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"When Is It Better to Use an 'Attacking/Aggressive' Defense Style Rather than a 'Passive' Defense Approach?"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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Editor's Note. Today Bruce's role will be played instead by Donkey from the Shrek movies. Donkey, like Esther, is an accomplished and famous bridge-playing ACBL Grand LifeMaster.

Donkey: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will discuss **"When Is It Better to Use an 'Attacking/Aggressive' Defense Style Rather than a 'Passive' Defense Approach?"** Well, Esther, thank you for talking to us today!

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¹As 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**.

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

Donkey: Errrr, well, very sorry about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, is there anything you wish to initially say before you delve into the substance of today's lesson about 'aggressive' defense?

Esther: Well, Donkey, of course I will try to help you! Yes, indeed, I would initially like to say that the ideas and examples² presented here are drawn from Larry Cohen's article, "Defensive Strategy-Part 3", published in the June, 2025 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin (p. 51).

Donkey: Errrr, well, Esther, ..errr, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, oh my goodness! Well, you could tell us a bit about whom this Larry Cohen fellow is?

Esther: Well, Donkey, I will try to help you.

Larry Cohen

By the age of 22, Larry had won his first two of **25** National Championships, the Blue Ribbon Pairs and the prestigious Spingold Teams. Between 1979 and 2008, Cohen won **57** first or second place finishes in national and world competitions. In 2002, the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) named Cohen "Player of the Year". Cohen is also listed on the ACBL's "Top 10 Living Most Influential Bridge Personalities". In 2020, in his first year of eligibility, Cohen was elected to the ACBL Hall of Fame. Cohen has had long-term bridge partnership with players such as Marty Bergen and David Berkowitz.

Cohen's bridge writings have been massively influential. Cohen for many years has published a monthly column in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin. Cohen has authored numerous books including 6 books that have won the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) "Bridge Book of the Year Award":

Larry Teaches Modern Bidding Vol. I, II, and III (Self-Published 2020);

On The Other Hand (co-written with David Bird) (2019);

² Esther has altered some of the cards in illustrative Boards.

On The Other Hand - Defense (co-written with David Bird)
(2020);

Tricks of the Trade (2018);

Larry Teaches Opening Leads (2014); and

To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks (1992).

Esther regards Cohen's 1992 book on the "**Law of Total Tricks**" as probably being the *most important bridge book of all time*. This book is published in 6 different languages and was the best-selling bridge book of the 1990's.

Donkey: Errr, well, Esther, ...err, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, haven't you reviously covered "active"/"aggressive" versus "passive" defense in some of your previous "Esther Bridge Lessons", such as "**Playing Active versus Passive Defense: What Are These Styles and When Should You Use One versus the Other?**" (10/18/24): https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Act_Pass.pdf and "**Do You Know When to Use 'Active' versus 'Passive' Defense?**" (5/7/25): <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/actVSpass1.pdf>

Esther: Well, Donkey, you are, of course, correct. But here in this lesson I wish to focus *exclusively* on "aggressive"/"attacking" defense.

Donkey: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, OK. Would you please start by defining what you mean by "aggressive"/"attacking" defense?

Esther: Well, Donkey, that is an *excellent* question! *Quite simply* "aggressive"/"attacking" defense is when you are on defense you decide to immediately take as many possible "winning" Tricks as quickly as you can.

Donkey: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, isn't "passive" defense, a defense in which you *wait* to take your "winning" Tricks and hope that the Declarer makes mistakes along the way and thus generates "extra" Tricks for the defense, usually the *preferred* defensive strategy?

Esther: Well, Donkey, you are, against all odds, *exactly, perfectly correct!* But there are situations is which a "passive" defense is *simply wrong!* When should we when

playing defense use this *dangerous* but *sometimes necessary* “aggressive”/ “attacking” defense? In Cohen’s words:

“If the answer to the following question is ‘yes,’ then aggression is called for: **‘If we don’t get our [T]ricks now, or get them developed in time, will [D]eclarer be able to throw away losers?’** Put another way, if there is a source of [T]ricks in the dummy (like a good running or about-to-run [S]uit), we need to get active.” (p. 51, **bold** in original)

Donkey: Errrr, well, Esther, ..errr, I mean Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, well, could you give us an example, please?

Esther: Yes, Donkey, I will try to help you. Consider the following Board:

Dealer: **SOUTH**

	NORTH (14)	
	S: A K 4 2	
	H: 5 4	
	D: A Q J 9 8	
	C: 3 2	
WEST (11)		EAST (3)
S: 8 7 6		S: 9
H: A K 7		H: J 9 8 3 2
D: K T 2		D: 6 5 3
C: J T 5 4		C: Q 9 8 6
	SOUTH (12)	
	S: Q J T 5 3	
	H: Q T 6	
	D: 7 4	
	C: A K 7	

Bidding

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 S	PASS	2 NT *	PASS
4 S	PASS	PASS	PASS

*Jacoby 2**NT**³ saying, “Partner, I hold (1) **4** of your bid Major and (2) **13+** HCPs.”

³ Within the “Esther Bridge Lessons” see: “Esther Convention Lesson #2: Jacoby 2NT Response Bid”:

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/jacoby2NT.pdf>

Donkey: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, on Trick #1 WEST led his Heart Ace thus "promising" the Heart King and asking Partner, "Partner, can you 'win' Trick #3 if I lead another Heart on that Trick either (1) with the Heart Queen (assuming the NORTH Dummy does not hold a Heart void, singleton, doubleton) or (2) by ruffing?" EAST plays the Heart 2 to suggest a "switch" to a different Suit. On Trick #2 should WEST lead the Club Jack thus "promising" the Club Ten?

Esther: Well, Donkey, any lead except a Heart would be "safe". But here you **must** be "aggressive"/"attacking"! In Cohen's words, "If you don't take your ♥K [on Trick #2], you'll be saving it for your next deal" (p. 51).

Donkey: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, on this Board what will happen if WEST does not "cash" his Heart King on Trick #2?

Esther: Well, Donkey, then Declarer will "win" Trick #2. On Tricks #3-#5 Declarer SOUTH will "draw" all the E/W Trump Spades. After that Declarer SOUTH will finesse twice in Diamonds and will then "win" 12 Tricks for what will *almost certainly* be a "top" Board!

Donkey: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, can you give us another example of when an "aggressive"/"attacking" defense is better than a "passive" defense?

Esther: Well, Donkey, sure. Consider the following Board:

Dealer: **SOUTH**

NORTH (15)

S: A J 6 2

H: K Q J T

D: A J 3

C: 4 2

WEST (9)

S: --

H: A 8 4 3 2

D: Q 8 4

C: Q J T 9 8

EAST (7)

S: 9 5 4

H: 9 7 6

D: K T 7 2

C: A 7 5

SOUTH (8)

S: K Q T 8 7 3

H: 5

D: 9 6 5

C: K 6 3

Bidding

SOUTH

2**S**

PASS

WEST

PASS

PASS

NORTH

4**S**

PASS

EAST

PASS

Donkey: Oh, my goodness, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! Well, on Trick #1 WEST leads the Club Queen thus "promising" either (1) "long" Clubs and the Club Jack or (2) a Club doubleton Q,x. EAST wins" with the Club Ace. What does EAST know or presume? *First*, EAST knows that Declarer SOUTH **must** hold the Club King; the Club King is not in EAST's Hand or in the NORTH Dummy, and if WEST held the Club King he would have led that card. *Second*, EAST also presumes that Declarer SOUTH does not hold the Diamond Queen because his pre-empt 2**S** bid was "weak". The Diamond Queen is not in the NORTH Dummy, so EAST presumes that WEST holds the Diamond Queen. Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what should EAST lead on Trick #2?

Esther: Well, Donkey, on Trick #2 EAST **must** be "aggressive" and try to "promote" a Diamond "winner" within the E/W Partnership! Therefore, EAST leads a "low" Diamond, WEST plays his Diamond Queen, the NORTH Dummy wins Trick #2 with the Diamond Ace, but now EAST's Diamond King has been "promoted" into a "winner". On Trick #3 Declarer SOUTH leads the NORTH Dummy Heart King to (1) "drop" the E/W Heart Ace and (2) "promote" Dummy's remaining 3 Hearts as an opportunity to dump Declarer's "losers". After WEST gets in with his Heart Ace on Trick #4 he can then lead a "low"

Diamond back to EAST for a 3rd and 4th E/W Trick. If on Trick #4 Declarer SOUTH "ducks" with the NORTH Dummy's Diamond 3 EAST will "win" with his Diamond Ten and then "win" on Trick #5 with his Diamond King for a "setting" 4th Trick. If on Trick #4 Declarer SOUTH "covers" with the Diamond Jack in the NORTH Dummy EAST will "win" with his Diamond King and then "win" on Trick #5 with his Diamond Ten for a "setting" 4th Trick.

EAST's "aggressive" defense was **mandated** by EAST seeing the NORTH Dummy's Heart K,Q,J,T "touching Honors" sequence. EAST knew that Declarer SOUTH was going to "draw" Trump Spades and then eventually dump "losers" in his own "closed" (hidden) Hand on the Dummy's remaining Hearts. Without the Diamond "shift" by EAST Declarer SOUTH will *gratuitously* make a *very painful* **11** Tricks!