

Esther Discusses "The Art of the Bridge Finesse"

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 "**The Art of the Bridge Finesse**". 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. To start, would you define exactly what a "bridge finesse" is?

Esther: Well, as defined by Wikipedia, a "finesse" is when a "player attempts to win either the current trick or a later trick with a card of the suit he leads notwithstanding that **the opponents hold a higher card** in the suit; the attempt is based on the assumption that the higher card is held by a particular opponent". For example, let's say that Declarer is on lead in the Dummy, and leads a low Spade when Declarer holds the Queen and Ace of Spades. Then Declarer's RHO plays "second hand low", and plays a low Spade. Then Declarer plays the Queen of Spades, rather than the Ace, and Declarer's LHO then plays low, meaning that the finesse is successful, and informing the Declarer that RHO holds the King. In this scenario, if Dummy held the Jack of Spades, Declarer would then play the Dummy's Jack, and if Declarer's RHO covered the Jack with the King, Declarer would play the Ace, and otherwise Declarer would again play low.

Bruce: OK. Well, what should Declarer know, or think he knows, when trying to finesse?

Esther: Well, my Bodacious Bupkus, when a Declarer attempts a finesse, the Declarer probably should have **some reason** to presume that a missing honor sits in a particular one of the Opponents' hands. For example, (1) if one Opponent bid, but the other Opponent did not, the Declarer might assume that the Opponent who bid is more likely to hold the missing honor. When only 1 Opponent has bid, **finesse through that Opponent. And if the finesse works, and you have transportation back to your hand as Declarer, go back to your Hand as Declarer, and keep finessing through that Opponent!** Or (2) during play, if neither Opponent bid, but one Opponent plays several honors in various suits, the Declarer might then infer that the other Opponent holds the other honors. Or (3) Declarer's LHO leads low in a suit not bid by the Opponents, thus suggesting from the admonition "lead top of nothing, bottom of something," thus suggesting that the Opponent on lead holds an honor in the led suit. Or (4) during play, if Declarer, for example, leads low from Dummy, RHO "ducks" by playing "second hand low", Declarer holding A,Q plays the Queen, now Declarer knows that RHO holds the King.

Bruce: OK. Well, are there various "kinds of finesses"?

Esther: Well, my Simpering Simpleton, of course! Afterall, it's bridge!!! For example, within the **Basic Finesses**, there are "basic finesses", "indirect finesses", "double/triple finesses", "deep finesses", and "Ruffing finesses". There are also **Special Finesses**, such as "Ann Gallagher finesses," and there is even a "Chinese finesse". But we will not cover all of these here.¹

Bruce: Well, why not???

¹ See "The Art of the Finesse in Bridge" on the www.dummies.com website, and/or "Improve Your Finessing":
<https://bridge-tips.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Improve-your-finessing.pdf>

Esther: Well, my Malodorous Misanthrope, because I am not only emotionally withholding, and not present or available, I am also intellectually withholding!!!

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, I had always suspected that to be the case! Are there reasons why one might want to finesse, but also reasons why one might not want to finesse?

Esther: Well, my Dandruff-ridden Dufus, yes, indeed! Here are some reasons why one might want to finesse:

1. A finesse, if successful, will enable you to make your contract, which you otherwise *cannot make*.
2. The auction, or the play of the hand, has informed you about where missing honors held by Opponents are *likely to be held*.
3. You, quite wisely, are "playing the room"². You know quite well all the players sitting in the same direction in a Mitchell movement wherein every N/S Pair sits only N/S, as does E/W as well. Or, you know quite well every Pair in the room playing a Howell movement in which all or most Pairs alternate sitting N/S or E/W. And you know that all of most of your Opponents are aggressive risk takers, such that you being a risk taker isn't likely to hurt you, but you may be disadvantaged if you are too risk averse. Or, *alternatively*, you know that all or most of your Opponents are not aggressive, and that if you are aggressive, and successful, you will have an advantage over your Opponents by being aggressive and pursuing finesses.

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what then are the reasons for not trying to finesse?

Esther: Well, let's say that (1) neither Opponent bid during the auction, and (2) it is early in the play of the hand such that no real clues about where missing honors lie have arisen during play. In this case, with *no additional knowledge*, your odds of winning a

² 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

finesse are exactly 50-50, the same as the odds of winning a coin flip! Do not finesse when you have any other options that are more likely than 50-50 to yield a successful outcome. For example, if your odds of "dropping" a missing honor are 75-25, **do not take the finesse when the odds of success are only 50-50!**

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Well, I see that you feel quite strongly indeed about this! Are there situations where the appeal of taking a finesse are especially **compelling**?

Esther: Well, yes, indeed, Bruce. Taking a finesse is most compelling when you hold a top honor, such as the Ace, and lower "**touching honors**" (e.g., Q,J, or J,T), or a "tenance" (non-touching honors lacking 1 intervening card, such as Q,T).

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, *why* is a finesse more compelling when you hold "touching honors"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, let's say you are on lead in Dummy, and Dummy holds Q,J,x in Hearts, and you as Declarer hold A,x,x in Hearts. If you lead the Queen of Hearts in Dummy, and your RHO "ducks", and you "duck", and your LHO then wins the Trick with the King, you still have "promoted" Dummy's Jack into now also being a winner!!! *Quod erat demonstrandum!*

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, can you summarize your views on *when you would be more likely to finesse*?

Esther: Well, Bruce, ask yourself:

1. Is trying to make a finesse the *only way* that you think that you as Declarer can make your contract?
2. Did only one Opponent bidding tell you which Opponent's hand you should finesse through?
 - a. If you are finessing in a Suit bid during the auction by one Opponents, then finesse in this Suit through that Opponent.
 - b. If you are finessing in a Suit not bid by the Opponents during the auction, but one Opponent bid a different Suit during the auction, then

finesse through the Partner of the Opponent who bid a different Suit.³

3. When you are missing an honor, do you as Declarer hold the Ace in one hand, and Q,J (or a "tenance", such as Q,T) in the other hand, when neither Opponent has bid, or did the Opponent sitting to the *left* of the hand holding the Ace bid, such that (1) you will "promote" a "touching honor" even if your finesse fails, and (2) you may then position yourself to later "kill" your RHO's King regardless of the outcome of the finesse?
4. If neither Opponent bid anything other than Pass, did the Opponent on lead then lead low, possibly playing "Lead top of nothing, bottom of something," possibly suggesting that this Opponent holds a missing honor, and you should finesse through that Opponent, assuming you decide you should finesse?
5. During play, when neither Opponent bid, did one Opponent leading several honors suggest to you that the *other Opponent* is more likely to hold a missing honor, and that you should now finesse through that Opponent?

"Yes" answers to these questions, and especially to the earlier questions, suggest that you may wish to finesse.

³ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see: "Esther Bridge Lesson #110: '1 of David Bird's 52 Great Bridge Tips on Declarer Play: 'Eight Ever, Nine Never', Maybe Not Always'": https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/8_ever.pdf

Appendix

A Compendium of Some Common Finesse Structures

Definition: A bridge "finesse" is a card play technique in which you attempt to win a Trick with a card that is not the highest-ranking Honor in the Suit.

1. Simple Finesse, 1 Hand Holds 2 Honors

NORTH		
Dummy		
♠ 9 5 3 2		
WEST		EAST
♠ J 8 6		♠ K T 7 4
SOUTH		
YOU		
♠ A Q		

You as Declarer lead the ♠2 toward your "closed" hidden Hand and play the ♠Q iff ("if, and only if") RHO East does not "cover", thus trying to "win" with your ♠Q when your Partnership does not hold the ♠K.

2. Simple Finesse, 2 Hands Hold 2 Honors

NORTH		
Dummy		
♠ Q 6 3		
WEST		EAST
♠ K T 4 2		♠ J 7 5
SOUTH		
YOU		
♠ A 9 8		

WEST leads a "low" Spade, and you play the NORTH Dummy ♠Q in the hopes that WEST holds the ♠K and that WEST led "bottom of nothing, top of nothing".

3. Simple Finesse, 1 Hand Holds 1 Honor

NORTH		
Dummy		
♠ K 6 5 3		
WEST		EAST
♠ A J 9 7		♠ Q T 8
SOUTH		
YOU		
♠ 4 2		

Declarer SOUTH leads the ♠2 "low to high" in the hopes that WEST holds the ♠A and elects to "duck".

4. Finesse When Missing 2 Honors and Hoping for "Split" Honors

	NORTH	
	Dummy	
	♠ A J T 3	
WEST		EAST
♠ K 7 4		♠ Q 9 8
	SOUTH	
	YOU	
	♠ 6 5 2	

- Declarer SOUTH leads his ♠2 "low to high". WEST sees the ♠A in the NORTH Dummy and so "correctly" plays "low" with his ♠4.
- Declarer SOUTH plays the ♠T from the NORTH Dummy and EAST "wins" with his ♠Q.
- Upon regaining the lead Declarer SOUTH leads his ♠5. If indeed the Honors were "split", as may be likely *if both Opponents PASSED during the auction and thus HCPs are likely "divided"*, and WEST holds the ♠K, then you will now "win" **2** Tricks in Spades in the NORTH Dummy.

5. "Deep" Finesse

	NORTH
	Dummy
	♠ A Q 9

Your Partnership is "missing" the ♠K and the ♠J. You as the SOUTH Declarer lead toward the NORTH Dummy and play the ♠9. Later you finesse a 2nd time by leading a Spade toward the NORTH Dummy and play the Dummy's ♠Q. According to Bruce Blakely,⁴ running this "deep" finesse you...

"will take two [T]ricks five times out of eith or 62.5% of the time. The five distributions in which [D]eclarer can win two [T]ricks: King on the left; K-[T] on the left; K-J on the left; K-J-[T] on the left; and J-[T] on the left with King on the right." (p.2)

⁴ Bruce Blakely, "Finesses":

<https://paltoalbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/finessesHO-1.pdf>

6. "Two-way" Finesse

NORTH
Dummy
♠ A J 3

SOUTH
YOU
♠ K T 2

According to Blakely, the probability of you taking **3** Tricks is 50%. He notes that, "If [D]eclarer has to play the [S]uit himself... he will take either two or three [T]ricks, depending on whether he properly guesses which [O]pponent has the Queen. Declarer can take all three [T]ricks if an [O]pponent breaks the [S]uit for him." (p. 3)

7. "Ruffing" Finesse

NORTH
Dummy
♠ A Q J
♥ A 7 4
♣ A 8 7

SOUTH
YOU
♠ 6
♥ K Q 8 6 5
♣ 8 7 4

Here SOUTH as Declarer in a Heart contract can play either of 2 ways: (1) play a straight finesse by leading toward the NORTH Dummy toward the ♠Q or ♠J, or (2) as a "ruffing" finesse by first "cashing" the Spade Ace and then leading the NORTH Dummy ♠Q and ruffing if EAST "covers" or sluffing if EAST plays "low".