

Esther Discusses "The 'Gambling' 3NT Opening Bid"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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<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 "The 'Gambling' 3NT Opening Bid". 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 first define what you mean by "Gambling 3NT Opening Bid"?

Esther: Well, my *gracious giver*, I will certainly try to help you! As defined by the Wikipedia entry, "Gambling 3NT"²:
"The [Gambling 3NT] bid is used to describe a hand containing a minor suit of at least seven cards in length and headed by the ace, king and queen, at minimum. The bid has the dual objectives of (1) *preempting* the opponents' bidding should they hold the majors and (2) trying for a game in notrump on the gamble that partner might hold adequate support." (italics and enumeration added)

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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.

² See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gambling_3NT

The "Gambling 3NT" posting³ on the website of the Pershore Duplicate Bridge Club, Worcestershire, England explains the "Gambling 3NT" opening bid as follows:

"Nowadays hardly anybody opens a 'natural' 3NT (which would show a balanced hand with 25-27 high card points), since this is very rare and leaves no room to explore major suit fits. Most players now use the 3NT opening as a pre-emptive bid, to show a hand with a long solid running minor suit and little or nothing in the other suits."

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, in any case, what I hear you saying is that to open a "Gambling 3NT" bid your Hand must have all of the following attributes:

1. 7+ cards in a Minor Suit headed by A,K and probably A,K,Q or A,K,J,T;
2. No void;
3. No 4+ card "side" Suit; and
4. By Partnership Agreement either 3, 2, 1 or 0 "protected" "stoppers" in Suits other than the "long" Suit.

The "Gambling 3NT" is made by the Dealer or by the Dealer's LHO following a PASS by the Dealer. This is where the "gamble" comes in, because the 3NT bidder cannot be sure what his Partner holds given that Partner has not yet had the opportunity to bid. Is all of this correct?

Esther: Well, my *handsome hombre*, yes, indeed. In his excellent "BridgeBum" website entry, "Gambling 3NT"⁴, Jeff Tang suggests that the first publication to discuss the "Gambling 3NT" was Howard Schenken's "Big Club": A revolutionary, highly competitive, and accurate way to bid for every bridge player (1968). Schenken suggested that Partners should agree that all 3 "side" Suits must contain *at least* a "protected" Queen (e.g., Q,x,x), but aces or

³ See: https://www.bridgewebs.com/pershore/bridge_tips2.pdf

⁴ See: https://www.bridgebum.com/gambling_3nt.php

"protected" Kings are more likely because the Opener holds 7+ cards in a Minor and there is no room for holding many "protected" Queen "stoppers".

Howard Schenken (1903 - 1979) was an American bridge player, writer, and long-time syndicated bridge columnist. He won 3 Bermuda Bowl titles, and the Life Master Pairs 5 times, the Spingold 12 times, and the Vanderbilt Trophy 10 times. The LM Pairs and Vanderbilt records still stand today. Schenken is credited as having created several bridge systems, including the "2 Over 1" convention.

Bruce: Ummm. Hmmmmm. Well, Esther, could you give us some examples of when you might open with a "Gambling 3NT" bid?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. Jeff Tang provides 3 example Hands on which a player might open with a "Gambling 3NT" bid, but I have altered some of the cards in these Hands. These Hands reflect *different* Partnership Agreements about what the "gambling" Opener must hold:

Aggressive (8)	Moderate (15)	Conservative (18)
S 9 5	S Q 4 3	S A
H 5 3	H A 9	H K 5 2
D 8 4	D A K Q 9 8 6 3	D K 9
C A K J T 8 5 3	C T	C A K J T 7 6 4

Bruce: Ummm. Hmmmmm. Well, Esther, could you give us an example of a "Gambling 3NT" bid made in actual competition?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you. Here is an example of a Board played in the 2019 Spring North American Bridge Championships "Daylight Open Pairs" as reported in the ACBL Daily Bulletin (Volume 21, Number 9, p. 2)⁵:

⁵ See: <https://cdn.acbl.org/nabc/2019/01/bulletins/db9.pdf>

NORTH (10)

S: J 6
H: --
D: A K Q T 9 7 6 2
C: 8 6 5

WEST (6)

S: 8 7 4 2
H: K 9
D: 8 5 4 3
C: K 7 3

EAST (10)

S: A 9 5
H: Q J 6 5 4 3
D: J
C: Q 9 4

SOUTH (14)

S: K Q T 3
H: A T 8 7 2
D: --
C: A J T 2

Bidding

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
3NT	PASS	PASS	PASS

Note that NORTH's "Gambling 3NT" was *extremely* aggressive since NORTH held 0 "side" Suit "stoppers" and even a Heart void! As all bridge players know bidding a NT contract when holding a void is always a *dicey* proposition! SOUTH's PASS holding no Diamond entry to NORTH's Hand also was very *risky*!

Sitting EAST was Phillip Adler, the last Bridge Columnist at the New York Times when the Times terminated its bridge column in 2015. Adler led the Spade Ace "to see the Dummy" which then "promoted" Declarer NORTH's Spade Jack into an entry when the SOUTH Dummy held 0 Diamonds. This enabled the Declarer NORTH to "win" in his Hand at least his Spade Jack and 8 Diamond Tricks! Thereafter NORTH could "cross" to the SOUTH Dummy by leading a "low" Club and then the NORTH Declarer could "cash" the Dummy Club Ace, the Heart Ace, and 1 Spade for a total of 12 Tricks!!! The title of the report of this Board in the 2019 ACBL Daily Bulletin was "Worst lead ever?"!

Bruce: Well, Esther, given that the "Gambling 3NT" bid is inherently "weak", especially as against the 25-27 HCP requirement for otherwise opening a standard 3NT, it seems that Opponents are likely to DOUBLE for penalty. Is there any accommodation for this situation?

Esther: Well, my *studly salamander*, yes indeed. The Responder to the player opening a "Gambling 3NT" bid after his RHO

DOUBLES can bid 4C. The Responder knows that the pre-empt bidder holds a "long" 7+ card Minor. The 4C bid says, "Partner, let's play in your Minor rather than in 3NT DOUBLED. If your 'long' Minor Suit is Diamonds rather than Clubs, please 'correct' to Diamonds."

Bruce: Well, Esther, are there any additional considerations for the Responder when Partner opens with a "Gambling 3NT" bid?

Esther: Well, my *curious carnivore*, yes indeed. The Responder is certainly expected to PASS if (1) the Responder holds "protected" "stoppers" in the Majors and preferably at least 1 Minor and (2) at least 1 card in both Minors to insure that the Dummy can gain entry to Declarer's "closed" (hidden) Hand's "long" Minor.

Bruce: Well, Esther, what is the primary *rationale* for Partners to play the "Gambling 3NT" convention?

Esther: Well, Bruce, one reason why some Partners abandon bidding 3NT as showing a "flat" Hand with 22-24 HCPs is because holding 22-24 HCPs occurs so rarely. You will hold 22-24 HCPs in roughly 0.17% of the Hands that you are dealt. This means that if you play in 3 competitions each week with 24 Boards played in each competition you will hold 22-24 HCPs on average about 6.3 times per year. However, holding the Hand profile for the "conservative" approach to bidding the "Gambling 3NT" convention also, as Jeff Tang noted, "...appears about as often as Halley's Comet."

Bruce: Well, Esther, if indeed Partner and I agree to play the "Gambling 3NT" convention how would I then show Partner that I hold 22-24 HCPs and possibly a "flat" Hand given that I can no longer open by bidding 3NT for that purpose?

Esther: Well, Bruce, if you held a "flat" Hand and 22-24 HCPs you could "show" the HCPs by bidding a "strong" 2C bid and then switch to either a 2NT or 3NT bid depending upon Partner's response bid.