

## **Esther Discusses "Beware of the 'Rule of 17' When Responding to Partner's 'Weak 2' Preemptive Opening Bid"**

**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 discuss "**Beware of the 'Rule of 17' When Responding to Partner's 'Weak 2' Preemptive Opening Bid.**" The "Rule of 17" is one of **40 or so bridge bidding/play rules<sup>1</sup>** that have emerged over the last several decades. Esther, 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 Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

**Bruce:** Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, in any case, thank you for talking to us today. Let's start by talking, first, about the "Rule of 17".

**Esther:** Well, of course, my *Malodorous Misanthrope*. The "Rule of 17" says, "When Partner opens the bidding by bidding a 'weak-2' preemptive 2-level bid, if the bid is in a Major, you as Responder can decide whether to bid Game by adding together (1) the number of Trump cards you hold, plus (2)

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<sup>1</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Lesson #25: **40 or So Bidding/Play 'Rules'**":  
<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/rules.pdf>

the number of HCPs you hold. If the answer is **17** or more, bid Game."<sup>2</sup>

**Bruce:** OK. Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what do you think about this "**Rule of 17**"? I know that you like certain "Rules", of which there are apparently many. For example, I know you very much like the "Rule of 20", "Rule of 11", and the "Rule of 7".

**Esther:** Well, my *Bodacious Bupkus*, as you say, I do very much like certain "Rules". But the "**Rule of 17**" is not at the top of my Favorites List! I think it is OK to use the "**Rule of 17**" as one way, but only one way, to help you evaluate whether you should bid Game when Partner opens either **2H** or **2S**. It is generally not helpful to be *too mechanical* when making bridge decisions! My views of the "Rule of 17" are fairly similar to those of my fellow Bridge Wizard, Larry Cohen.<sup>3</sup> Larry says, "The Rule of 17 (like most rules) is a guideline--no more. I don't recommend that experienced players use it. It is more of a learning crutch for newer players." I do not feel quite as strongly as Larry, but I do take his general point!

**Bruce:** OK. Well, would you mind explaining a bit more about your views of the "**Rule of 17**"?

**Esther:** Well, certainly, my *Simpering Simpleton*, of course! One problem with the "**Rule of 17**" is that the Rule does not take into account the **shape** of your Hand! In bridge, it important to remember the following Cardinal Principle of Bridge:

**"Flat" Hands tend to play well in NT contracts, and "Long-suited" (especially "2-suited") Hands tend to play better in Suit contracts!**

You simply must take this **Cardinal Principle** into account when you are bidding!!!

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<sup>2</sup> The "**Rule of 17**" was popularized by Mel Colchamiro, who wrote a popular column in the Bridge Bulletin, and also a popular bridge book: How to Play Like an Expert Without Having to Be One: Mel's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Rules and Other Guidelines for Playing Winning Bridge at Your Level and Above.

<sup>3</sup> See Larry Cohen's 2020 article, "**Rule of 17**": <https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/rule-of-17>

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, clearly, you feel VERY STRONGLY about this Cardinal Principle! Can you show us a Hand that illustrates your point?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, of course I can. Consider the following Hand played in a recent ACBL Regional Tournament:

Charlotte Regional "Gold Rush"

**Board #21 9/3/23**

Dealer: NORTH

Vul: N/S

	NORTH (6)	
	<b>S:</b> K J T 7 5 3	
	<b>H:</b> J 5	
	<b>D:</b> 9 8	
	<b>C:</b> J 5 3	
WEST (6)		EAST (14)
<b>S:</b> A 4		<b>S:</b> 9 2
<b>H:</b> T 9 6 4		<b>H:</b> K Q 8 2
<b>D:</b> 5 4		<b>D:</b> K Q J 6 2
<b>C:</b> Q T 8 7 2		<b>C:</b> K 9
	SOUTH (14)	
	<b>S:</b> Q 8 6	
	<b>H:</b> A 7 3	
	<b>D:</b> A T 7 3	
	<b>C:</b> A 6 4	

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, on this Hand NORTH as Dealer opened the bidding by bidding 2**S**. Do you agree with this bid?

**Esther:** Well, yes, maybe I do. Some players (unwisely) will bid 2**S** (or 2**H**) holding a Hand such as:

**Major:** A T 8 6 4 2

I think that's crazy!

**Bruce:** Why?

**Esther:** Well, opening this Hand by bidding a 2-level preempt bid may indeed achieve the purpose of messing up the Opponents' bidding. But the **downside risks** are massive, especially sitting first! When you make a 2-level preemptive bid with such holdings, Partner will have no (zero) idea whether you hold this Hand, or instead hold:

**Major:** A K J T 9 4

The range of possibilities is *ridiculously broad*. In general, when you bid you very much want your bid to "limit" your Hand with respect to HCPs, or card count/distribution, or both!

**Bruce:** Well, my goodness, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. What principle do you follow when making what you consider an appropriate "2-level" preemptive bid?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, I will only make a preemptive 2-level opening bid if I hold (1) ~11 or fewer HCPs (i.e., my Hand is "weak"), and (2) 6 cards, and (3) either **2 of the top 3 Honors**, or **3 of the top 5 Honors**! That way I have somewhat "limited" my Hand by my bid, and Partner/Responder will have at least a general idea about what my Hand looks like! This Hand is *marginal* for opening 2**S**, but does hold (1) 3 of the top 6 Honors, and (2) the J,T "touching" Honors.

**Bruce:** Well, OK. On this Board EAST, rightly or wrongly, with (1) 14 HCPs and (2) 5 Diamonds with 3 "touching" Honors, but no void on singleton in Spades, decided to Pass. So, what would you bid as Responder sitting SOUTH?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, guess what? SOUTH holds, you guessed it, (1) 3 Spades, and (2) 14 HCPs, and **3 + 14 = 17!!!**. But will this Hand play well in a Suit contract??? This Hand is "flat", "flat", and "flat"! How is the "**Rule of 17**" going to work out on this Board if you bid 4**S**?

**Bruce:** Well, my goodness, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, probably not very well.

**Esther:** Well, yes, Bruce. As it happens, E/W will win the Ace of Spades, 1 Heart, 1 Diamond, and at least either EAST's King of Clubs or WEST's Queen of Clubs. We don't want to overgeneralize from this, and be a "Results Player"<sup>4</sup>, but SOUTH bidding 4**S** with such a "**flat**" Hand in a Suit contract simply is *generally unlikely* to work out very favorably!

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<sup>4</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Lesson 16: Don't Be a 'Results Player', and the Importance of 'Playing the Room'":

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Bds\\_11\\_12.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Bds_11_12.pdf)

## Esther's Recommended Steps for Responder's Deciding How to Bid When Partner Opens 2H or 2S<sup>5</sup>

Once Partner opens by bidding 2H or 2S, Partner has "limited" his Hand by showing (1) 6 cards in the bid Major, and (2) either 2 of the "top" 3 Honors in the bid Suit, or 3 of the "top" 5 Honors in the Suit. Therefore, the Opener *must* inescapably hold a Suit with a Ron Klinger "Suit Quality Test ('SQT') Score" of at least (1) 6 Trump cards + (2) 2 or 3 Honors = 8 or 9. An "SQT Score" of 8 will generally support a Suit bid at the 8 - 6 = 2 level!

Any opening bid by Partner that "limits" his Hand so *precisely* (e.g., 1NT, 2H, 2S, 2NT, 3H, 3S) makes you as Responder "The Captain" whose job it is to set the final contract for your Partnership. The Opener holding a "limited" Hand **must not** bid again unless you as Responder ask the Opener a question. For example, if you as Responder bid 2NT, you are making an "artificial" bid asking the Opener,

"Partner, my Hand is quite strong and holds 'stoppers' in all unbid Suits, and I think our Hands may 'fit' and we may make a 3NT contract. I am somewhat 'short' in your long Suit, so transportation to your Hand as Dummy may be a problem in a 3NT contract. Do you hold a *side entry* to your Hand if we play 3NT? If you hold a side-Suit Ace or a "protected" King (e.g., K,x,x), then bid this side-Suit at the 3 level. Otherwise simply rebid your Major at the 3 level to *deny* a side-Suit entry to your Hand."<sup>6</sup>

If you as Responder instead are contemplating setting the final contract at 4H or 4S, these Suit contracts are all about dumping "losers". Your Hand as Responder will become the Dummy. Dummy's Trump cards do not "add" any "extra" Tricks to your Result, *unless* the Dummy can "dump" Declarer's side-Suit "losers" by ruffing "losers" in the Dummy. Does your Hand as Responder include

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<sup>5</sup> Some Partners do not play a 2D opening bid as preemptive in Diamonds, and instead use the Flannery convention to use an "artificial" 2D opening bid to show (1) exactly 4 Spades, (2) 5+ Hearts, and (3) 11-14 HCPs. See "Esther Bridge Conventions #6: Flannery 2D! Opening": <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/flannery.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> You can as Opener bid 2NT also if you are instead considering a 4H or 4S contract, to see if Opener has a side Suit "feature" that may help you make a Suit Game contract. But a 2NT response is more often used when Responder is considering a 3NT Game contract, and Responder is willing to set a final 3H or 3S contract if the Opener holds no side feature.

voids, singletons, or doubletons that will allow Declarer to ruff in your Dummy?

You *know* that Opener has a "weak" Hand because Opener bid a preempt opening. You also *know* that Opener is likely "short" in the other unbid Suits, and if you yourself hold a "long" side Suit, Opener is likely "short" in that Suit.

You should compute the score for the "**Rule of 17**" by adding together (1) the number of cards you hold in Partner's bid Major and (2) the number of HCPs you hold to see if that total equals **17** or more. But do not rigidly follow the "**Rule of 17**" and bid a Game contract *only* if your total is 17 or more, or *never* bid a Game contract if your total is less than 17.

Also, if you bid **2NT** asking Opener for a side feature, take that answer into account when considering a final **4H** or **4S** contract. But try to estimate how many "losers" you think your Partnership holds to guess whether you hold 3 or fewer "losers". Use this as another very important guide to your decision making.

Also, take into account whether or not you and Partner are Vulnerable. Naturally your "payoff" for successfully making a Game contract will be greater if you and Partner are Vulnerable, but if you are Vulnerable your penalty will also be greater if you do not make your Game contract. Life is hard! So is duplicate bridge!