

**Esther Discusses "The Basics of
'Hand Evaluation' and 'Hand Re-Evaluation'
During the Auction: Dynamic Hand Evaluation"**

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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

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

Esther: Today, we are honored to have with us *moi*, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will discuss "The Basics of 'Hand Evaluation' and 'Hand Re-Evaluation' During the Auction: Dynamic Hand Evaluation".

Bruce: Well, Esther, thank you for talking to us today.

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

Bruce: Errr, very sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, why don't you first talk a bit about some basics of the "Hand Evaluation" process that one should use during the auction to determine *whether* and *how* to bid?

Esther: Well, of course, my *Malodorous Misanthrope*. Even novice bridge players know that "Hand Evaluation" begins by adding up the number of High Card Points (HCPs) that you hold, with an Ace = **4**, King = **3**, Queen = **2**, and Jack = **1**. Thus, the total deck of 52 cards contains $4 \times (4 + 3 + 2 + 1) = 4 \times 10 = \mathbf{40}$ HCPs. Obviously, *on average* your randomly-dealt Hand will hold **~10** HCPs. When considering a Suit bid players also usually add 1 HCP for holding every bid-Suit card more than 4 cards. And players may "discount" Honors that are "unprotected", such as holding Q,x, or J,x,x.

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

¹ Esther is actually a fictitious, not real person. This "Esther Bridge Lesson" was actually written by Bruce Thompson.

Bruce: Oh, my goodness, Est... I mean, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Can you suggest some readily-available instructional materials that our Beginner Intrepid Readers can easily access to learn more about the bridge topic of "**Hand Evaluation**"?

Esther: Well, certainly, Bruce! The Wikipedia entry on "**Hand Evaluation**" is actually quite good:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hand_evaluation

But *without question* the very best brief reading on "**Hand Evaluation**" is the "**Hand Evaluation**" chapter in Marty Bergen's extraordinary little 2011 book, pocket posh tips for bridge players. As noted on the "Bridge Bruce's Way" ("*BBW*") website,

<https://www.esther-bridge.com/bbw/bbw.html> :

Another *fabulous, wonderful* print resource for Beginners (and Advancers as well) is a little "pocket book" (so-called because this 121-page book is small enough fit in your pants or shirt pockets). This pocket book is replete with bridge wisdom. The author, Marty Bergen, is a **10-time** National Bridge Champion, and creator of numerous bridge conventions, including "Bergen Limit Raises", "DONT",² and the "Rule of 20"³, and has had a regular column in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin since 1976! This *wonderful* little pocket book is pocket posh tips for bridge players, and can be found new or used online from various vendors, including WALMART (\$12).⁴

Bruce: Well, OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Can you give us a bit of the essence of what Marty Bergen argues in his extraordinary "**Hand Evaluation**" chapter in his 2011 pish posh bridge book?

Esther: Well, my *Bodacious Bupkus*, here are a few of Bergen's core ideas:

²Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", see "Convention #4: **Bergen Limits Raises**" and "Convention #17: **DONT**".

³Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", see, for example, "**Esther Discusses 'Are the 'Rule of 20' and the 'Law of Total Tricks' Both Broken?'**":

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/count\(s\).pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/count(s).pdf)

⁴<https://www.walmart.com/ip/Pocket-Posh-Pocket-Posh-Tips-for-Bridge-Players-Paperback>

1. Two-Suited Hands play very well in **Suit contracts**, because 2-Suited Hands often allow the Declarer to either (a) cross-ruff or (b) dump "losers". This idea is honored by Bergen's creation of his "**Rule of 20**" bidding guideline, which says:

You can and *should* open a Suit contract bid sitting in *any* seat within the auction if the sum of (1) your HCPs and (2) the number of cards in your longest 2 Suits is **20 or more!**
2. Hands in which HCPs are concentrated within your "longer" Suits rather than in your "shorter" Suits are better. For example, the Hand:

♠ A Q 9 6 ♥ K Q J 8 ♦ T 7 5 ♣ T 9 (12)

is superior to the Hand:

♠ T 9 6 5 ♥ J 8 6 ♦ A Q 5 ♣ K Q (12).
3. Hands in which your Honors are "touching" are superior to Hands in which your Honors are not "touching". In Bergen's words in his 2011 book, "HAPPY TOGETHER. All [H]onor cards increase in value when combined with other [H]onors in the same [S]uit" (p. 13). For example, the Hand:

♠ Q J T 9 ♥ K Q J 8 ♦ K Q T ♣ T 9 (14)

is superior to the Hand:

♠ K J 9 8 ♥ Q T 8 6 ♦ K J 9 ♣ A 9 (14).

Bruce: OK. Well, once you perform your initial "**Hand Evaluation**" I suppose you can then *retire* from the bridge "**Hand Evaluation**" obligation. Aren't you then done with "**Hand Evaluation**"?

Esther: Well, my *Blatant Bozo*, you could not possibly be any more *wrong!!!* Your obligation instead is to conduct "**Hand Re-Evaluation**" throughout the *entirety* of the auction, because what Partner and other Players bid will often change your evaluation of your own Hand! For example, if Partner bids Spades, and you can "support" Partner's Spades, and an Opponent bids Hearts, and you are "short" Hearts, the value of your Hand was just escalated by the Opponent's Heart bid!

Bruce: Well, OK. Could you give us a concrete example of how this process of "**Hand Re-Evaluation**" should work?

Esther: Well, sure. Let's consider the following Board⁵, and then I will talk through the process of "**Hand Re-Evaluation**" from the *perspective of E/W*:

DLR: **NORTH**

VUL: **BOTH**

	NORTH (13)	
	S: A T 9 6	
	H: K Q 3	
	D: A 9 6 4 2	
	C: 9	
WEST (10)		EAST (9)
S: K 3		S: 8 5 2
H: J T 8 2		H: A 7 5
D: J 5		D: T 3
C: A J T 5 3		C: K Q 8 6 2
	SOUTH (8)	
	S: Q J 7 4	
	H: 9 6 4	
	D: K Q 8 7	
	C: 7 4	

Bidding

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1 D	PASS	1 S	PASS
2 S	PASS	PASS	DBL
PASS	3 C	???	

Bruce: Well, OK. Would you comment initially on WEST's "**Hand Re-Evaluation**" when WEST decided to DOUBLE the N/S 2**S** contract?

Esther: Well, Bruce, first, WEST holds **10** HCPs. And WEST knows that SOUTH was pretty much obligated to bid 1**S** as long as he held 4+ Spades even if SOUTH held only 6 or **7** HCPs. So WEST knew that EAST may also hold some HCPs!

WEST sits in the "*balancing*" position because if WEST PASSES at his 2nd turn to bid, then the contract is set at 2**S** SOUTH. WEST knows that SOUTH as Responder has shown at least **4** Spades by his 1**S** response bid, and NORTH by bidding 2**S** has shown exactly **4** Spades. And WEST knows that NORTH

⁵ Some of the ideas presented here are based on Adam Parrish's article (p. 45), "Static vs. Dynamic [Hand] Evaluation," in the August, 2024 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin.

holds at least ~13 HCPs and SOUTH holds at least ~6 HCPs, so together N/S hold at least $13 + 6 = 19$ HCPs. Given that N/S hold **8+** Spades, the "**Law of Total Tricks**"⁶ says that N/S are *very likely* to make an easy 2S contract, because $8 - 6 = 2$, and thus make an easy "positive" Bridge Score.

Esther is adamant that you usually should not let Opponents play a 2-level contract in a Major when the bidding proceeds in this manner.⁷ Of course, sometimes you do not have *any* reasonable bid, and you simply must PASS in the "balancing" position.

In the words of Ron Klinger, author of the Ron Klinger "**Suit Quality Test ('SQT') Score**", in his book, 100 WINNING BRIDGE TIPS for the Improving Player:

Do not allow your opponents to play a Suit part-score at the two-level unless you have [both] length and strength in their Suit [and think you can set your Opponents]. If [O]pponents hold a primary trump fit (they bid and supported a Suit) it is **almost always wrong [for you] to PASS it out at the 2-level. (p. 40) [emphasis added]**

Here WEST executed a "Takeout/**Demand** DOUBLE"⁸ rather than overcall 3C because WEST holds **4+** cards in both the unbid Suits, is "short" in both the of the Opponents' bid Suits, and WEST's DOUBLE if NORTH PASSes requires EAST to bid Clubs or Hearts, whichever is EAST's "longer and stronger" of the 2 Suits.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, sitting SOUTH what should SOUTH do in response to the E/W 3C overcall?

⁶ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see "(1) Does the 'Law of Total Tricks' ('LOTT') Really Work, and (2) Is the 'LOTT' Magic?":

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

⁷ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see "When You Are in the 'Balancing' Position, and Opponents Bid a 'Constructive Raise' to Either 2H or 2S, Do NOT Let Opponents Play This Contract!!!":

https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/2H2S_bal.pdf

⁸ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see Convention #14: "6 'Not-for-Penalty' Doubles":

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

Esther: Well, Bruce, just as WEST conducted "**Hand Re-Evaluation**" throughout the auction, you too must conduct your own "**Hand Re-Evaluation**". Although you hold only **8** HCPs, you hold both "length" and Honors in both of NORTH's bid Suits. This makes your Hand more valuable. You have not yet shown NORTH your **4** Diamonds with Honors. I would bid **3D** to say, "Partner, I hold 4+ Diamonds, so we hold **8+** cards in *both* Diamonds and Spades. You decide! Our Hands *together* are *more valuable* because our Hands 'fit' in 2 Suits. According to the '**Law of Total Tricks**', we may go down, but likely by *no more than 1* Trick, and we will deny E/W a likely 'positive' Bridge Score."

In the words of Adam Parrish in his August, 2024 ACBL Bridge Bulletin article:

Good bridge players *continually* [and *dynamically*] modify the evaluation of their [H]and as new information becomes available during the auction, both from their [P]artners and from their [O]pponents. Listen to the bidding, estimate how well your [H]and is meshing with [P]artner's and how well your [H]onors are positioned relative to the [O]pponents' cards, and *adjust* your evaluation accordingly. (p. 45) [italics added]

Esther's Overarching Bridge Advice

Bridge bidding requires a player to **balance** potential rewards for making a somewhat uncertain choice against the possible *penalties* for taking a calculated risk. There are **2** overarching considerations that the player should contemplate when making these challenging decisions.

1. When Making Decisions, "Play the Room"

In her Lesson #16, "**Esther Discusses 2 Boards from the 7/14/20 49er Game: Do, NOT, Ever, Be a 'Results Player', and The Importance of 'Playing the Room'**",⁹ Esther emphasizes that:

***"Playing the Room."** One of the most important principles of bridge is that when you are bidding, you have to think about how the specific other players in the room will play the Board, and*

⁹Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Bds_11_12.pdf

“play the room.” Remember: You are not playing against cards; instead, you are playing against other specific pairs sitting your direction on the Board, and you are playing for a better or best Board (i.e., the highest positive score, or the lowest negative score, sitting in your direction). Shark people are much more aggressive than Novice people.

Explicitly think about what choices your specific Opponents sitting in the same direction as you are likely to make. For example, Novice players will be reluctant to DOUBLE for penalty, so if in a Novice competition you successfully DOUBLE for penalty you may gain a big MatchPoint advantage, but furthermore, in the same situation if you do not DOUBLE for penalty because you deem the DOUBLE somewhat risky, you also will not be severely damaged because Novice players are unlikely to DOUBLE. Sharks will make the opposite choices, and so if you bypass a potentially successful DOUBLE when playing against Sharks, you will accordingly be punished because you will be surrounded by players who will take these calculated risks. Of course, the same logic applies to decisions to bid, or not bid, slam contracts.

2. Target Board Percentages of 70%, Not 100%

In competitive MatchPoint duplicate pairs bridge you will earn between 0 and [n of Pairs sitting your direction - 1] MatchPoints on each Board.¹⁰ So, if you are competing in a group while you sit N/S, and there **10 N/S** Pairs playing in the competition, your MatchPoints on every Board in the competition will be between **0** and $10 - 1 = 9$. At the end of the competition all of your Board MatchPoint scores will be added up to compute your competition **Total MatchPoint Score**. And then your **Total MatchPoint Score** will be divided by the mathematically largest possible Board MatchPoint Score (e.g., **9** for a competition involving 10 Pairs x the number of Boards played in a competition) to compute your **Total Percentage**. For example, if **10** Pairs compete on **18** Boards, the mathematically largest possible **Total Match Score** in that competition would equal $9 \times 18 = 162.0$. If your **Total MatchPoint Score** was **114.5**, your **Total Percentage** would equal $114.5 / 162.0 = 70.7\%$. The pairs in the

¹⁰Within the “Esther Bridge Lessons”, for more information about MatchPoint scoring see: <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/scoring.pdf>

competition will then be rank-ordered by their **Total MatchMatch Scores** or their **Total Percentages**, and both these results will always rank order the Pairs *identically*.

All this discussion begs the question, "When you are balancing risks and rewards when making bidding (and play) decisions, **what Board Percentage should you target on each Board?**" You might think that the obvious answer is 100%!

But you would be *wrong*! If you bid (and play) with the objective of making a 100% Board Percentage on each Board you will then inevitably be taking a very large number of risks. And many of these risks will be unnecessary!

In most duplicate pairs bridge competitions the *top-ranked* pair will usually score somewhere between about **60%** and **75%**. Essentially, if you score 70% on *each* Board, so too your **Total MatchMatch Score** will equal 70.0%. And you will almost certainly win the competition!

Therefore, when you are balancing risks and rewards during bridge bidding and play, shoot for a Board Percentage on each Board of **70%**, and not 100%. Of course, if you see the prospect of obtaining a Board Percentage of 100%, if the risks in obtaining this particular result are minimal, also *don't look the bridge gift horse in the mouth!*