

**“‘*The 5 Level Belongs to the Opponents’*
Except When..., and Playing a 5 Level Contract in
a Major When One Opponent
Made a ‘*Michaels Cuebid*’ Overcall”**

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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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 5 Level Belongs to the Opponents’* Except When..., and Playing a 5 Level Contract in a Major When One Opponent Made a ‘*Michaels Cuebid*’ Overcall”. 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 so “warm and caring”!

Bruce: Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther.

Esther: Well, Bruce. Please try to exercise at least a modicum of empathy, assuming you have at least the limited capacity to do so. Can you imagine how relentlessly all the other girls in grades K through 4 of my elementary school years relentlessly, endlessly tormented me about my last name, Klinktoast-Houstonhousen?

Bruce: Well, yes, sorry again, Esther! Well, Esther, would you please explain what you mean by, “**The 5 level belongs to**

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¹ 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, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! So this article was really, really written by **Bruce Thompson**.

the Opponents”?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. Jeff Tang in his article, “The Five Level Belongs to the Opponents”,² from his “BridgeBum” website notes that:

”The Five-Level Belongs to the Opponents’ was a BOLS Bridge Tip written by the late American expert Ed Manfield. From 1974 - 1994, BOLS Royal Distilleries of Holland³ sponsored a writing competition for bridge advice. Manfield's winning tip in 1987 recommends avoiding ‘five over five’ bids, e.g. bidding 5♠ over an opposing 5♥.”

Esther has also discussed some of these issues in “Esther Bridge Dialogue Lesson #123: “Correctly Bidding in Competitive Auctions in Which Both Pairs Bid Game: Is the 5 Level Really ‘Always for the Opponents’?”: [https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/5 over 5.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/5%20over%205.pdf)

Bruce: Well, Esther, do *any other* bridge experts agree that “**The 5 level belongs to the Opponents**”?

Esther: Well, Bruce, yes indeed! Ron Klinger in his 2003 edition of his bridge book, 100 Winning Duplicate Tips, says that:
“**Tip 54:** It is wise to trust the opponents who bid to a high level; at unfavorable vulnerability.” (p. 79)

Bruce: Well, Esther, who is this Ron Klinger fellow?

Esther: Well, Bruce, here is a brief bio about Ron, a bridge player, teacher, and writer whom I greatly respect:

Ron Klinger

Ron Klinger (1941-) is an Australian contract bridge player who has written more than 70 bridge books including his 1990 book, Guide to Better Card Play, which won the “American Bridge Teachers’ Association (ABTA) Bridge Book of the Year Award.” His book, Right Through the Pack Again, won the 2010 “International Bridge Press Association Book of the Year Award.” He was Editor of Australian Bridge for 13 years (1972-1985). For many years he has written,

²See: <https://www.bridgebum.com/the-five-level-belongs-to-the-opponents.php>

³ The Bols Distillery is a Dutch distillery that was founded in 1575 and claims to be the oldest commercial distillery in the world.

and still currently writes, a weekly bridge column for both the Sydney Morning Herald and The Sun-Herald.

Klinger also originated the Ron Klinger "**Suit Quality Test ('SQT') Score**". The "**SQT Score**" is computed by adding together (1) the number of cards held in the Suit and (2) the number of Honors held in the Suit (including the Ten if a higher Honor is also held). Suit contracts set at a level of "**SQT Score**" - 6 are generally relatively safe.

Bruce: But, Esther, you have always pounded the table saying that:

**"Bridge is a game of *General Cardinal Bridge Principles!*
But bridge is also a game of **exceptions**, and even exceptions to the exceptions!"**

Are there any **exceptions** to the **General Cardinal Bridge Principle** that "**The 5 level belongs to the Opponents**"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, you are certainly *correct* about this!!! I will explain 1 **exception** to the **General Cardinal Bridge Principle** that "**The 5 level belongs to the Opponents**" by turning again to Ron Klinger. Klinger also notes that in *competitive* auctions when the Opponents compete to the 5 level,

"Tip 53: Do not push to the 5 level with a doubleton in their suit." (p. 78)

Tip 53 implies that generally "**The 5 level belongs to the Opponents**", but *if* you hold a *void* or a *singleton* in the Opponents' bid Suit then you can and possibly should Overcall your Opponents and bid at the 5 level!

Bruce: Well, Esther, would you make this discussion more concrete by giving us an example bridge Board on which you would Overcall at the 5 level? And while you are at it would you also talk us through the play of your example bridge Board?

Esther: Well, Bruce, on my "**Esther Bridge Lessons**" website I have previously recommended the "**BBO Bridge Master**" website:

<https://www.bridgebase.com/v3/anon/bridgemaster>

The "**BBO Bridge Master**" website allows you to declare your skill level, then shows a series of Hands and announces the final contract, each of which you then play as Declarer. At the end of play you can then request a solution in which the optimal "**Line of Play**" is discussed step by step. Here

as an illustration I will use the free "BBO Bridge Master" Level-5 **Lesson B-25** which gives you the opportunity to see and *repeatedly practice* for free playing a given bridge Board. I have altered a few of the cards in these Hands from the **Lesson B-25**.

BBO Bridge Master Level 5 **Lesson B-25**

Dealer: **SOUTH**

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

Bidding

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 H	2 H*	3 H	4 S
5 H	PASS	PASS	PASS

*This is a "Michaels Cuebid"⁴ showing a Hand with 2 5-card Suits. In most Partnerships this bidding sequence shows Spades and Clubs.

On Trick #1 WEST leads his Club Queen as the "top" of his "touching Honors" and EAST Overtakes with his Club Ace. On Trick #2 EAST returns his last Club and Declarer SOUTH "wins" with his Club King.

Bruce: Well, Esther, in this case SOUTH bid at the 5 level over EAST's 4**S** bid. Did SOUTH do so because SOUTH in this case held a singleton in E/W's bid Spades? Is this why SOUTH bid to the 5 level?

⁴ Within the "Esther Bridge Conventions Lessons" see "Esther Bridge Convention Lesson #12: 5 Overall Two-Suited Distribution Cuebid Systems" one of which was invented by Michael Michaels:

https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/5_cuebids.pdf

Esther: Well, Bruce, you are exactly correct! That is exactly why SOUTH bid 5H!

Bruce: Well, OK, Esther, would you now talk us through Declarer SOUTH's "Line of Play" on this Board?

Esther: Well, Bruce, once the NORTH Dummy is exposed Declarer SOUTH sees 1 Club "loser", 1 Spade "loser", and possibly 1 Diamond "loser". So, SOUTH's 5-level contract is in danger.

A major problem that Declarer SOUTH has involves his own 4-card Club holdings. WEST's "Michaels Cuebid" showed WEST initially holding 5 Clubs with a good Ron Klinger "Suit Quality Test ('SQT') Score". The NORTH Dummy initially held 2 Clubs and SOUTH initially held 4 Clubs.

Because $5 + 2 + 4 = 11$, this means that after Tricks #2 SOUTH knows that not only is the Dummy now void in Clubs, but EAST also is now void in Clubs. So, EAST can Overruff a Club "loser" led from Declarer SOUTH's Hand for a ruff in the NORTH Dummy!

Bruce: Well, OK, Esther, anything else?

Esther: Well, Bruce, yes indeed. N/S together hold $4 + 5 = 9$ Trump Heart cards. E/W hold $13 - 9 = 4$ Trump Hearts. When there is an "even" number of cards "missing" the *most-likely* "split" is the 3-1 "split" and not the 2-2 "split".⁵

Beginning on Trick #3 Declarer SOUTH plans to "draw" 2 Rounds of Trump Hearts. Both E/W players "follow" on Trick #3 with WEST playing the Trump Heart 8 and EAST playing the Trump Heart 9. On Trick #4 WEST shows "out" of Hearts by playing a "low" Spade and EAST plays the Heart Ten. This means that EAST still holds the Trump Heart Jack.

Bruce: Well, Esther, don't the bidding and early play suggest that E/W hold "split" Spade A,K? On Trick #5 SOUTH "draws" the last Trump Heart held by EAST. What should Declarer SOUTH now do on Trick #6?

Esther: Well, Bruce, because the N/S contract is at the 5 level and this 5H contract is on *perilous* grounds therefore Declarer SOUTH *must* try for a Diamond finesse. On Trick #6

⁵ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see "A Comprehensive List of 8 Different Categories of Bridge Probabilities, and How These May Help Guide Your Bidding and Play": https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8_probs.pdf

Declarer SOUTH leads a "low" Diamond and "wins" with the NORTH Dummy's Diamond Queen.

SOUTH now *knows* that WEST *definitely* holds the Diamond King. Furthermore, because WEST's Hand is known to be 2-Suited in Spades and Clubs SOUTH knows that WEST's Diamond King is very likely to "drop" on a 2nd Round of Diamonds.

On Trick #7 Declarer SOUTH leads the NORTH Dummy Diamond Ace and, as expected, (1) WEST's Diamond King "drops" and (2) the NORTH Dummy Diamond Jack is now "promoted" into a "winner". On Trick #8 SOUTH "cashes" the NORTH Dummy's Diamond Jack. WEST discards another "low" Spade. On Trick #9 Declarer SOUTH ruffs the last Diamond led from the NORTH Dummy.

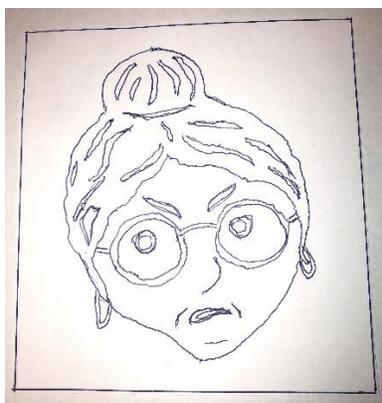
After 9 Tricks N/S have "won" 8 Tricks and E/W have "won" 1 Trick. The 4 cards now held in the 4 Hands are:

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

Bruce: Well, Esther, what should Declarer SOUTH lead on Trick #10?

Esther: Well, Bruce, on Trick #10 SOUTH should lead his own Spade 3 knowing that WEST and EAST together hold the Spade A,K but that these 2 Honors are likely "split". If WEST "wins" Trick #10 WEST will be "endplayed" and forced on Trick #11 to later concede a Trick in either his initially "long" Spades or "Clubs".

If on Trick #10 WEST "ducks" SOUTH will play a Dummy Spade Honor and EAST "wins" with his Spade King. If EAST "wins" Trick #10 he will be forced to lead a Spade on Trick #11. In either case Declarer SOUTH will exactly "make" his 5H contract.



Esther says...

“Why not proceed *immediately* to ‘**Bridge Base Online Bridge Master**’ Level-5 Lesson #**B-25** to practice playing a “**Elimination Endplay**” on this Board? Search ‘BBO’, then Click ‘Bridge Master’, then Click ‘Play’, then Click ‘Level 5’, then Click ‘B-25’. You can play this Board *repeatedly* in Bridge Master for *free!*”

Esther also says...

“I have now prepared a ‘Map’ of all the ‘**Esther Bridge ‘Pop’ Quizzes**’ that use ‘BBO Bridge Master’ lessons to teach the ‘*Squeeze Play*’, the ‘*Elimination Endplay*’, the ‘*Winkle Endplay*’, the ‘*Loser-on-Loser Play*’, the ‘*Unblocking Play*’, the ‘**Distribution Safety Play**’, and the ‘*Dummy Reversal Play*’”:

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/MAP.pdf>