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"Correctly Bidding in Competitive Auctions in Which *Both* Pairs Bid Game: Is the 5 Level Really 'Always for the Opponents'?"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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Editor's Note. Today Bruce's role will be played instead by Donkey from the Shrek movies. Donkey, like Esther, is an accomplished and famous bridge-playing ACBL Grand LifeMaster.

Donkey: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will discuss "**Correctly Bidding in Competitive Auctions in Which *Both* Pairs Bid Game: Is the 5 Level Really 'Always for the Opponents'?**". Well, Esther, thank you for talking to us today!

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¹As 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**.

Esther: D**n it, Donkey! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

Donkey: Errr, well, very sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Well, would you begin by presenting a bridge Board so that you can explain several CARDINAL BRIDGE PRINCIPALS in a more concrete context?

Esther: Well, Donkey, of course I will try to help you! The following Board was played in a 499er BBO game on May 22, 2025:

Knoxville 499er Board #17
 Dealer: **NORTH**
 Vul: **NONE**

	NORTH (13)	
	S: --	
	H: A 7	
	D: A Q T 7 4 3 2	
	C: K 8 5 4	
WEST (5)		EAST (17)
S: Q J 9 7 5 4 3 2		S: A T 8 6
H: Q 5		H: K 6 4 3
D: 9		D: K
C: 9 3		C: A Q J 7
	SOUTH (5)	
	S: K	
	H: J T 9 8 2	
	D: J 8 6 5	
	C: T 6 2	

Bidding

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1D	2C		

WEST leads his Heart 6 toward his Partner's bid Suit.

Donkey: Errr, well, Esther, ...err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, oh my goodness! Well, do you agree with EAST's Overcall bid of **2C**?

Esther: Well, Donkey, I will try to help you. *Fasten your seat belt, please!* Put bluntly, no, I do not agree with this **2C** bid!!!! There are 2 problems with this **2C** bid. First, the **2C** bid misrepresents EAST's Club holdings because the bid normally implies 5 Clubs, or at least 4 Clubs with even

stronger Honor holdings. This bid is not a blatant lie, but communicating *specific* card counts is *extremely* important when bidding Suit contracts. Both Partners need to know specific card counts so that they can invoke the "**Law of Total Tricks**" to help determine what level of contract the Partnership can successfully make. The "**Law of Total Tricks**" says that:

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 your Partnership together holds minus 6!

Donkey, perhaps the most important bridge book of all time is Larry Cohen's 1992 American Bridge Teachers' Association's award-winning bridge 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**".

More information about the "**Law of Total Tricks**" can be found in the "**Esther Bridge Lesson**", "(1) Does the 'Law of Total Tricks' ('LOTT') Really Work, and (2) Is the 'LOTT' Magic?":

https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/LOTT_bad.pdf

Donkey: Errr, well, Esther, ...err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What is the second reason you do not like EAST's 2C Overall bid?

Esther: Well, Donkey, second, I do not like this 2C bid by EAST because there is a better bid that *more specifically* describes and "*limits*" EAST's Hand. The "correct" bid for EAST to make is a "**Takeout/Demand DOUBLE**". A "**Takeout/Demand DOUBLE**" is 1 of 7 "**Not-for-Penalty DOUBLES**". A "**Takeout/Demand DOUBLE**" says:

1. "Partner, I have **13+** HCPs;
2. I am 'short' (0, 1, or 2 cards) in the Opponents' bid Suit;
3. I do not hold a 5-card Suit; and
4. I hold at least **3** cards in every unbid Suit."

When your Partner makes a "**Demand Takeout DOUBLE**" you **must** bid your "longest and strongest" Suit unless (1) your

RHO bids or (2) you have an *extremely* good reason to not bid, such as you hold a *massive* Trump "stack" in the Opponents' bid Suit. More information on the "**Takeout/Demand DOUBLE**" can be found in the "Esther Bridge Conventions Lesson", "**7 Not-for-Penalty DOUBLES**":
<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/double.pdf>

How Often Should I Be DOUBLING?

Donkey: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, in a given bridge competition typically ***how often*** should I be DOUBLING?

Esther: Well, Donkey, that is an *excellent* question! To put it simply, novice and newer bridge players DOUBLE way, WAY, WAY too *infrequently*!

Back in the days when we used to play "human" (in-person) bridge, before the pandemic, in the Savannah Bridge Center, before the Savannah Bridge Center burned down, there used to be an annual or semi-annual game in which Clubs across the country played the same Boards, and for which a printed booklet was prepared ahead of time in which a famous bridge player, Larry Cohen, commented on each hand in the 24 Boards, and indicated what each player should bid on each hand. Larry Cohen, according to Wikipedia, "is an American bridge player, writer and teacher. He is best known as an advocate for the 'Law of Total Tricks' as a guide in the bidding. He has won 25 North American Bridge Championships (NABC) events..." In the booklet for a recent competition in this venue, Cohen included the suggested bid of DOUBLE on roughly 1 in every 5 of the randomly-generated Boards. The implication of this pattern on 24 randomly-generated Boards is that your Partnership bidding in every game should probably include 3 to 4 bids of DOUBLE! If you are a less experienced player, *you probably are not making enough not-for-penalty DOUBLES!!!*

The "Law of Total Tricks"

NORTH (13)			
S: --			
H: A 7			
D: A Q T 7 4 3 2			
C: K 8 5 4			
WEST (5)		EAST (17)	
S: Q J 9 7 5 4 3 2		S: A T 8 6	
H: Q 5		H: K 6 4 3	
D: 9		D: K	
C: 9 3		C: A Q J 7	
SOUTH (5)			
S: K			
H: J T 9 8 2			
D: J 8 6 5			
C: T 6 2			

Bidding

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1D	2C	2D	???

Donkey: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, after SOUTH bid 2D, what should WEST bid? What should WEST bid even if EAST had instead bid 2C rather than **DOUBLE**? Afterall, WEST holds *only* 5 HCPs!

Esther: Well, Donkey, in the words of Marty Bergen, "Points Schmooints!" In the words of the Savannah Bridge Club Grand LifeMaster whom some Savannah players call "Yoda", "Points are for No Trump", and not for Suit contracts!

WEST knows that E/W together hold $8 + \sim 4 = 12$ Spades! This means that E/W are likely to "make" a contract set no higher than $12 - 6 = 6$ level!!! It's called the "**Law of Total Tricks**"!!! At this table WEST actually bid 3S. But certainly a 4S bid by Responder would have been fully justified!

Donkey: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, the *actual* bidding at my table proceeded as follows:

NORTH (13)

S: --
H: A 7
D: A Q T 7 4 3 2
C: K 8 5 4

WEST (5)

S: Q J 9 7 5 4 3 2
H: Q 5
D: 9
C: 9 3

EAST (17)

S: A T 8 6
H: K 6 4 3
D: K
C: A Q J 7

SOUTH (5)

S: K
H: J T 9 8 2
D: J 8 6 5
C: T 6 2

Bidding

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1D	2C	2D	3S
4D	4S	5D	???

Donkey: Errrr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what should WEST bid at his second turn within the auction?

"The 5 Level Belongs to the Opponents!"²

Esther: Well, Donkey, let me say initially that it is *entirely* possible to have an auction in which *both* Pairs can bid and even make a Game contract in different Suits. In fact, it is *entirely* possible for 1 Pair to hold **8+** cards in **2** Suits while the other Pair holds 2 **8+** card "fits" in **2 different** Suits! Both Pairs holding an **8+** card "fit" is called "reciprocal fits", and both Pairs holding **2 8+** card "fits" is called a "double-double reciprocal fit".³

² From 1974 to 1994 the BOLS Royal Distilleries of Holland sponsored a competition for Best Bridge Tips Awards. In 1987 American Ed Manfield won for his "Tip", "The five-level belongs to the Opponents." The **BOLS Bridge "Tips"** are aggregated in Sally Brocks edited 1998 book, The Complete Book of BOLS Bridge Tips.

³ 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

Donkey: Oh, my goodness, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! Well, what should WEST bid at his next turn within the auction?

Esther: Well, Donkey, I am going to address your question by quoting from the excellent 2021 bridge book, The Power of Pass, by Ron Klinger and Harold Schogger. But first let me talk about the 2 authors.

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, 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 (including the Ten) held in the Suit. Suit contracts set at a level of "**SQT Score**" - 6 or lower are generally relatively safe.

Harold Schogger is an English bridge player and teacher. He opened his full-time bridge club in Hendon London in 1983. Since 1997 he has devoted his time to directing and teaching. He formerly was the bridge correspondent for the Jewish Chronicle.

Donkey: Errrr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what do Klinger and Schogger have to say about continuing to compete for the contract once the Opponents have reached the 5 level?

Esther: Well, Donkey, Klinger and Schogger say:

"Many players tend to resolve difficult competitive decisions by 'bidding one more'. This can be a good strategy at low levels, in part because defense against *low-level* contracts is often difficult. However, at higher levels it pays to exercise discretion. *It is seldom right to compete over the [O]pponents' 5-level bid.*

Bidding 5-over-5 is often a losing proposition because:

- (a) You go down one or more when they were going down.**

- (b) You and [P]artner might have holdings like Q-x opposite J-x-x, in the [O]pponents' [S]uit or in the outside [S]uits. These can produce unexpected defensive tricks, while they are losers for your side in your contract.
- (c) With 10 [T]rumps each, the Law of Total Tricks suggests that each side might make 10 [T]ricks (both fail in five) or one side might make 11 [T]ricks, but then the other side will be two down. If Total Trumps [for the 2 Pairs] = 19, there is even less reason to bid 5-over-5. If one side can make 11 [T]ricks, the other side makes only 8." (p. 63, italics added)

***"But Bridge is a Game of Exceptions
to General Rules!"***

Donkey: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What did WEST bid at this table in the actual competition?

Esther: Well, Donkey, WEST actually set the final contract at 5S. And holding 8 + 4 = 12 Trump Spades, E/W actually made their 5S contract even holding a mere 17 + 5 = 22 HCPs! What would you expect, Donkey. 12 - 6 = 6! It's called the "Law of Total Tricks"!

By the way, the probability of your Partnership holding 11 of the 13 cards in a Suit is 1.0%. The probability of your Partnership holding 12 of the 13 cards in a Suit is 0.00000003%!