

**Esther Discusses (1) Bidding Stayman, (2) Formulating a NT "Line of Play" by First Counting "Winners", and (3) "Promoting" Long-Suit Low-Card Winners**

**Bruce Thompson**

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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 **(1) bidding Stayman, (2) formulating a NT "Line of Play" by first counting "winners", and (3) "promoting" long-suit low-card winners**. Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, thanks for taking 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? As I have previously told you, they would encircle me routinely, **loudly** singing:

*Klinktoast-Houstonhousen,  
Klinktoast-Houstonhousen,  
What a stinky name!  
And you stink too,  
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, today's discussion focuses on the following Board:

**Board**

Dealer: NORTH

		NORTH (16)		
		<b>S:</b> A K T		
		<b>H:</b> A T 9		
		<b>D:</b> J T		
		<b>C:</b> A 7 4 3 2		
	WEST (6)		EAST (9)	
	<b>S:</b> 9 5 2		<b>S:</b> 8 6 3	
	<b>H:</b> J 8 5 4		<b>H:</b> Q 7 6 3	
	<b>D:</b> K Q		<b>D:</b> A 9 8	
	<b>C:</b> T 9 8 6		<b>C:</b> Q J 5	
		SOUTH (9)		
		<b>S:</b> Q J 7 4		
		<b>H:</b> K 2		
		<b>D:</b> 7 6 5 4 3 2		
		<b>C:</b> K		

**Bruce:** Well, Esther, first, Dealer NORTH opened the auction by bidding 1NT. That seems very straightforward. NORTH holds (1) 16 HCPs, (2) no void, (3) no singleton, and (4) no more than 1 doubleton. Next, EAST holding 9 HCPs and no 5 card suit, PASSES. Again, obvious. Third, SOUTH holds 9 HCPs, and 1 4-card Major with 2 honors: Spades. Would you comment on SOUTH's *bid of Stayman*?

**Esther:** Well, my malodorous misanthrope, many Partnerships play Stayman as requiring 8-10 HCPs. I, on the other hand, do not!!! I will only bid Stayman holding at least 9 HCPs.<sup>1</sup> The reason is simple. Although playing a makeable 4-level Major contract almost always yields a higher Bridge Score than playing 3NT, when you bid Stayman holding only 1 4-card Major, there is always the possibility that Opener bidding

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<sup>1</sup> An **exception** is if you are **5-4 or 4-5 in the Majors**, in which case (1) you should not perform a Jacoby transfer, and (2) you could bid Stayman with as few as **~7 HCPs**, and as "The Captain" in this particular bidding sequence later set the final contract at the 2-, 3-, or 4-level.

1**NT** holds (1) no 4-cards Major, or (2) a 4-card Major different than yours. Of course, if the Responder bidding Stayman holds 2 4-card Majors, the odds are greater that Opener will hold a matching 4-card suit. Indeed, **when Responder holds 2 4-card Majors, the odds are 60% that the Partnership will find an 8-card fit.** If you do not have a 8-card fit in a Major, your Partnership holds 25 or 26 HCPs, and you will probably make a 3**NT** contract! Of course, SOUTH *greatly* hopes for a 4-4 Spade fit, because playing a **NT** contract with a singleton Club in Dummy is terrifying! But there is only one way to find out about a 4-4 fit in a Major...

**Bruce:** OK. But why is it important then to bid Stayman with at least 9, rather than 8, HCPs?

**Esther:** Well, my simpering simpleton, because when Partner opens 1**NT** and you hold a 4-card Major, there is a real possibility that your Partnership will end up playing a 3**NT** contract! And you (absolutely) must remember: When you are playing suit contracts, trump card counts are often *more important* than HCPs!<sup>2</sup> Thus, the oft-repeated expressions: "Points are for No Trump!" (says Yoda), and "Points Schmoints!" (says Marty Bergen, as the title to the 1<sup>st</sup> of his **2 Points Schmoints!** books). But in **NT**, that is a different matter, and HCPs are very important! And if Opener holds 16 or 17, and you hold 9, then your Partnership holds 25 or 26 HCPs, and will probably make 3**NT**! And if Opener holds only 15 HCPs, and you hold 9, you may still be OK playing a 3**NT** contract.

**Bruce:** Well, OK, Ms. Klink..., errr, I mean, Esther. WEST PASSED, NORTH bid 2**D**, and EAST PASSED again, and SOUTH bid 2**S** to show SOUTH a single 4-card Major in Spades, EAST PASSED, and NORTH bid 3**NT**, and the hand was PASSED out. EAST was on lead, and because Partner bid only PASS at every turn, (correctly) led 4<sup>th</sup> from the top from his longest suit<sup>3</sup> holding no "touching honors", leading the 3 of Hearts. Now

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<sup>2</sup> On the [Esther Bridge Lessons website](#), see "**35. Easter discusses 'In setting suit contracts, count primarily Trump cards, and not HCPs...'**"

<sup>3</sup> On the [Esther Bridge Lessons website](#), see "**9. The 'Rule of 11', the most important rule in bridge!**"

the Dummy SOUTH's cards come down. What must Declarer NORTH now do?

**Esther:** Well, my bodacious bobblehead, Declarer must now (1) in a **NT** contract, first count winning Tricks, and then (2) formulate a tentative "Line of Play". Starting with Spades, Declarer sees that N/S holds 7 Spades. Having studied "bridge probabilities" a bit, Declarer knows that with Opponents holding 6 Spades, and that **number being even**, the probability of a 3-3 split (35.5%) is lower than the probability of a 4-2 split (48.4%)!<sup>4</sup> But the probability of a 5-1 or a 6-0 Spade split is small (100% - 83.9% = **16.%**). This means that Declarer thinks he can possibly draw 3 Rounds of Spades, leaving the final winning 13<sup>th</sup> Spade in the Dummy, for a total of 4 Spade Tricks, although it is slightly more likely, 48.4% versus 35.5%, that this will not work!

**Bruce:** OK. Where do you see other "Quick" or "Sure" Tricks?

**Esther:** Well, Declarer will win (1) the Ace and King of Hearts, and (2) the Ace and King of Clubs. Also, when EAST leads the 3 of Hearts, Declarer will duck in the Dummy, playing "second hand low," WEST will play the Jack of Hearts, which Declarer will overtake with the Ace of Hearts, and this will "promote" either Declarer's 9 or 10 of Hearts into a winner. Thus, the Declarer will take 3 or 4 Spades, 2 or 3 Hearts, and 2 Clubs = **7 to 9 Tricks**.

**Bruce:** OMG. The 3**NT** contract is possibly going down!!!!

**Esther:** Well, calm down, my dandruff-ridden dufus!!! Let's think through the Declarer's best "Line of Play".

***PRIOR TO PROCEEDING, STUDY THE N/S HANDS, PRESUMING THAT AS DECLARER YOU WOULD NOT KNOW THE E/W HANDS, AND BEARING IN MIND THAT NEITHER EAST NOR WEST BID, AND NOW FORMULATE YOUR TENTATIVE "LINE OF PLAY".***

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<sup>4</sup> On the Esther Bridge Lessons website, see the Section about statistical probabilities for bridge, **"Some VERY Important Non-Esther Bridge Info."**

**Esther:** Well, as Declarer playing a **NT** contract, after you **first** count your "sure" Tricks, you **second** should count the number of cards that you and Dummy together hold in each suit. Here, N/S holds (1) 7 Spades, (2) 5 Hearts, (3) 8 Diamonds, and (4) 6 Clubs.

**Bruce:** OK. So what?

**Esther:** Well, in defending against **NT** contracts, Defenders will attack with what they believe is the "longest and strongest" suit, with some emphasis on "longest," because even the smallest cards when playing a **NT** contract cannot, by definition, be trumped, and thus can be winners.

**Bruce:** So, what does this mean about the Declarer's planned initial "Line of Play"?

**Esther:** Well, when you as Declarer a playing a **NT** contract, as with the Defenders, you also should NEVER, NEVER, NEVER IGNORE YOUR LONGEST SUIT, because you can potentially "promote" even your smallest cards into winners!!! So, on this Board, Declarer NORTH should ALSO attack using the Partnership's longest suit, which in this case, is Diamonds. NORTH as Declarer is going to capture the lead whenever possible in Declarer's hand, and lead his highest Diamonds from his short 2-card Diamond holding, to **force out Opponents' winner Diamonds, and "promote" Dummy's remaing small Diamonds into winners**. Declarer knows that holding 8 Diamonds, Opponents hold 5 Diamonds.

**Bruce:** So?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, Declarer knows that with **an odd number** of cards out, 5, the highest probability split is 3-2 (67.8%), which is roughly 3-times more likely than the next-most-likely split, 4-1 (28.3%). Thus, Declarer should expect to most likely lose exactly 3 Diamonds. This means that Declarer is **likely to take 3 Diamond winners in the Dummy!**  
*GAME ON!!!*

**Bruce:** Well, are there *any other considerations* that make a "Line of Play" focusing on getting extra Tricks, and possibly *essential* extra Tricks, via attacking Diamonds, a good, workable plan?

**Esther:** Well, yes. There are 2 special considerations when playing a **NT** contract as Declarer. **First**, you want to make sure that you hold Stoppers in all the suits, so that Opponents can't "run" a long suit when you can't trump, since there are no trump in a **NT** contract! On this Board, Declarer NORTH holds 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> round control in Spades, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round control in Hearts, and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round control in Clubs! So, on this Board, Declarer knows that Opponents running a long suit is VERY unlikely!

**Bruce:** So, what is the second consideration for Declarer playing a **NT** contract?

**Esther:** Well, **second**, TRANSPORTATION. Also, TRANSPORTATION. On this Board, Declarer cannot EVER get to Dummy's Diamonds by leading a Diamond! That is *not optimal*! But it is not the end of the world. Declarer has 3 sure entries (Queen of Spades, King of Hearts, and King of Clubs) to the Dummy. So, the plan is, capture the lead in Declarer's hand, then lead a Diamond. Capture the lead in Declarer's hand again, when possible, and then lead Declarer's remaining Diamond. Then, later, win in Dummy, and play the lowest remaining Diamond in Dummy. When you inevitably regain the lead, go to Dummy, and run the remaining 3 Diamond winners. Yes, Virginia, you will win 3 Tricks with the 5, 6, and 7 of Diamonds! And you will indeed make your **3NT** contract, and maybe more!

**Bruce:** So, it sounds like you should pay attention even to low cards in long suits when playing a **NT** contract???

**Esther:** Well, BINGO, Bruce.