

Esther Discusses "Playing Active versus Passive Defense: *What* Are These Styles and *When* Should You Use One versus the Other?"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

To return to the "Esther Bridge Lessons," CLICK:

<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

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 "**Playing Active versus Passive Defense: *What* Are These Styles and *When* Should Use One versus the Other?"** 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!

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! I do understand that young girls can indeed be quite vicious to each other. Well, in any case, Esther, may we start by you defining what these terms "**Active Defense**" and "**Passive Defense**" mean?

© Copyright, Bruce Thompson, 2024. All rights reserved.

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**.

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. "**Active Defense**" occurs when you aggressively try to (1) immediately take winning Tricks or (2) aggressively set up or "promote" winning Tricks. For example, on the initial lean holding non-Trump A,K,x,x against the Opponent's Suit contract you lead your non-Trump Ace, (1) thus *promising* Partner that you hold and will next play the King in the same Suit, assuming the Dummy is not void and does not hold a singleton, and (2) asking Partner to use an "**Attitude Signal**" to tell you whether Partner can take the 3rd Trick either with the Queen or by ruffing.

"**Passive Defense**" occurs when you lead to "play it safe" and "fail to do harm" by surrendering low cards that you know or believe will be sure "losers" no matter what you do. The purposes of a "**Passive Defense**" are to (1) not actively help the Declarer and (2) try to afford the Declarer the opportunity to make unforced errors.

Bruce: OK, fair enough. So, Esther, once you are on the initial lead, and you select your lead based on your initial decision to play either "**Active Defense**" or "**Passive Defense**", do you stick with your *initial* Defense choice throughout the remainder of the play of the Board?

Esther: Well, Bruce, no, **absolutely not!** Throughout the play of the Board your defensive approach will almost always *shift* as you acquire *new information* during the auction. You will see the Dummy. You will read your Partner's "signals" to you. You will make additional inferences about the Declarer's holdings. Throughout play you must *continually reevaluate* whether you wish to try to attack and take "winner" Tricks or be passive and allow Declarer to take what you regard as inevitable winners. Throughout the play to the Board you need to repeatedly ask yourself:

"Do we need to go get our tricks by setting them up as fast as possible or do we need to be careful not to help the [D]eclarer or set up any [T]ricks for them? ...If we feel that... [playing the Board] *is a race*, that we need to go win our [T]ricks before the [D]eclarer sets up their [T]ricks or discards their losers, then we need to make aggressive, attacking plays... On the other hand, if we think that [D]eclarer is likely to have a hard time making the contract without help from us, then we try our best to not give the declarer any help and

we lead suits that we think are safe" [by leading inevitable "losers"].²

Bruce: OK. Well, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther, are there any general situations in which either "**Active Defense**" or "**Passive Defense**" might usually be preferred?

Esther: Well, Bruce, yes. But remember, these are *general* guidelines, not universal inflexible guidelines.³ "**Active Defense**" is often better when:

1. Your Opponents have set a **grand** slam contract.
2. One Opponent or both have shown a particularly "long" non-Trump Suit when a Suit contract has been set on which "losers" can be discarded. Always remember: *In Suit contracts it's all about getting rid of "losers"*.
3. One Opponent or the other or both Opponents have shown very "**big**" Hands.
4. You determine that "top" Honors are likely sitting "behind" your Partnership's Honors and the Suits are "splitting" in the Declarer's favor.

In other words, you generally will prefer an "**Active Defense**" when you think, whether based on HCPs or card distributions or both, that the Declarer is likely to make his contract.

Bruce: Well, OK, Esther. What about "**Passive Defense**"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, "**Passive Defense**" is often better when:

1. Your Opponents have set a **small** slam contract.
2. Your Opponents have struggled to set the contract and seemingly have no "extra" special features (e.g., the Opponents bid 1NT, 2NT, 3NT).
3. The Declarer is "strong" and the Dummy is "weak" (e.g., one Opponent bids 2NT and the Board is PASSEd out).
4. The Opponents have shown Hands that are "balanced" and roughly "equal" in HCPs.

² From Robert S. Todd's web article, "**Types of Defense—Active vs. Passive**":

<https://www.advinbridge.com/this-week-in-bridge/446>

³ These ideas are from Maritha Pottenger's article, "**Active versus Passive Defense**":

<https://lajollabridge.com/LJUnit/Education/Maritha/Active-Versus-Passive-Defense.pdf>

5. You have strength in one of the Declarer's "side" Suits in a Suit contract or in a **NT** contract and so on lead you do not want to "finesse yourself".

Bruce: OK. Well, any additional thoughts about when it is better to use an "**Active Defense**" or "**Passive Defense**"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, here are some other thoughts from Maritha Pottenger's web posting:

1. In defending against a Suit contract, "**If [D]ummy has a fairly balanced hand** (and Declarer has NOT indicated a twosuit hand), **and [D]ummy has scattered [H]onors and some threatening intermediate cards, passive defense is usually best.**" [emphasis in original]
2. If you decide to play an "**Active Defense**", "**If [D]ummy has two suits of 4 cards or longer and you feel you must attack one of them to develop tricks, it is usually best to attack the one that is weakest,** particularly if you have an [H]onor in both. If, for example, [D]ummy has AQJx in clubs and A982 in diamonds and you have Kxxx in clubs and Qxxx in diamonds and you feel you must attack, lead a diamond—never a club."
3. "**It is almost never right to attack strong tenaces in dummy** (e.g., AQJx; AJ10x; KQ109; etc.) [unless Partner "signals" to you a preference for you to lead that Suit]. You are usually helping Declarer—not yourself and your [P]artner."

Bruce: OK. Well, would you give us some examples of leads that involve "**Active Defense**"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, of course. Here are some examples:

1. Lead "away" from an Honor to try to set up later "winners" for your Partnership and signal Partner a "preferred" lead.
2. Assuming you hold Trump cards against a Suit contract lead a side-Suit singleton to try to set up a later ruff by asking Partner to "return your lead."
3. Lead from the "top" of "touching Honors" to promise Partner that you hold "touching Honors" to try to promote later "winners."
4. Lead Trump initially or later in play, especially if once Dummy comes down you see a "short" side Suit which Declarer will likely ruff later in play before

"drawing" Trump in order to cut down or eliminate Declarer's opportunity to ruff in Dummy.

Bruce: OK. Well, could you give us an example of a Board on which you at least initially would favor an **"Active (Aggressive) Defense"**?

Esther: Well, Bruce, let's say that sitting SOUTH E/W Vulnerable you hold:

♠ Q 4 3 ♥ K 3 ♦ A K Q J 9 ♣ 8 6 5 (15)

and the bidding proceeds:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
PASS	1NT	PASS	PASS
PASS			

Sitting SOUTH not Vulnerable you decide to make an "Aggressive PASS" because the Opponents are Vulnerable and you and Partner are unlikely to make a noteworthy "positive" score by setting the final contract in Diamonds while you see the opportunity to take as many as 5 Diamonds and a Heart and/or a Spade and get a bigger "positive" score by playing against 1NT on defense. Obviously, your Hand begs an **"Active Defense"**!

Bruce: OK. Well, how about another example where you would favor an **"Active (Aggressive) Defense"**?

Esther: Well, Bruce, the following example is based on a Board presented in a May 18, 2024 article titled, "Bridge: Should Defense Be Active or Passive?", in the Hastings (NE) Tribune:

Hands were substantially different than these the Declarer SOUTH sitting last within play will win the Trick at the "lowest" possible level! WEST does not want to lead a "protected" Ace, especially not in the Trump Suit. WEST could lead the Club 8 as "top of nothing", but that would be improvident. It is clear that WEST must lead his Heart 3 as "bottom of something" in the hopes that EAST holds Heart Honors and that E/W can take some Tricks in this 2nd unbid Suit. EAST should then "return" WEST's led Suit and lead the Heart Ten in hopes of driving out SOUTH's Heart Queen if indeed SOUTH holds that Queen. If EAST's Heart Ten wins then EAST can next play his Heart 9 and WEST can cover with his Heart King in the hopes that the Heart "split" was 3-3.

Bruce: OK, Esther. Any final thoughts?

Esther: Well, yes, Bruce. Here is a **Cardinal Bridge Principle** that involves the very essence of "**Passive Defense**" and not doing things that gratuitously "assist" the Declarer in making his contract:

During play do not make a lead that "breaks" a "new" unbid Suit unless you hold "touching" Honors, especially if you sit LHO to the Declarer. Doing so will often result in Declarer making 1 "extra" Trick.