

Bruce Thompson

ESTHER DISCUSSES TIPS ON PLAYING AND FOR TEACHING

DEFENSE TO NEW AND ADVANCING BRIDGE LEARNERS

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen

Note. [Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen](#)[1] is a hypothetical Quintuple Emerald Gold Life Master (20+ million ACBL Masterpoints), who in her various dialogs, convention lessons, and quizzes vacillates between insisting on being called “Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen,” and “Esther, because I am so warm and caring,” and who in her downloadable lessons website named the “Esther Bridge Lessons,” torments (usually, but not always) her earnest, hapless bridge student, Bruce.

Louis H. Watson, in the various editions of his (1958) *Watson’s Classic Book on the Play of the Hand at Bridge*, put quite eloquently the well known wisdom that “**defensive play is the most difficult phase of bridge**”. Watson noted that:

Most players agree that Bidding can become pretty well standardized between any pair of players, and even two players who have no common bidding system can generally coordinate their ideas of bidding to such an extent that they will have some notion of what each is doing. The play of the Declarer is comparatively simple, for he always manipulates half the cards in the deck..., all of which he can see. The player on the Defending Side has no such advantage. He can see his own thirteen cards, and he can see the Dummy’s thirteen cards. But the only cards he can play as he chooses are his own thirteen, and he cannot see his Partner’s hand at all. (p. 159)

[1] As noted in an article in the Winter/Spring, 2024 article, “Things the Pandemic (and Our Club Burning Down) Helped Me Learn About Teaching Bridge Using Online Lessons,” in *The American Bridge Teachers’ Association (ABTA) Journal*, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! And this article was really, really written by **Bruce Thompson**.

In my experience teaching bridge to new and advancing players it is very important to early and often tell your students what they already know: “Defense in bridge is **very hard!**” Telling your students that defense is hard **normalizes** their fears

about playing defense. But new and advancing players know that they will play on defense on about 50% of the Boards in any given competition, so doing well

on defense is vitally important to doing well overall in the competition. And **explicitly** telling your students that bridge defense is hard helps them situate defense as a topic within the bridge instructional curriculum: Defense is not the first topic new bridge players need to master! And once it’s time to focus on learning more about defense, bridge learners should realize that there will be inevitable (and life-long) struggles with defense along the bridge learning journey!

A “Key” Aspect of Bridge Defense is Selecting Your Lead

One mistake newer bridge players make is not thinking about the lead during the auction, as against only after the auction is completed. It is important to tell newer bridge players to “think about your lead during the auction,” because thinking about your possible lead can inform your bidding. As an example, I once sat LHO to a Dealer who opened 1NT (15-18 HCPs). I held ♠AKQTx, an outside Ace, and with other Honors, like my RHO I also held a “big” Hand with 17 HCPs. I knew that my RHO and I together held 32-35 HCPs in the deck, and so that Partner at most held 5-8 HCPs.

In my Partnership I could DOUBLE my RHO’s 1NT opening bid to show Partner that I hold a 1NT opening Hand, but my Hand does not have a NT distribution. I could Overcall with a 2C bid. But I also know that if I PASS my LHO was likely to either PASS or execute a Jacoby transfer. And I knew that I could enter the bidding later if my LHO bid anything other than PASS.

I also knew that we were not Vulnerable, but that the Opponents were, and that we could make a large positive bridge score by setting the Vulnerable Opponents’ 1NT contract even undoubled! I would be on lead. I knew that on lead I would take at least 3 Club Tricks, maybe 4 or even 6 Club Tricks “off the top,” and at some point on defense also win my outside Ace! And I knew that many Pairs sitting in the same direction as me and Partner would foolishly boom out a DOUBLE or an Overcall bid, and that instead my “aggressive PASS” of the 1NT bid would yield us a Top Board! And it did! By the way, it is also very, very important to



teach newer players that not only can you make good bridge scores on defense, but that you can also even make massive positive scores playing on defense!

When teaching bridge to newer players I always recommend bridge books that I think can be helpful on given topics. Two good books on selecting leads are:

- Opening Leads by Robert Ewen (1993), and
- Opening Leads by Mike Lawrence (1996).

But I also teach a general set of principles that I rank order in their general precedence, such as:

1. When you are on lead on defense against a Suit contract, and Partner PASSEd at each turn during the auction, lead a singleton Queen or smaller, and expect partner to follow the admonition, "Return your Partner's lead!" so that you can ruff early in play. If you hold a doubleton Qx or smaller, lead the "top" of your doubleton so that Partner again knows that you are short in your led Suit. And in turn, if Partner is "on lead", return Partner's lead at your first reasonable opportunity.

2. When you are unsure what to lead, because Partner did not bid or the auction does make a choice obvious, lead the 4th from the "top" of your "longest and strongest" Suit that was not bid by Opponents, especially when playing a NT contract, so that Partner can use the "Rule of 11" to discern Declarer's holdings.

3. If Partner bid a Suit during the auction, and you are "on lead" initially, unless you see some obvious reason not to do so, lead your highest Honor in Partner's bid Suit, and if you win the Trick, then lead that Suit again.

4. Lead from the top of 2 "touching" Honors in a "long" non-Trump Suit (e.g., K from KQ987) against a Suit contract, or from 3 "touching" Honors (e.g., QJT85) or a "tenace" (e.g., QJ976) in a 4+ card Suit against a NT contract. Leading an Honor alerts Partner that you are holding the "touching" Honor so that Partner can later lead this Suit back to you.

5. Leading an Ace in a non-Trump Suit (1) promises Partner that you will next lead the King, unless Dummy has a void or a singleton, and (2) **demands** that Partner immediately tell you using "signaling" whether Partner can take the third Trick in the Suit either by (a) playing the Queen or (b) ruffing. For example, I prefer to play "Inverted Attitude" or

"Upside Down Attitude" (U.D.A) where "low" = "yes", and "hi" = "no", so if I play a 3 on Partner's initially-lead Ace, I am telling Partner, "Yes, I can take the **3rd Trick** in this Suit!" And leading an Ace against a Suit contract and then **not** playing the King should alert Partner that you held an Ace singleton, and that Partner upon obtaining the lead should then lead this Suit back to you to ruff.

6. Do **not** lead "unsupported" Aces (e.g., Ax, Axxx) unless Partner bid this Suit. Reserve "unsupported" Aces for "killing Opponents' Kings"!

Defense: It's All About 'Signaling'

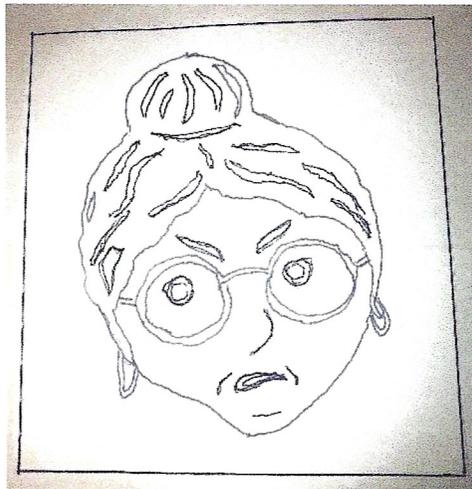
The only way the Defenders can offset Declarer's advantages from seeing and controlling 26 of the 52 cards in the bridge deck is by Defenders successfully communicating as much information to Partner as possible at each and every turn. As we all know, this involves "signaling" to Partner on defense: (1) "Attitude", (2) "Suit Preference", and (3) "Suit Card Count" (even or odd count).

With respect to "Attitude", there are 2 choices: (1) "High" = "Yes", and "Low" = "No", or (2) "Low" = "Yes", and "Hi = No", or so-called "Inverted Attitude" or "U.D.A.". The choice is generally irrelevant, but what I emphatically tell my students is, "Whatever you do, do not lie to Partner about your 'Attitude'!" As they say at the bridge table, "A lying Partner quickly becomes a former Partner!"

I also emphasize that players must pay quite close attention to Partner's "Attitude Echo." For

example, if we are playing U.D.A. and Partner on initial lead plays an Ace, and I play an 8, it is possible that the 8 is my lowest card in the Suit. The second card I play is my "echo", confirming (or not) my initial "signal". If I play an 8 on Trick #1 and the Ten on Trick #2 in the Suit, I am saying "I like this Suit!" But if an 8 on Trick #1 and the 4 on Trick #2 in the Suit, I am saying "I do not like this Suit!" "Attitude" signals are the first thing I teach newer players when teaching defense.

The second thing I teach newer players about defensive play is "Suit Preference", because it is also important, albeit more challenging. A simple signal system involves my first slough. Partner and I may agree, "My first slough may indicate my preference that you lead this Suit back to me, especially if I didn't bid during the auction." Or, my first ruff may also instead



be saying “Partner, this slough may mean nothing, because I have nothing else to dump, and apparently I am required to play some card during every Trick.”

Of course, a more sophisticated, but more difficult “Suit Preference” system can be used when defending against Suit contracts. For example, if an Opponent is playing a 4♥ contract, and a Diamond is led, and I play a card higher than the 6, such as the ♦9, I am saying, “Partner, between the 2 Suits (1) not involving the Trump Suit, and (2) the Suit other than the led Suit, Diamonds, I prefer that between Clubs and Spades you lead back to me the higher of these 2 Suits, Spades.

Finally, the last “signals” I teach involve showing Partner my “**Suit Card Count**,” odd or even. “Attitude” signals occur only when Partner or I lead a Suit, “Card Count” signals occur only when Declarer leads either from Declarer’s Hand or Dummy.

Playing “**high-low**” (e.g., 7, then the 2, or 8, and then the 5) on cards led in a suit by Declarer or Dummy says, “I have an even **number** of cards in this suit.” Playing “**low-high**” (e.g., 2,9, or 4,7) on cards led in a suit by Declarer or Dummy says, “I have an **odd** number of cards in this suit.”

Final Thoughts

As part of bridge instruction I always strongly emphasize to my students that they should strenuously avoid becoming or being “**Results Players**.” “Results Players” generalize from a single Board result to the upcoming infinite array of future Boards, rather than instead playing based on fundamental Bridge Principles. Thomas Rush in his post on the “Teachers” Section of the Bridge Club of Houston website wisely put being a “Results Player” into proper perspective:

I’m a student of the game. I am not a [R]esults [P]layer: you can make a good bid and get a bad board, and you should be complimented. You can also make a bad bid or play and score well; in that case, you [still] have to look at the board and find the mistake [and not continue to play in violation of sound Bridge Principles, which may not work every single time, but that over time will inevitably lead to your most favorable bridge results over time and across all Boards, and not just an aberrant Board]. It’s the job of a good bridge teacher to help you understand and learn the right percentage choices, regardless of whether they worked on this hand or not--because they put the odds on your side. I believe in teaching principles, not rules; judgement not conventions; consistency not brilliance. Principles will help you decide what to do in new situations. Judgement makes you more successful in competitive situations,

and getting to games that make (as well as staying out of games that don’t make!). Perhaps most of all is consistency: Letting your partner know what is in your hand, and not trying to be brilliant. If brilliance were the right thing to do, it would be in all the books, it would be the ‘normal’ thing, because it worked! [Emphasis added.]

I can remember earning a Top Board after an auction in which Partner responded to my 1♥ opening bid by bidding what we previously had agreed was Jacoby 2NT, and I set the contract at 6♥, which I made, even though Partner indeed did not have either (1) 4 Hearts or (2) opening HCPs! I made the contract and earned a Top Board, because no other Pair sitting our direction would have stupidly bid slam on these holdings. Getting a good result on a stupid bid does not commend lying to Partner during the auction as being a generally wise practice!

I also teach my students how badly a single bad Board can hurt your **Overall Bridge Percentage**. If you earn a 0% Board when a 50% Board was easily otherwise obtained, and you are playing 18 Boards in a BBO competition, your **Overall Percentage** will be reduced by $[(50\% - 0\%) / 18 = 50\% / 18 = 2.8\%]$! If you earn a 0% Board when a 75% Board was easily otherwise obtained, and you are playing 18 Boards in a BBO competition, your **Overall Percentage** will be reduced by $[(75\% - 0\%) / 18 = 75\% / 18 = 4.2\%]$!

If you are at the top of the competition prior to your Bad Board, after your Bad Board you may nevertheless still earn MasterPoints. But if you are grouped in the middle of the competition, where many Pairs are lumped closely together, your unfavorable result will move you down below many of your Opponent Pairs! I teach how much a single Bad Board can hurt results so that my students will understand how critical **consistency** is when playing competitive bridge, and how important it is to try to avoid mistakes, although of course some mistakes are inevitable.

Unfavorable results when playing on defense hurt just as badly as poor play when you are Declarer. So helping new or advancing players master the basics of play on defense will certainly be of great assistance to your students, which you also must teach them!

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