

	Dummy	
	9 7 6	
Partner		<b>You</b>
Q 8 5 2		K T 3
	Declarer	
	A J 4	

If you play your Ten, Declarer will win with his Jack, and this may gratuitously cost you a Trick. When Partner led, low, given that you hold both the King and the Ten, you have to expect Partner to hold an Honor, which by playing the Ten you have no longer “promoted” into a “winner”.

As another example, presume that against a **NT** contract Partner leads his 4, presumably 4<sup>th</sup> from the top of his “long” Suit so that you can invoke the very important “**Rule of 11**”.<sup>3</sup> Dummy again shows up “weak” holding only 3 cards in Partner’s long Suit, with:

	Dummy	
	9 7 6	
Partner		<b>You</b>
A J 5 4 2		K T 3
	Declarer	
	Q 8	

Your King wins Trick #1. You then return your Ten toward Partner, who will then win with the Ace, and then proceed

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<sup>3</sup> The “**Rule of 11**” says that when Partner leads 4<sup>th</sup> from the top of a Suit, you can subtract 11 – (1) the face value of the led card – (2) the number of cards cards in the Suit in the Dummy *higher* than Partner’s led card – (3) the number of cards in the Suit in your Hand *higher* than Partner’s led card = exactly the number cards in the Suit *higher* than the led card held by Declarer. So, when Partner leads the 4, and Dummy holds 3 cards higher than the 4 in the Suit, and you hold 2 cards higher than the 4 in the Suit in your Hand, therefore Declarer holds exactly 11 – the 4 = **7**, and 7 - 3 - 2 = 7 – 5 = **2** cards held by Declarer higher than the 4 in the led Suit!

to take 4 more Tricks, resulting in 5 Tricks for your Partnership "off the top"!

**Exception: Play "Low" Sitting Third from the Bottom of "Touching Honors"**

The exception to the General Bridge Principle is that:

**When sitting 3<sup>rd</sup>, iff you hold "touching Honors" (or a tenace, such as Q,J,9), play the *lowest* card within your sequence so that, if you win the Trick, and Declarer does not "cover" with a higher Honor, Partner will then know that you hold the "top" of an Honor sequence.**

**Bruce:** Well, Esther, that is all *pretty good stuff*. But can you state the **General Rule**?

**Esther:** Well, yes, my *fortuitous friend*! Of course:

**When sitting 3<sup>rd</sup>, iff you hold "touching Honors" (or a tenace, such as Q,J,9), play the *cheapest* card within your sequence that will "do the job" of *communicating your holdings* to Partner and "promoting" your remaining Honors!**

**Bruce:** Well, Esther, can you provide some examples?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, sure. In all of these examples, Partner on lead is sitting WEST, and you are sitting EAST. The cards played *respectively* by WEST and Dummy NORTH are underlined, and the card that you sitting EAST *should* play is also underlined:

**EXAMPLE #1**

	Dummy	
	9 7 <u>5</u>	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>3</u>		A <u>K</u> T 4

**EXAMPLE #2**

	Dummy	
	6 5 <u>2</u>	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>7</u>		K Q <u>J</u> 8 4

**EXAMPLE #3**

	Dummy	
	T 6 <u>5</u>	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>4</u>		Q J <u>9</u> 3

**EXAMPLE #4**

	Dummy	
	J 9 <u>7</u> 3	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>5</u>		K Q T <u>8</u> 4

**Bruce:** OK, Esther. Well, what about the following additional examples?

**EXAMPLE #5**

	Dummy	
	9 7 <u>5</u>	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>3</u>		A J T 4

**EXAMPLE #6**

	Dummy	
	9 7 <u>5</u>	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>3</u>		J T 8

**EXAMPLE #7**

	Dummy	
	9 7 <u>5</u>	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>3</u>		K Q T 2

**EXAMPLE #8**

	Dummy	
	T 9 <u>5</u>	
Partner		<b>You</b>
<u>3</u>		Q J 8 4

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, these later examples involve some *additional subtleties*. Here is what I would do:

**EXAMPLE #5**

Dummy

9 7 5

Partner

3

**You**

A J T 4

Play your **Ace** "*3<sup>rd</sup> Hand high*". Your "top" Honors are not "touching", and you do not hold a "tenace".

**EXAMPLE #6**

Dummy

9 7 5

Partner

3

**You**

J T 8

You hold a "tenace". Sitting 3<sup>rd</sup> play the lowest among what are your (*roughly*) "touching Honors", the **8**, as long as it "covers" the card played from the Dummy so that your Partnership's remaining Honors are "promoted".

**EXAMPLE #7**

Dummy

9 7 5

Partner

3

**You**

K Q T 2

Even though you hold a "tenace", but because your K,Q are "top" Honors, play your **Queen** to either "promote" your King into a "winner", or to "win" the Trick.

**EXAMPLE #8**

Dummy

T 9 5

Partner

3

**You**

Q J 8 4

Play "lowest among (*roughly*) equals", the **8**, because you do not hold "top" Honors, and your Queen may not be "promoted" very much by playing the Jack.

**Bruce:** Well, Esther, thank you very much indeed!

**Esther:** You are more than welcome, Bruce!