

## **Esther Comments About Bidding, Or Not Bidding, Slam**

**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 talk us through some of the **nuances of bidding a particularly interesting hand**. Our purpose isn't so much to focus on the hand *per se*, but rather to **expose how Esther thinks** about bidding. 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 call me Esther. Instead, call me Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

**Bruce:** Errr, well, sorry again about that, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Here are the 4 hands, and the first few bids:

Dealer: SOUTH  
Vul: NONE

		NORTH (18)	
		<b>S:</b> A K Q 8	
		<b>H:</b> A J 6 5	
		<b>D:</b> K J 9 6 4	
		<b>C:</b>	
WEST (3)			EAST (8)
<b>S:</b> 9 4			<b>S:</b> J 3 2
<b>H:</b> Q 7 4 3			<b>H:</b> K T 9 8
<b>D:</b> T 7 3			<b>D:</b> 5
<b>C:</b> J 5 4 3			<b>C:</b> A T 9 7 6
		SOUTH (11)	
		<b>S:</b> T 7 6 5	
		<b>H:</b> 2	
		<b>D:</b> A Q 8 2	
		<b>C:</b> K Q 8 2	

### Bidding

EAST: PASS      SOUTH: 1**D**      WEST: PASS      NORTH: 1**H**

**Bruce:** Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, first, do you agree with SOUTH's opening bid of 1**D**?

**Esther:** Well, SOUTH holds 11 HCPs, and 4 of the King of Suits: Spades. Not real pretty Spades, but Spades. And 11 HCPs plus a card count of 8 cards in the longest two suit equals 19, which is (slightly) less than the 20 required for opening under Marty Bergin's "Rule of 20", but close. So, yes, I would make this bid.

**Bruce:** OK, so do you agree with NORTH's 1**H** response bid?

**Esther:** Well, NORTH holds 18 HCPs. So NORTH thinks that the partnership holds somewhere between at least (11 + 18) 29 HCPs, and (13 + 18) 31 HCPs. And the more your partnership holds, the more you want the partnership to talk, at least until "the one who knows, (then) goes." At this early stage, the partnership needs to explore fits more. Now NORTH has 4 of both Majors, and normally you bid 1**H** when you hold 4 of both Majors. And I normally count having an A,K,Q,x holding as equivalent to holding 1 more card. But if NORTH bids 1**S**, the 4-4 Heart fit will be very hard to find, since

NORTH will have *denied* holding 4 Hearts, which is a lie. So NORTH should bid 1**H**, and SOUTH, if SOUTH holds 4 Spades, should/must then bid 1**S**, showing this, and then NORTH can jump all over it. So, I think NORTH's 1**H** is a reasonable bid.

**Bruce:** Well, what should SOUTH then bid?

**Esther:** SOUTH must not lie to NORTH by bidding something other than 1**S**. SOUTH can show Clubs later, if that becomes reasonable. If SOUTH bids Spades later than on SOUTH's second bid, NORTH will assume that SOUTH has fewer than 4 Spades.

**Bruce:** OK. Here N/S plays under a strict partnership requirement that a 1**D** opener must hold at least 4 Diamonds. Thus, NORTH now knows that the partnership has (1) something like 29-31 HCPs, (2) an 8-card Spade fit, and a 9-card Diamond fit, and (3) NORTH is void in Clubs. This means that a small slam in either Spades or Diamonds might be do-able. Do you think NORTH should then ask for Aces or key cards?

**Esther:** Well, Bruce, one strict rule I always follow when I ask Partner for a count of Aces (or key cards, if we are bidding **Roman Key Card 1430 or 3014**<sup>1</sup>) is: *Never, never, never* ask for Aces or key cards unless you hold first or second round control (Aces or protected King) in every (as in every) suit. Also, one usually does not ask for Aces when one has a void. In this case, if SOUTH shows 1 Ace, NORTH won't know if the Ace is a Club, or the Ace is a Diamond. Maybe an Ace Diamond is more likely, because SOUTH opened 1**D**, but that is pretty tenuous. The situation would be entirely different if NORTH instead held 3 Aces, including the Ace of Diamonds, because then SOUTH's answer to Aces or key cards asking then would be definitively clear.

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<sup>1</sup> Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention #3: Roman Key Card (RKC) 1430 (or 3014)":

[https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/RKC\\_1430.pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/RKC_1430.pdf)

**Bruce:** Well, with this many HCPs and two suits that fit, clearly you would bid either 4**S** or 5**D**, or a small slam in one of these two suits. What would you do?

**Esther:** Well, one general principle I repeatedly share with you is that you are not competing against chairs. You are competing against the other actual human pairs playing, in this case, N/S. And the important principle is: "**Play the room!!!!**" So, in general, if you are playing in a Limited game, no one will bid a slam on this Board, and you will not get punished very much for missing a slam contract that no other N/S pair will bid. But if you are playing in the Shark Tank, you might want to bid the small slam, because (1) other N/S pairs will probably make the same bid, and will achieve a similar result, and (2) you will get punished if you don't make the small slam bid, and it proves makeable by other N/S pairs. Also, bear in mind that both small slam contracts here will be "wrong-sided" by being placed in SOUTH, the weaker of N/S's two hands, which might argue for some concern.

**Bruce:** Well, if you decided to go with a game contract, would you bid 4**S** or 5**D**?

**Esther:** I probably would bid 4**S**, because (1) the 4**S** contract requires fewer tricks, and (2) 4**S** making 4 earns 420, while 5**D** making 5 earns 400 (although 5**D** making 6 also earns 420). But it's a judgment call.

**Bruce:** Well, if you decided to go with a small slam contract, would you bid 6**S** or 6**D**?

**Esther:** Again, it's a judgment call, but I would probably bid 6**D**. But bidding a small slam with only 8 trump is dicey, even though with 5 cards out, the probability of a 3-2 split is considerably higher than a 4-1 split, which means you can draw all the trump cards in 3 rounds since you hold A,K,Q. But NORTH has little trumping value with only 4 Spades. And the "Law of Total Tricks," which says you are likely to make a contract if the contract is no higher than the number of trump cards you hold minus 6 (here  $8-6 = 2$ ), makes this 6-level bid a terrifying proposition. Holding 9

Diamond trump cards for a small slam contract is less terrifying. And the value of NORTH's Club void goes up with NORTH holding 5 rather than 4 trump, especially with only 4 versus 5 trump cards out. If the contract is in Spades, NORTH's 4 Spades can each take tricks by either drawing trump, or trumping Clubs, but not both.

**Bruce:** Well, it looks to me like both 6S or 6D on this Board make. How does that affect your thinking about what the correct bidding was?

**Esther:** Zero, my malodorous simpleton! Your way of "thinking" is called "*being a results player*." "Being a results player" is the road to **perdition**. Generalizing the results of a *single* Board to *many* Boards is the way to become a really, really bad bridge player. Instead, focus on general Principles of Bridge, several of which I mentioned here, and think like a real bridge player!