

Esther Revisits "Do You Know When to Use 'Active' versus 'Passive' Defense?"

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 "Do You Know When to Use 'Active' versus 'Passive' Defense?" 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, because I am such a *warm and caring* person!

Bruce: Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast..., err, I mean Esther. Well, in any case, would you begin by briefly defining what you mean by "**active defense**" versus "**passive defense**"?

Esther: Well, my *gracious giver*, I will certainly try to help you! "**Active defense**" involves situations in which you will lose Tricks *if* you delay "cashing" your "winners". "**Active defense**" involves proactive *aggressive* steps such as:

1. "cashing" "winners" *before* Declarer can sluff his "losers" in the Suit so that he can ruff,
2. "promoting" lower cards into "winners",
3. trying to create ruffs for the defenders,
4. leading Trump cards to try to exhaust ruffing opportunities in a Dummy "short" in Trump cards,

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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.

5. "knocking out" an entry in Dummy before Declarer is ready to use the entry, and
6. forcing Declarer to ruff "high" or Overruff to deplete Declarer's higher Trump cards.

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... Are you actually *being nice* to me?

Esther: Well, my *inquisitive interlocutor*, of course I am being "nice" to you! Why wouldn't I be "nice" to you?

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... OK. Would you now describe what is meant by "**passive defense**"?

Esther: Well, my *beaudacious bonsman*, "**passive defense**" involves the Defenders leading cards that the Declarer is going to win anyway and *avoid* giving the Declarer Tricks that the Declarer would *not* otherwise "win". As Paul Gosnoy noted in his excellent web posting, "Active vs Passive Defense",² "If tricks can't disappear there's no need to be active".

You will *more often* be using "**passive defense**" rather than "**active defense**". As Larry Cohen noted in a May, 2025 article in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin, "Defensive Strategy—Part 2":

"In general, passive defense is the way to go. If there is no reason to be attacking/aggressive, then don't... Unless there is a reason... to get aggressive/risky/attacking, don't." (p. 55)

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... Isn't there a previous "Esther Bridge Lessons" that reviews these basic concepts?

Esther: Well, my *handsome hombre*, yes indeed. I previously wrote an "**Esther Bridge Lesson**" titled, "Playing Active versus Passive Defense: *What Are These Styles and When Should You Use One versus the Other?*" You can find that lesson at: https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Act_Pass.pdf

But I thought it might be useful to review here some "*real deal*" bridge Boards from actual prior competitions to see if you can identify which Boards warrant "**passive defense**" rather than "**active defense**". These Boards are drawn from Paul Gosnoy's excellent article, but I have modified some of the cards in the Boards.

²https://bridge-tips.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Gosney_talk_Active_Vs_Passive_Defence.pdf

"Real Deal" Board #7

Dealer: **SOUTH**

Vul: **BOTH**

NORTH (12)

S: Q 4
H: K T 7
D: A K 7 6
C: T 4 3 2

WEST (7)

S: K 9 7 6 5
H: 4 3
D: J 9
C: K 9 8 5

EAST (6)

S: 8
H: A J 9 8 2
D: T 5 3 2
C: J 7 6

SOUTH (15)

S: A J T 3 2
H: Q 6 5
D: Q 8 4
C: A Q

Bidding

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1NT	PASS	3NT	PASS
PASS	PASS		

	Tricks	
	N/S	E/W
#1: WEST leads ♠6, ♠4, ♠8, ♠J	1	0
#2: SOUTH leads ♠2, ♠K, ♠Q, ♥8	1	1
#3: WEST leads ♥4, ♥K, ♥A, ♥5	1	2

Bruce: Errr, well, Esther... EAST on Trick #4 could lead his ♣6 in the expectation that he "promote" his ♣J and possibly give WEST a "winner" assuming that SOUTH must hold Club "stoppers". That would be "**active defense**". Or EAST could lead a "low" Diamond that will be won in Dummy in any case. That would be "**passive defense**". Which would be better?

Esther: Well, Bruce, formulate your decision before you go to my answer.

When you have formulated **your** answer, go to **Esther's** answer:
<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/actVSpass1.pdf>