

## **Esther Discusses "Playing NT as Declarer: It's All About (1) the *Discards* and (2) *Tracking* 'Control Card' Play"**

**Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen<sup>1</sup>**

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 NT as Declarer: It's All About (1) the *Discards* and (2) *Tracking* 'Control Card' Play**". 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 please discuss the "Play as **NT** Declarer" on the following Board? What should Declarer do in the *initial* stages of play?

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<sup>1</sup> 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](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**.

**Board #2** Knoxville BBO  
 499er Game 08/01/24  
 DLR: **EAST**  
 VUL: **N/S**

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

**Bidding**

EAST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
1C	PASS	1D	PASS
1NT	PASS	PASS	PASS

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. SOUTH will lead the Club 3, 4<sup>th</sup> from the "top" of his "longest and strongest" Suit, given that neither NORTH nor SOUTH bid, and EAST's opening Club bid, given that SOUTH holds 4 Clubs with a Ron Klinger "**Suit Quality Test ('SQT') Score**" of 4 cards + 2 Honors (including the Ten) = **6**, probably means that EAST opened a "short" Club. Here are Declarer EAST's primary initial tasks:

1. **First**, once SOUTH leads the Club 3, Declarer EAST must **count his "winners"**. EAST can see that he should take 2 Spades, 2 Hearts, 2 or 3 Diamonds, and 0 Clubs, for a total of **6-7** Tricks.
2. **Second**, once the WEST Dummy comes down Declarer EAST must count the number of cards E/W hold in each Suit, to determine which "low" cards in a **NT** contract may be "promoted" by Declarer into "winners." Here E/W hold **7** Spades, **7** Hearts, and **8** Diamonds, but sadly no Suit with **9+** cards. Thus, the Diamonds Suit is the most promising Suit for "promoting" small-card "winners," if the N/S Diamond "split" is 3-3, which isn't the most likely "split," but nevertheless still has a high probability

(4-2 = **48.4%**, 3-3 = **35.5%**).<sup>2</sup> The "bad" news is that N/S are going to take either 4 or 5 Clubs "off the top." That's the danger in setting a **1NT** contract, but of course the contract may nevertheless still be makeable, because **1NT** will make as long as Declarer loses *no more* than **6** Tricks, and obviously 4 or 5 Club Tricks won't take N/S the full distance! In any case, once Declarer obtains the lead, Declarer will usually want to "attack" his "long" Suit, as long as he retains "control" cards across the other Suits.

**Bruce:** OK, fair enough. Here there is no necessity of Declarer EAST using the "**Rule of 7**" to determine how many Rounds of Clubs to "duck" prior to playing his "stopper", because E/W hold no Club "stopper." Furthermore, sadly E/W do not hold a super "long" Suit, so "promoting" winning Tricks, usually a vital task of a **NT** Declarer, is not particularly relevant. What then should become Declarer EAST's primary focus of attention?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, EAST is going to have to sort out very *carefully* what his **discards** from both Dummy and his Hand will be! Discarding "losers" is *always* critical when playing **NT** contract, just as "promoting" winners is usually also critical. But on this Board, where "promoting" winners is less of an issue, discarding "losers" is going to determine whether the contract "makes." A **Cardinal Bridge Principle** is:

**When playing a NT contract as Declarer, if possible, never discard *any* card that (1) may later become a "winner", or (2) may be or later become necessary for transportation purposes.**

**Bruce:** OK, once SOUTH leads the Club 3, and the WEST Dummy comes down holding only 2 Clubs, with Declarer EAST holding 2 Clubs, what should Declarer EAST initially do?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, the Club 3 lead by SOUTH of an unbid Suit suggests that SOUTH is leading 4<sup>th</sup> from the "top" of his "longest and strongest" Suit. Thus, Declarer EAST can invoke the "**Rule of 11**" to determine how many Clubs higher than the club 3 that NORTH holds. Because  $[11 - 3] = 8$ , and Dummy holds 1 Club higher than the 3, so  $8 - 1 = 7$ , and the

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<sup>2</sup> Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", see the "**Some Very Important Probabilities**" section.

Declarer EAST holds 1 Club higher than the 3 = 7 - 1 = 6. Thus, NORTH and SOUTH together hold 6 Clubs higher than the Club 3. Declarer EAST can only hope for a *roughly-even* Club "split", so that either SOUTH or NORTH or N/S together cannot run "long" Clubs "off the top", which happily actually happened in the present case because the N/S 9 Clubs split 5-4.

**Bruce:** Well, OK, Ms. Klink..., errr, I mean, Esther. On this Board N/S took Trick #1 and Trick #2 Club winners with NORTH's Club Ace and SOUTH's Club King, respectively. On Trick #3 Declarer EAST discarded the Dummy WEST Diamond 5 and the Declarer EAST discarded his Diamond 2. On Trick #4 Declarer EAST discarded the Dummy WEST Heart 4 and the Declarer EAST Heart 2. Esther, do you agree with these *discard* decisions?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, in the grand scheme of things these discard decisions may not matter, but they do not comply with Cardinal Bridge Principles. I would not discard the Dummy Diamond 5 because that 5 helps "protect" the WEST Dummy Diamond K,Q,T. Instead, from Dummy I would have discarded the Heart 4 and then the Heart 6. Declarer EAST only needs 1 Heart for transportation back to the Declarer's Hand, and reserving more than 1 Heart in the WEST Dummy serves no useful purpose for the Declarer. However, on the "plus" side, Declarer EAST did not discard any Spades from Dummy, and especially not 1 of his own 4 Spades.

**Bruce:** OK. Well, after 11 Tricks, on this Board Declarer EAST was in his Hand "on lead". Declarer EAST had taken 6 Tricks, and lost 5 Tricks, including 4 Club Tricks. If the Declarer EAST on lead can take a single 1 more Trick then E/W will exactly make their "makeable" 1NT contract. On the other Hand, if Declarer EAST *fails* to win Trick #12, not making a "makeable" 1NT contract will result in a very "low" E/W MatchPoint score because other Pairs sitting E/W may set the same contract but not make the same error. 3 Rounds of Spades and 2 Rounds of Hearts had been played, and at this point in play the 4 Hands held:

NORTH (5)

S:  
H: 9  
D:  
C: 8

WEST (9)

S:  
H:  
D: T 8  
C:

EAST (13)

S: 6  
H: 8  
D:  
C:

SOUTH (13)

S:  
H: Q  
D: A  
C:

On Trick #12 Declarer EAST *disastrously* led his losing Heart 8 rather than his "winner" Spade 6. Obviously, Declarer EAST was unsuccessful at both (1) keeping track of how many cards had been played in *each* Suit and (2) which "top" Suit Honors had not yet been played. Esther, can you provide any advice for newer players about *how to keep track* of these things?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, first of all when you as Declarer hold A,K,x,x in Hearts, and Dummy holds T,x,x in Hearts, then you know that you are going to have to keep track of the missing Heart Q,J, so do not lose sight of whether these 2 Heart Honors have been played. Keep a mental checklist on this issue *active!*

With respect to counting cards in the Spades Suit, when you hold 4 Spades to the Spade Ace, and once Dummy comes down you see that Dummy holds 3 Spades Q,J,x, you immediately then know that Spades may "split" 3-3 and thus "promote" your 4<sup>th</sup> Spade card into a "winner", and you will have to monitor this. Set this task for yourself as soon as Dummy comes down! And here is a "hint" about counting cards in Suits:

**You may find it easier to count how many *Rounds* a Suit has been played, rather than counting how many *cards* have been played in the Suit.**

Once as Declarer you remember that a Suit has been played 3 Rounds in a **NT** contract, and no one sluffed, you then know that the 13<sup>th</sup> card in the Suit has now been "promoted" into a winner.